



ADVANCE GREATER BIRMINGHAM

COMPREHENSIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY
2023 - 2028

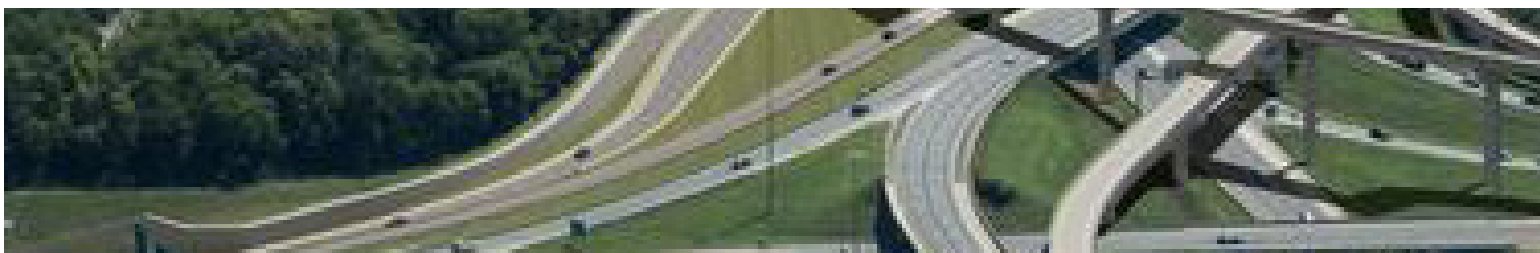


TABLE OF CONTENTS

ADVANCE GREATER BIRMINGHAM: OVERVIEW	4
Introduction.....	4
Mission, Vision, & Goals	6
CEDS: Report Layout.....	8
SECTION I: REGIONAL SUMMARY BACKGROUND	9
1. Population and Workforce.....	10
2. Natural Resources	19
3. Built Environment.....	21
4. Target Industry Clusters	29
SECTION II: REGIONAL ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE	33
1. Regional SWOT Analysis	34
2. Regional Priority Goals	35
3. Special Considerations: Economic Resilience & Opportunity Zones.....	37
SECTION III: CEDS IMPLEMENTATION	41
1. CEDS Action Plan.....	42
2. Evaluation Framework	49
3. Acknowledgements	51

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Population Changes by County, 2020.....	10
Table 2: Population Changes by County, 2020.....	11
Table 3: Population Changes by County, 2020.....	13
Table 5: Percent of Regional Households in Poverty, 2021	15
Table 6: Unemployment Rates by County, 2010 to 2020.....	16
Table 7: Labor Force Participation Rates per County, 2010 to 2020	17
Table 8: CDBG Water & Sewer Grant Totals, Greater Birmingham Region	22



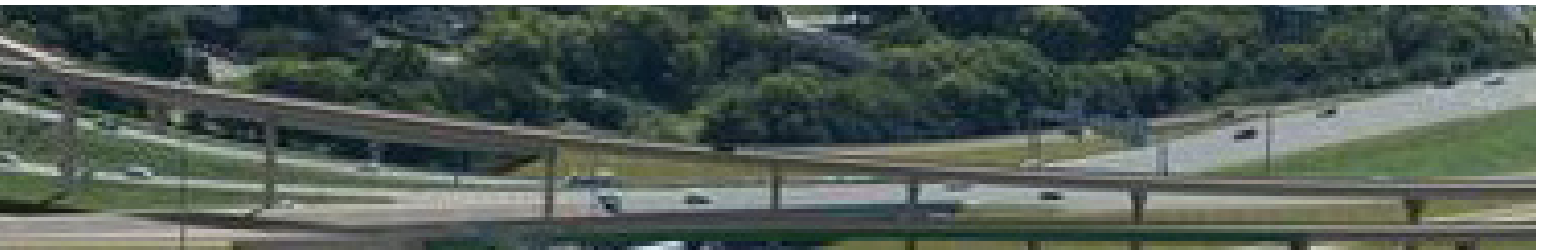
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Study Area Map	5
Figure 2: Population by Educational Attainment Level, 2020.....	12
Figure 3: Counties by Median Household Income, 2020.....	15
Figure 4: Employment by Industry, 2010 to 2020	18
Figure 5: Map of Regional Industrial Parks	24
Figure 6: Map of Regional Airport, Rail, and River Access	26
Figure 7: Median Sales Price of Newly Constructed Homes 2009 - 2021	28
Figure 8: Concentration of Healthcare Establishments	30
Figure 9: Opportunity Zones, Greater Birmingham Region.....	40

CEDS STRATEGY COMMITTEE

A special thanks to the Advance Greater Birmingham’s Strategy Committee for their time and dedication to the CEDS planning process and the continued development of the region:

- Allie Allcorn, City Administrator, City of Oneonta
- Commissioner Steve Ammons, Jefferson County Commission
- Meghann Bridgeman, Executive Director, Create Birmingham
- Alan Childress, Chairman, City of Clanton Industrial Development Board
- Leslie Clines, Project Manager, Blount County Economic Development Council
- Emily Jerkins, President and COO, Birmingham Business Alliance
- David Knight, Executive Director, Walker County Commission
- Paul Johnson, Central Six Workforce Development Council / AIDT
- Sam Kellett, COO, Sabre Finance
- Marcelo Lima, Vice President, Planning and Development, Birmingham Airport Authority
- Bakari Miller, Vice President, Business Development, Economic Development Partnership of Alabama
- David Mitchell, Mayor, City of Columbiana
- Brian Muenger, City Manager, City of Pell City
- David Russell, Executive Director., Birmingham-Jefferson County Port Authority
- Renee Sides, Executive Director, City of Cordova, Economic & Industrial Development Authority
- Don Smith, Executive Director, St. Clair Economic Development Council
- Amy Sturdivant, Executive Director, 58, Inc.



- ADVANCE -

GREATER BIRMINGHAM

INTRODUCTION

The Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham (RPCGB) was enabled by state legislation in 1963 as an advisory planning agency for Blount, Chilton, Jefferson, Shelby, St. Clair, and Walker counties and their resident municipalities. As the area's regional council, RPCGB exists to provide its member governments with data, research, and technical assistance to support the continuing development within the region. RPCGB provides an array of services to its member governments, including transportation and community planning, grant-writing assistance,

Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping, specialized market studies, and technical assistance with project development. RPCGB also houses several initiatives committed to improving the lives of residents within the Greater Birmingham region, such as the Alabama Partnership for Clean Air (APCA), CommuteSmart, the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), and the Medicaid Waiver.



Above: Downtown Birmingham Skyline

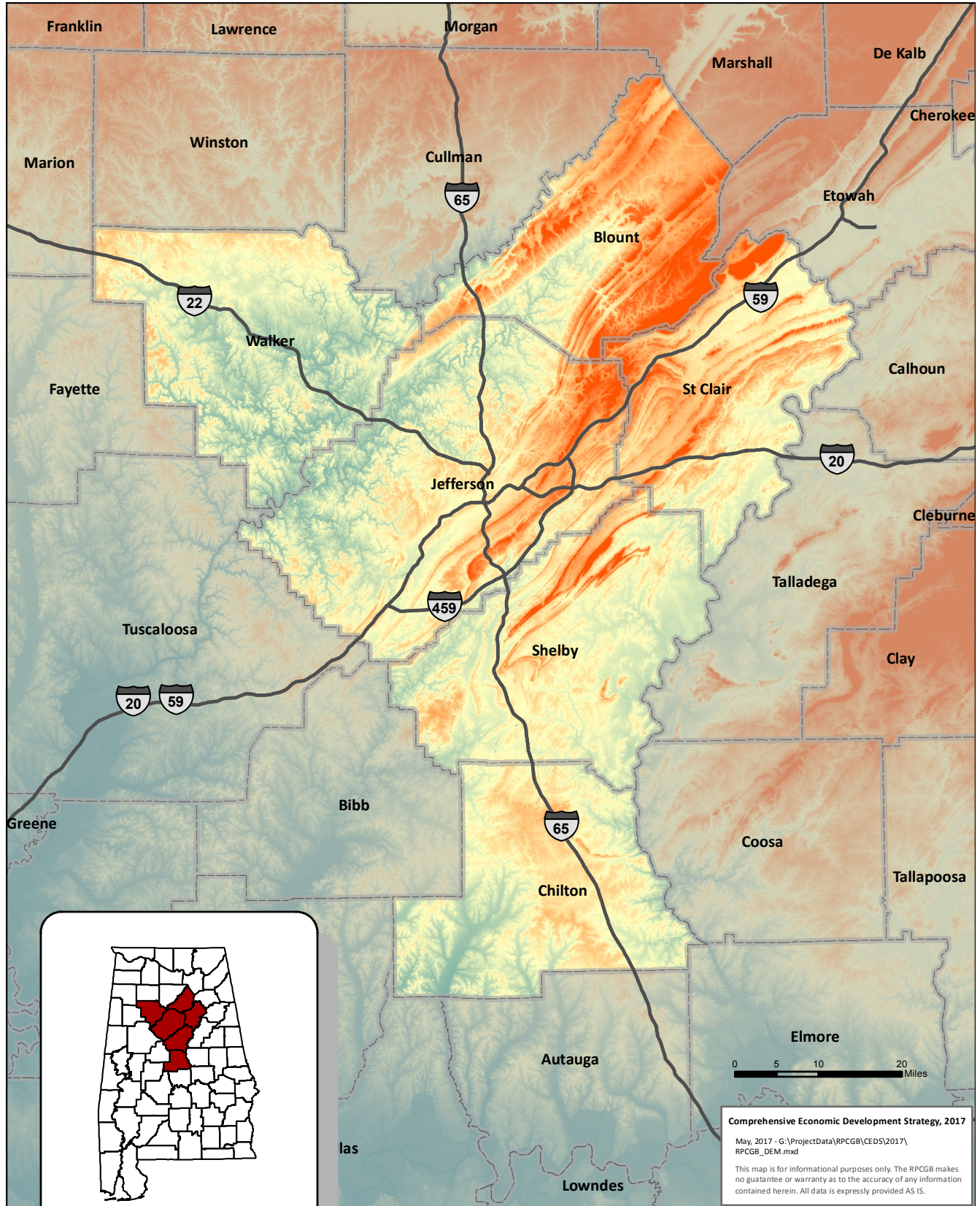
What is the CEDS?

RPCGB is designated as the Economic Development District (EDD) for the six-county region by the Economic Development Administration (EDA). EDDs are multi-jurisdictional entities, commonly composed of multiple counties, where at least one geographical area within the designated service boundaries meets EDA's regional distress criteria as set out in 13 CFR § 301.3(a). EDDs are charged with helping lead a locally based, regionally driven economic development planning process that leverages the involvement of the public, private, and non-profit sectors to establish a strategic blueprint for regional collaboration. This strategy-driven plan for regional economic development is called the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy, or CEDS.

Why is the CEDS Important?

The EDA reviews all regional CEDS documents, and it requires all proposed grant applications to comply with the action items coordinated in the project region's CEDS to qualify for its funding programs. The RPCGB seeks to utilize the CEDS planning process and its resulting action plan to identify regional economic needs and offer implementation strategies to assist member governments in project development on a municipal, county, and regional level.

FIGURE 1: STUDY AREA MAP



CEDS Outcomes

The Advance Greater Birmingham 2023-2028 CEDS aims to accomplish the following outcomes:

- Outline an approach to coordinate growth and prosperity, building on the region’s strengths and opportunities
- Present comprehensive and inclusive strategies for prioritizing key regional industry clusters while emphasizing regional collaboration
- Develop a “living document” through continued discussions with the CEDS Strategy Committee and stakeholders to ensure the plan is actively updated in order to adapt to changes in project development policies or needs

HOW IS THE CEDS USED?

The CEDS document is constructed to be used as a roadmap for advancing and diversifying the regional economy. The CEDS analyzes regional assets, challenges, and economic trends, along with input from the CEDS Strategy Committee and regional stakeholders, to develop an Action Plan for the region. The Action Plan outlines different focus areas, goals, and growth strategies the prioritization and implementation of projects throughout the six-county region. Member governments and organizations can utilize the content of the CEDS as a guide to develop grant applications and other projects to create economic opportunities for their residents and communities. Specifically, projects seeking EDA assistance must connect to the growth strategies and action items outlined in the CEDS to be considered for funding.

MISSION, VISION, & GOALS

Using feedback from the CEDS Strategy Committee and stakeholders, the RPCGB staff developed the mission, vision, and focus areas for advancing the Greater Birmingham region’s economy:



MISSION

The 2023-2028 CEDS will serve as a blueprint to encourage economic development initiatives within the six-county Greater Birmingham area. It will focus on the continued development of a diverse economy, through projects aimed at attracting new investment, supporting local businesses, fostering local entrepreneurship, strengthening the region's current key industries, and expanding the opportunities for future sectors. This region's quality of life will be enhanced by identifying and promoting projects for funding that strengthen the regional economy leading to job creation and employment retention.

VISION

The Advance Greater Birmingham's vision is a well-marketed region that fosters partnerships that promote regional growth and stability while retaining an ample employment-ready workforce; heavily invested leadership; and a highly connected, accessible infrastructure network.

PRIORITY GOALS

The Priority Goals outlined below serve as the foundation of the Action Plan for the CEDS:

1 WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT & RETENTION

Enhance the region's ability to attract, retain, and continually develop a highly-skilled workforce that meets the needs of current industry and can calculate future workforce changes to be adaptable to an ever-changing business environment

2 BUSINESS CLIMATE & ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Support the region's capacity to provide business support and assistance, especially regarding start-up firms and entrepreneurs

3 INFRASTRUCTURE

Improve and modernize infrastructure to meet the demands of expanding industries and a growing population

4 ECONOMIC RESILIENCE

Continue to enhance the economic resilience of the region by supporting projects and initiatives that foster market diversification, multi-jurisdictional collaboration, and strategic planning for growth and development

CEDS: REPORT LAYOUT

The Advance Greater Birmingham CEDS is divided into four central sections:

- **Section I - Regional Summary Background:** Summarizes the economic background of the region, including the socioeconomic conditions and overviews of the natural and built environment and prominent industry clusters.
-
- **Section II - Regional Economic Performance:** Analyzes the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) based on input from the CEDS Strategy Committee and Regional Stakeholders.
-
- **Section III - Action Plan:** Thorough outline of goals and strategies identified through the planning process, other plans, and stakeholder feedback to develop the priority goals for the region.
-
- **Section IV - Evaluation Framework:** Evaluation metric created to identify and monitor performance measures associated with the goals and strategies described in the Action Plan.

Cohesion with Other Initiatives:

The best efforts were made throughout the planning process of the Advance Greater Birmingham CEDS document to ensure the plan corresponded with and supported other initiatives and plans at regional and state levels. The documents consulted during the planning process are listed below:

- [The 2019 Birmingham Regional Freight Plan, RPCGB](#)
- [The 2045 Regional Transportation Plan, RPCGB](#)
- [The 2019 B-Active Plan, RPCGB](#)
- [The 2020-2023 Appalachian Development Plan, Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs \(ADECA\)](#)
- [The 2021 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan \(SCORP\), ADECA](#)
- [The 2021 Alabama Connectivity Plan, ADECA](#)
- [The Building \(it\) Together Report, Bold Goals Coalition of Central Alabama](#)
- [The 2019 Birmingham Workforce Alignment Strategy, Central Six Workforce Development Council](#)



SECTION I

REGIONAL SUMMARY BACKGROUND

With a population of nearly 1.2 million, the Greater Birmingham region serves as the largest metropolitan area in the State of Alabama and offers the lifestyles found in areas with both metropolitan and rural environments. The heart of the metropolitan hub can be accessed within an average 35-minute drive from areas outside Jefferson County, making this region attractive to many different age groups and lifestyles. In addition, the region’s cost of living is lower than the national average, and housing affordability is also favorable compared to other major urban markets. These factors, along with many others discussed in this chapter, make the Greater Birmingham region a prime location for people and businesses.

This section outlines the Summary Background of the Greater Birmingham region and includes the following chapters:

CHAPTER	PAGE NUMBER
1. POPULATION AND WORKFORCE	10
2. NATURAL ENVIRONMENT	19
3. BUILT ENVIRONMENT	21
4. TARGET INDUSTRY CLUSTERS	28

1. POPULATION AND WORKFORCE

This section highlights the socioeconomic conditions of the region’s population and workforce. Evaluating these trends is essential to comprehensive economic development strategic planning because changes in population and workforce patterns can alter demands regarding existing infrastructure and other community facilities. Shifts in the existing regional population characteristics pose potential challenges in meeting transportation, education, wastewater, and other critical investment needs, while population increases often result in stable tax bases and an increase in the general quality of life of the residents.

POPULATION AND PROJECTIONS

An area’s population growth rate can help predict its future economic expansion, as increases in population often indicate increased economic prosperity. However, changes in population density can impact future land use and infrastructure demand. The Greater Birmingham region’s population has grown steadily over the past decade, increasing overall by 3 percent since 2010. The highest amount growth occurred in Shelby and St. Clair counties, and only Walker County experienced a population decline, losing nearly 6 percent of its residents in 10 years. Assuming similar annual growth rates, the total regional population is expected to reach 1.18 million by 2026, an increase of over 2 percent. Table 1 shows the total population in each of the region’s six counties in 2010 and 2020, as well as the percent change and population projections for 2026.

TABLE 1: POPULATION CHANGES BY COUNTY, 2020

County	2010	2020	Percent Change	2026 Projection	Percent Change
Blount	56,692	57,755	1.9%	60,313	1.9%
Chilton	43,121	44,147	2.4%	46,801	1.9%
Jefferson	656,912	658,615	0.3%	674,914	1.1%
Shelby	187,880	216,350	15.2%	236,788	6.5%
St. Clair	80,658	88,929	10.3%	98,722	4.8%
Walker	67,612	63,802	-5.6%	64,646	-2.1%
Regional	1,092,875	1,129,598	3.4%	1,182,184	2.3%

Source: American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates, 2020

AGE DISTRIBUTION

The region’s population is also aging. According to data from the U.S. Census for 2020, the average median age of the Greater Birmingham region was 40 years. This rate increased by 5 percent since 2019, and it exceeds both the national median age of 38 years and the State of Alabama median age of 39 years. The regional median age has increased steadily over time, rising from 36 years in 2000 and 37.4 years in 2010. Shelby County had the largest increase in median age between 2010 and 2020, but Walker County, which had the highest median age in 2020, is projected to have the largest increased median age by 2026.

The changes in a population’s age composition can also be evaluated by age group. As shown in Table 2, the young professional age bracket has remained stagnant over the last decade, while there has been a mild decrease in the middle management age bracket of the population. However, a substantial increase has occurred for the 65 years and older age group. Though this is a good indication of the healthcare and quality of life in the area, it poses a potential challenge for the regional workforce. As more of the population reaches retirement age, the stagnant levels of young professionals and middle management tier workers indicate a potential future gap in the workforce, leaving fewer working-age people in the economy. This could lead to a shortage of qualified workers, making it more difficult for businesses to fill essential roles or meet the demands of regional supply chains. Table 2 outlines the ages of the population in the region by age group.

TABLE 2: POPULATION CHANGES BY COUNTY, 2020

Age Category	2010	2020	Change
19 and Under	292,506	286,405	-2.1%
20 to 34 Years	221,128	222,313	0.5%
35 to 64 Years	440,125	438,353	-0.4%
65 and Over	139,116	182,527	31.2%

Source: American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates, 2020

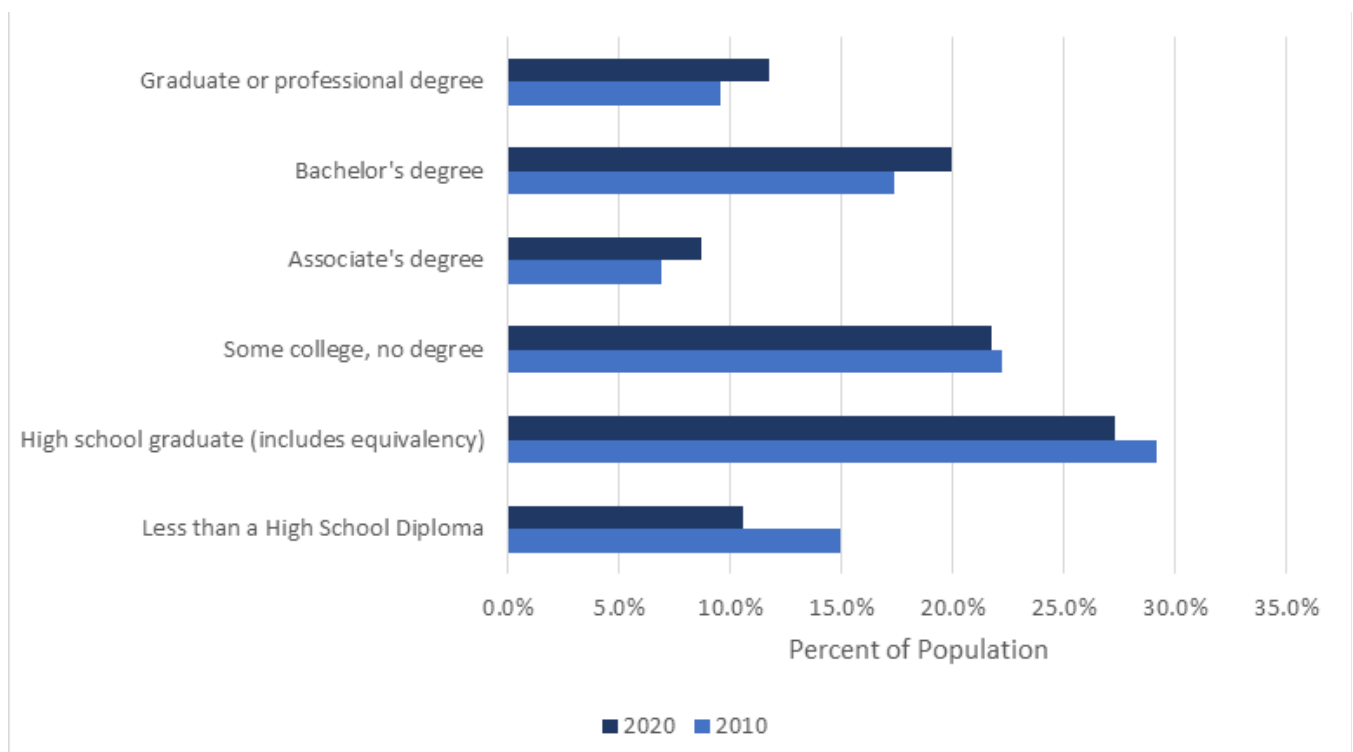
EDUCATION

The Greater Birmingham region is home to ten higher-educational institutions, including four-year colleges such as the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), Samford University, the University of Montevallo, Miles College, and Birmingham-Southern College (BSC). In addition, the region has two-year professional schools such as Lawson State Community College and Jefferson State Community College that are a prominent source of education and training for the area’s workforce.

Education can be an indication of the economic success of individuals and the overall community, and educational attainment levels can be used to evaluate the workforce capacity of an area. For the Greater Birmingham area, education levels have increased over time, as the number of residents in the region having less than a high school diploma has fallen by 30 percent the last decade. The region’s educational attainment has also surpassed state levels. As of 2020, over 30 percent of Greater Birmingham residents had a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to the state’s average of about 22 percent.¹ Figure 2 illustrates the attainment averages for the region.

¹ Center for Business and Economic Research, Culverhouse School of Business, “Alabama Shows Dramatic Improvement in Education Attainment; State Remains Below National Average,” University of Alabama, August 7, 2019, <https://cber.culverhouse.ua.edu/2019/08/07/alabama-shows-dramaticimprovement-in-education-attainment-state-remains-below-national-average/>.

FIGURE 2: POPULATION BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT LEVEL, 2020



Source: American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates, 2020

38.3%

more residents have a Bachelors degree or higher in 2020 than 2010

DIVERSITY

The Greater Birmingham region is becoming increasingly more diverse. Since 2010, the average white population in the region has been relatively stagnant, decreasing by less than 1 percent. Conversely, the average Black population has increased by over 5 percent, and the population that identified as another racial or ethnic minority experienced the largest increase of 44 percent. Due to the positive relationship between diversity and economic vitality, the Birmingham region’s increasingly diverse population is advantageous for the area’s present and future prosperity. Diversity encourages innovation and maintaining a diverse workforce can assist in economic areas like problem-solving and capturing a larger share of the consumer market.

TABLE 3: POPULATION CHANGES BY COUNTY, 2020

Racial Category	2010	2020	Change
White	742,697	736,270	-0.9%
Black/African American	309,384	326,082	5.4%
American Indian and Alaska Native	2,708	3,220	18.9%
Asian	13,423	15,985	19.1%
Some other race	14,408	20,760	44.1%
Hispanic Origin	42,202	50,730	20.2%

Source: American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates, 2020

HOUSEHOLD INCOME LEVELS

The number and size of households of the Greater Birmingham region has increased by nearly 4 percent since 2010. Of the six counties, Jefferson County had the highest number of households at 268,302 households in 2020, but it also had the smallest growth of slightly over 1 percent over the last decade. Chilton County had the lowest number at 17,140 households, while Shelby County experienced the highest growth of over 12 percent. Only Walker County experienced a decrease in households.

The regional average median household income for the Greater Birmingham area was \$57,234 in 2020, an increase of over 20 percent since 2010. However, 43 percent of all households in the Greater Birmingham region earned less than \$50,000 per year, making this income bracket the largest share of households. The highest concentration of income occurred in Shelby County, where the median household income was \$78,889 and approximately 30 percent of total households earned more than \$100,000 per year. Walker County experienced the lowest concentration of wealth, with a median household income of \$45,833 and 53 percent of its total households earning less than \$50,000. Table 4 tracks the changes in household income by income category, and Figure 3 illustrates the median income for each county.

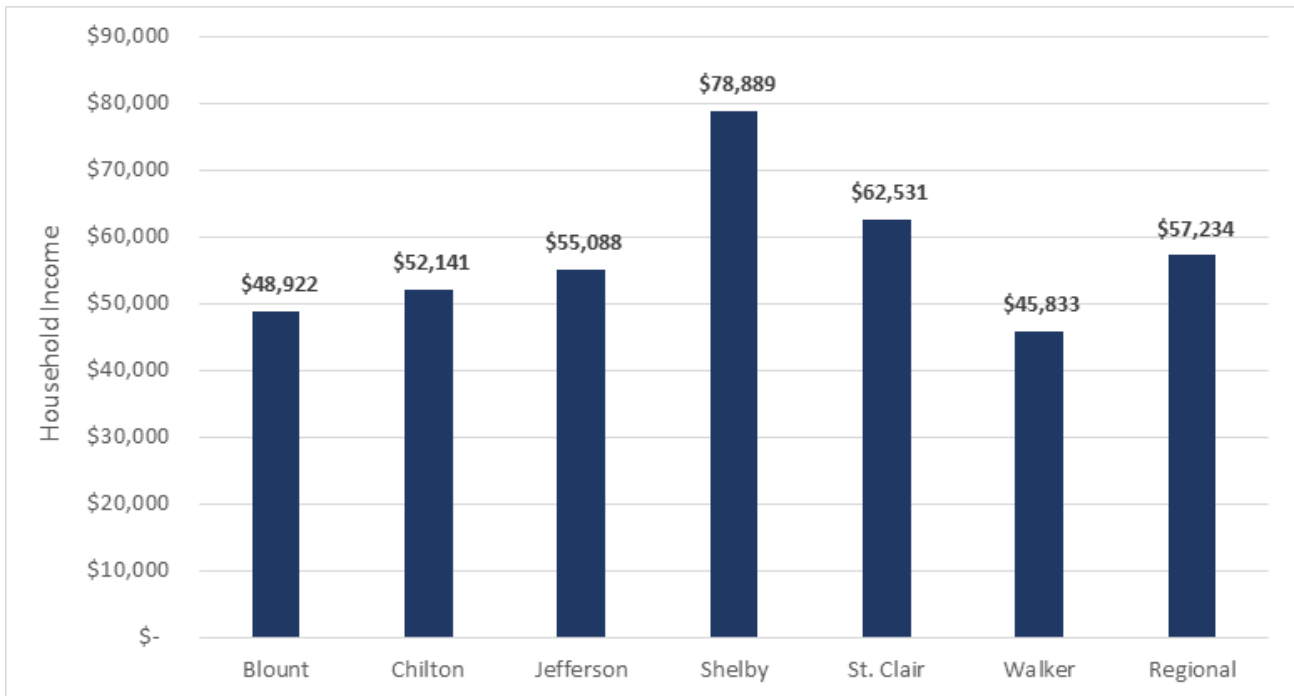
TABLE 4: HOUSEHOLDS BY HOUSEHOLD INCOME, 2010 TO 2020

Income Bracket	Blount	Chilton	Jefferson	Shelby	St. Clair	Walker	Regional
Less than \$50,000	10,899	8,313	120,821	24,146	12,975	13,483	190,637
Percent of Total Housholds	51%	49%	46%	30%	40%	53%	43%
\$50,000-\$99,999	6,086	5,845	75,711	25,438	11,435	7,912	132,426
Percent of Total Housholds	29%	34%	29%	32%	35%	31%	30%
\$100,000-\$199,999	3,668	2,605	49,858	23,258	7,307	3,587	90,283
Percent of Total Housholds	17%	15%	19%	29%	22%	14%	20%
\$200,000 or More	573	394	17,411	7,914	1,048	483	27,824
Percent of Total Housholds	3%	2%	7%	10%	3%	2%	6%

Source: American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates, 2020



FIGURE 3: COUNTIES BY MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME, 2020



Source: American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates, 2020

POVERTY LEVELS

Measuring income poverty can gauge the economic vitality of a community, determine the number of people who are eligible to receive benefits from government programs, and guide decisionmakers to best provide economic relief. The threshold income for a household to be considered living in poverty is determined by the National Poverty Guideline and based on the number of people in each household. Applying the 2.56 average household size to all counties, the poverty threshold would be \$20,953 per year. Table 1.2 lists the percentage of households living below this threshold in each of the regional counties in 2021.

TABLE 5: PERCENT OF REGIONAL HOUSEHOLDS IN POVERTY, 2021

County	Percentage of Households
Blount	19.1%
Chilton	22.2%
Jefferson	19.61%
Shelby	11.7%
St. Clair	13.3%
Walker	22.5%

Source: U.S. Census, 2021

EMPLOYMENT AND TRENDS

Overall, the region’s labor force has stayed fairly steady over the last decade. Between 2010 and 2020, the working age population, or those ages 16 years old and above, increased by 3 percent. Growth in working age population was concentrated in Shelby and St. Clair counties, while Chilton County experienced the most decline, losing nearly 30 percent of working age residents.

LABOR FORCE TRENDS

While the region’s employment rates were historically low throughout the late 2010s, the COVID-19 pandemic caused significant shifts in economic activity that caused unemployment to rise to levels higher during mid-2020 than those experienced during the Great Recession in 2008. However, by the end of 2020, the unemployment rates throughout the region began to level out to nearly pre-pandemic levels.

TABLE 6: UNEMPLOYMENT RATES BY COUNTY, 2010 TO 2020

County	2010	2020	Change
Blount	4.5%	2.7%	-40.0%
Chilton	5.5%	3.3%	-40.0%
Jefferson	5.5%	3.8%	-30.9%
Shelby	3.9%	2.5%	-35.9%
St. Clair	4.3%	3.1%	-27.9%
Walker	6.2%	3.9%	-37.1%
Regional	5.0%	3.2%	-35.5%

Source: American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates, 2020

However, unemployed residents finding new jobs is not the only cause of a declining unemployment rate. It can also decrease as unemployed workers leave the labor force as they stop looking for work. To better evaluate the trends of all workers, the area’s labor force participation rate, which includes any discouraged workers not considered in the unemployment rate can be calculated. The Greater Birmingham region’s labor force participation rate has declined over the past decade, most notably in Blount and Chilton counties. However, Walker County has historically had the lowest rate, which has remained relatively stagnant over the last 10 years. See Table 7 for the participation rate changes.

TABLE 7: LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES PER COUNTY, 2010 TO 2020

County	2010	2020	Percent Change
Blount	60.3%	52.4%	-13.1%
Chilton	60.4%	54.4%	-10.0%
Jefferson	63.6%	61.5%	-3.4%
Shelby	69.9%	65.4%	-6.4%
St. Clair	60.3%	59.1%	-2.0%
Walker	53.4%	52.7%	-1.3%
Regional Average	63.5%	60.8%	-4.2%

Source: American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates, 2020

INDUSTRY EMPLOYMENT TRENDS

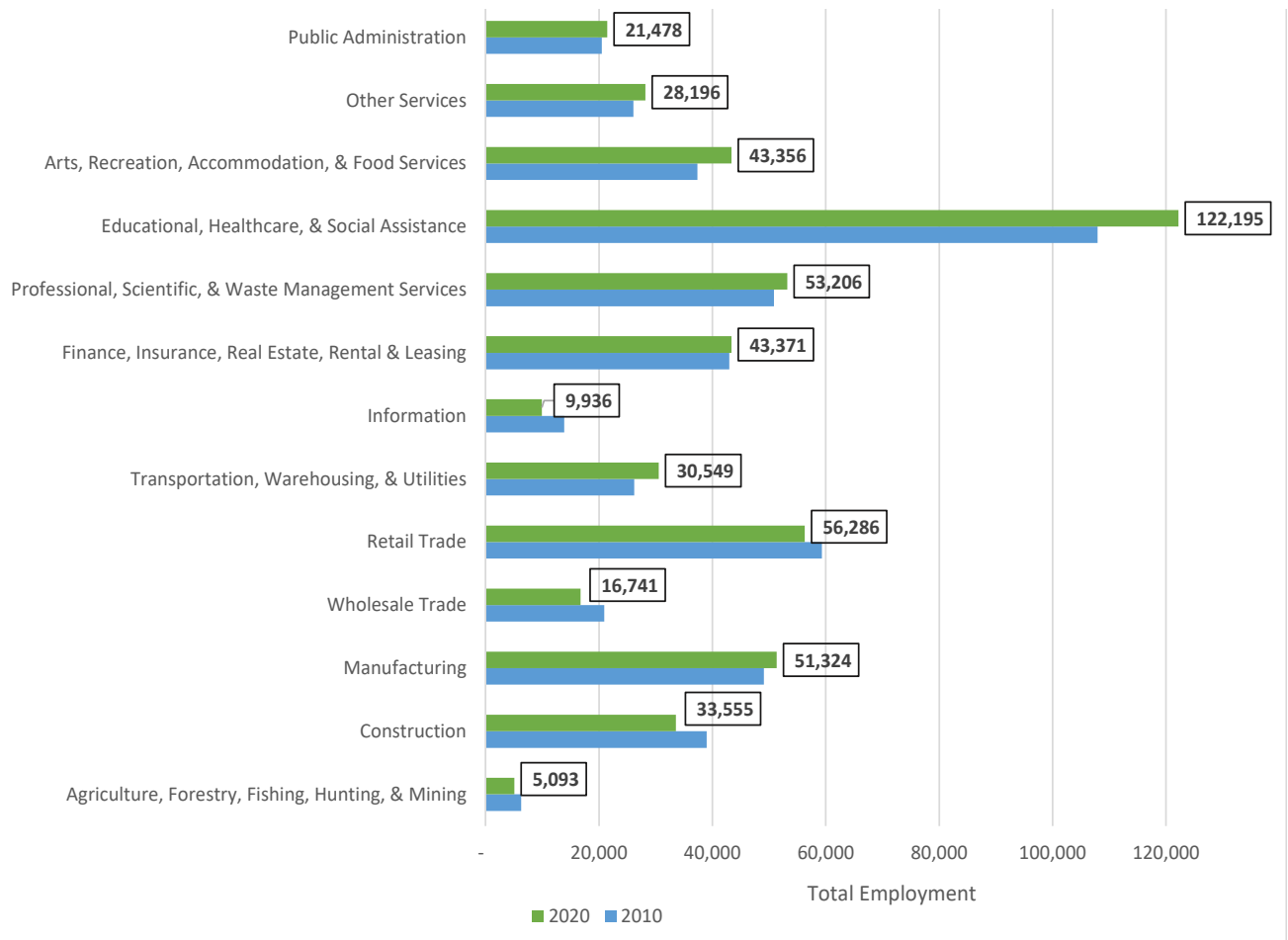
While employment in the region has historically been tied to the successes of the iron and steel industries, the diversification of the economy and the labor force has shifted the region’s economic reliance into other industry sectors. What was once a market primarily dependent on the production of goods is now a predominately service-based economy. This shift has strengthened the region’s ability to cope with fluctuating economic conditions and has helped to mollify the effects of recent economic downturns, such as the economic shocks from the COVID-19 pandemic.

As depicted in Figure 4, a large percentage of the region’s employment growth has been within the Healthcare and Education sectors, which have grown by over 13 percent since 2010. However, the sectors with the largest increase in employment are within the the Arts, Recreation, Accommodation, and Food Services industry, which has expanded by over 16 percent in the last decade. The region has lost some employment in some industries, as outlined in Figure 4. The most severe decline has occurred in the Information industry (over a 28 percent decline since 2010), followed by Wholesale Trade (20 percent employment loss) and jobs related to Agriculture & Mining (over 19 percent decline). However, those industries only make up roughly 6 percent of total employment within the region.

13.2%

employment increase within
Healthcare and Education
Service Industry between 2010
and 2020

FIGURE 4: EMPLOYMENT BY INDUSTRY, 2010 TO 2020



Source: U.S. Census, 2020



2. NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Another asset unique to the Greater Birmingham region is its natural environment. Nestled at the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, the six-county area is surrounded by a variety of natural resources. These include well-known outdoor recreational areas like Oak Mountain State Park, Red Mountain Park, and Ruffner Mountain, as well as miles of riverway for fishing and kayaking. In addition to its natural environment, the region is also home to a wide variety of historic places and landmarks, such as the City of Birmingham's Civil Rights District. These places have constructed the character and culture of the Birmingham region and collectively contribute to the economic activity of the area.

NATURAL RESOURCES

Alabama is known for its large forests, with over 23 million acres scattered throughout the state, approximately 69 percent of the state's acreage. These forests are valuable resources that provide wildlife habitats, recreation and outdoor opportunities, and raw materials for industry. The region's forest base includes yellow pine, which make up about 41 percent of the forest base, and over 200 native species of hardwoods, which cover the other 59 percent. Though the industry has steadily declined in the region, 1 out of every 4.6 jobs in the state is related to agriculture and forestry on average.²

² The Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology, Auburn University. *Economic Impacts of Alabama's Agricultural, Forestry, and Related Industries*. February 2013. https://forestry.alabama.gov/Pages/Management/Forms/Economic_Impact.pdf

WATER RESOURCES

The six counties of the Birmingham-Hoover Metropolitan Statistical Area are located within the drainage basins of three rivers: Black Warrior, Coosa, Cahaba. Of the 52 to 57 inches of annual rainfall, 5 inches contribute to groundwater recharge and over half becomes surface runoff entering streams and rivers.

Water systems in the region also contribute to the area's energy sources. Alabama Power Company is a major regulatory force over the region's water resources, as it controls the waterflow of the Black Warrior River with a hydropower dam at the Sipsey Fork. It also owns four major reservoirs on the Coosa River.



Above: Cahaba River in Bibb County

AIR QUALITY AND INITIATIVES

Per the requirements of the Clean Air Act, the region must comply with air quality standards established by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Regions found to be in noncompliance are classified as nonattainment areas, and Jefferson County, Shelby County, and a portion of Walker County have been classified as nonattainment for both 24-hour as well as annual Particulate Matter 2.5 standards. The region is thereby required to perform integrated transportation and air quality planning and implement pollution reduction strategies.

RPCGB houses two major initiatives - Alabama Partnership for Clean Air (ACPCA) and CommuteSmart - aimed at improving air quality in the metropolitan core.

- APCA** is an affiliation of public, private, and nonprofit organizations working to implement strategies to achieve and maintain compliance with national air quality standards, improve public health, minimize the economic impacts on existing businesses, and maximize the potential for economic growth consistent with clean air goals. APCA affiliates educate businesses and groups on best air quality practices, voluntary emissions testing, alternative fuels, and ridesharing.
- CommuteSmart** was created in 1999 to help alleviate traffic congestion and reduce air pollution in Jefferson and Shelby counties. The program encourages the reduction of single occupancy commuting and educates commuters on cleaner modes of transportation. Some of these methods include carpooling, vanpooling, bicycling, walking, teleworking, and public transit.



Above: The Commute Smart program is an effective way to save money, reduce traffic, and improve air quality. Using alternatives to driving alone; such as carpooling, vanpooling, walking, bicycling, riding a bus, and teleworking can save money and improve the environment.

HISTORIC PRESERVATION

The six-county area maintains 82 historic preservation properties. Most of these sites are located in Jefferson County and are especially concentrated in the downtown Birmingham and Mountain Brook areas, as well as along I-20. Jefferson County is also home to the region's two HBCUs and currently has 30 active and seven completed projects under the AL Historic Tax Credit Program.



Above: the Coosa River at Gadsden (Source: Glynn Wilson)

3. BUILT ENVIRONMENT

The Greater Birmingham region is located in the central part of the State of Alabama, approximately two hours from three neighboring states, and it is served by five interstates and six major railroads. Its connectivity to other states and region is one of its unique assets and opportunities. Its location makes it a strategic center of the state's economy, and its built environment are critical to fostering the area's continued economic growth and development.

WATER AND SEWER

There are over 70 water systems in the six-county region, and these systems have a total water treatment capacity of approximately 300 million gallons per day (MGD). The Water Works and Sewer Board for the City of Birmingham is the area's largest provider, with a treatment capacity of approximately 190 MGD. There are numerous public and private sewer collection and treatment systems in the region, and there is an increasing demand for expanded sewage collection and treatment systems to accommodate for system growth and maintenance requirements.

Given the necessity of these systems, updates to water and sewer infrastructure prove to be one of the greatest needs in the region. Table 8 shows the number of water and sewer projects applied for versus how many of those applications were funded, as well as the amount of funding requested and awarded over the previous five years. Overall, sixteen water and sewer projects were applied for, while nine of those applications were funded. \$2.6 million, or 43 percent of the funding that was requested was not awarded, indicating the need for water and sewer system improvements throughout the region.

TABLE 8: CDBG WATER & SEWER GRANT TOTALS, GREATER BIRMINGHAM REGION

Year	Total Amount Requested	Total Amount Awarded	Grants Applied For	Applications Funded
2017	\$1,650,000	\$950,000	5	3
2018	\$1,050,000	\$600,000	3	2
2019	\$900,000	\$900,000	2	2
2020	\$1,250,000	\$450,000	3	1
2021	\$1,150,000	\$500,000	3	1
Total	\$6,000,000	\$3,400,000	16	9

Source: Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs, CDBG Program, 2017 - 2021



TRANSPORTATION

The Greater Birmingham region is well-connected to major transportation hubs in the southeast. The region's interstate and highway system are primarily used for commuter transportation and freight travel. There are approximately 292 miles of Interstate system and over 1,200 miles of U.S. and State highways within the region, including the I-22 corridor from Birmingham to Memphis. This network includes I-65, which runs south to north between Nashville, Tennessee to Mobile, Alabama, as well as I-20/59, which runs west to east from Atlanta, Georgia to Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas. Due to Birmingham's long history as a center of heavy industry, the region is crisscrossed by an extensive rail network, increasing its industrial, manufacturing, and trading connectivity.

FREIGHT SYSTEMS

The freight industry accounts for over 90,000 jobs in the region, 15 percent of the total number of jobs. While larger industries within the region, such as Healthcare and Retail Trade, are not specifically included in freight, they continue to be reliant on freight movements operations to move products and goods. In addition, compared to non-freight industries, freight-related jobs contribute significantly more to the region's overall economic output. The nearly \$30 billion in output generated by the freight industry is 28 percent of the region's total, while only accounting for 15 percent of the employment and 20 percent of the compensation.

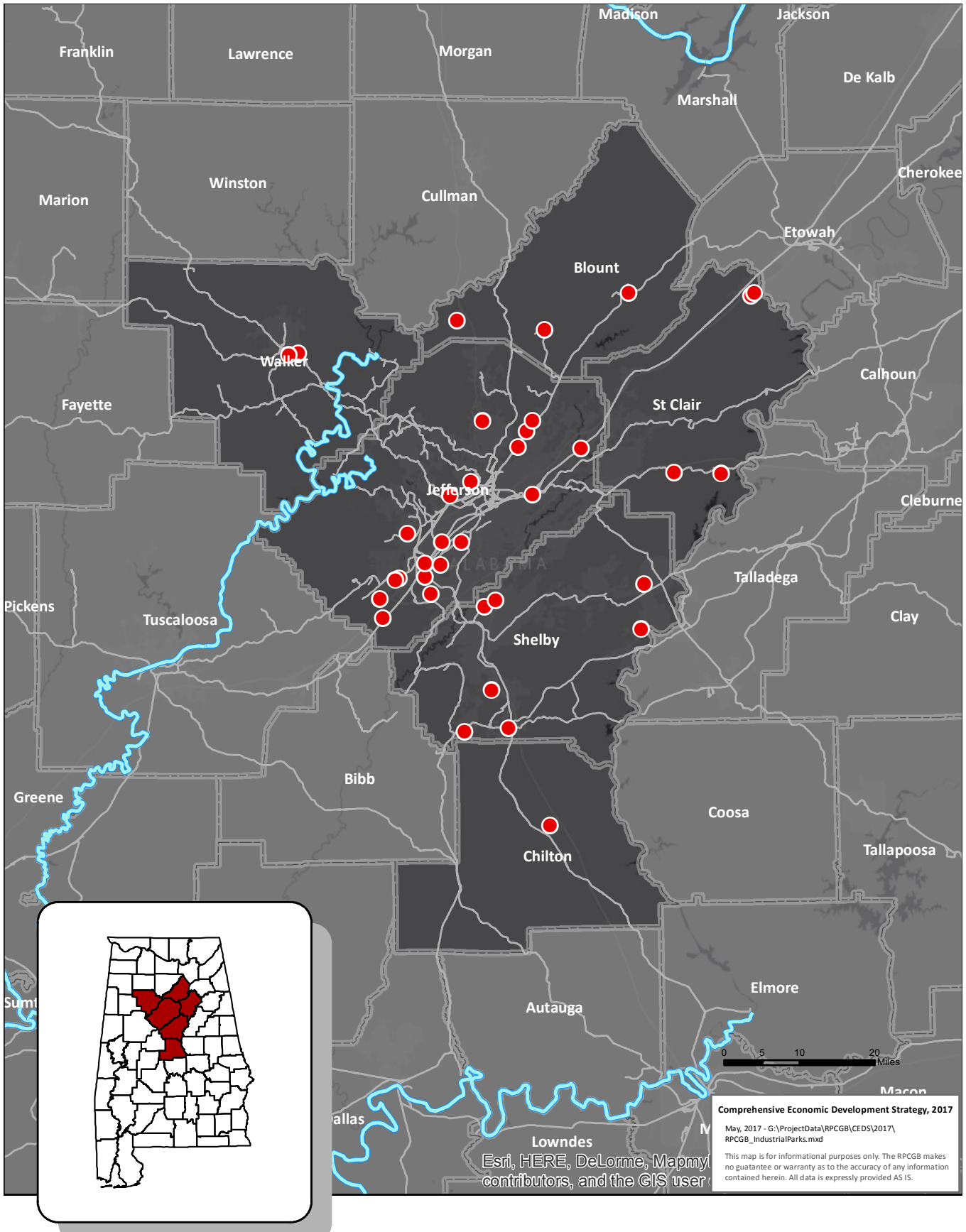
INDUSTRIAL PARKS

The Birmingham region is home to nearly forty industrial parks ranging from under 100 to over 800 acres. These parks, concentrated in Jefferson County, are located along primary transportation corridors that include interstate highway and rail access. With the increased rail activity, major investments to the automobile industry, and the emergence of the region as a major freight hub, additional demand for transportation and warehousing facilities have benefitted the region's industrial parks. Industrial park tenants range from automobile suppliers, pharmaceutical distribution, and retail distribution to engineering, general consumer services, and healthcare services. See Figure 5 for a map of the region industrial parks.

90K

freight-related jobs exist within the region

FIGURE 5: MAP OF REGIONAL INDUSTRIAL PARKS





RAILWAY SYSTEM

The Birmingham region is served by three Class I railroads and three Class III short line railways, and the rail corridors throughout the region are a key part of the nation’s freight rail network. Birmingham is one of the few gateway cities where major east and west railroads interchange with each other, making it a strategic location with quick access to markets in both the Midwest and Northeast. Class I railways own approximately 526 miles of track and short line railways own approximately 154 miles of track in the region.

Seventeen independent rail and truck transload facilities are located in Birmingham. The industry has recently made substantial investment in new or upgraded rail infrastructure and facilities in preparation for growing importance of the region as a major rail hub. As part of the Crescent Corridor project, the recent addition of the Birmingham Regional Intermodal Facility in southwest Jefferson County will offer the only intermodal service for domestic containers and trailers in Birmingham, with service to and from the northeast.



AVIATION SYSTEM

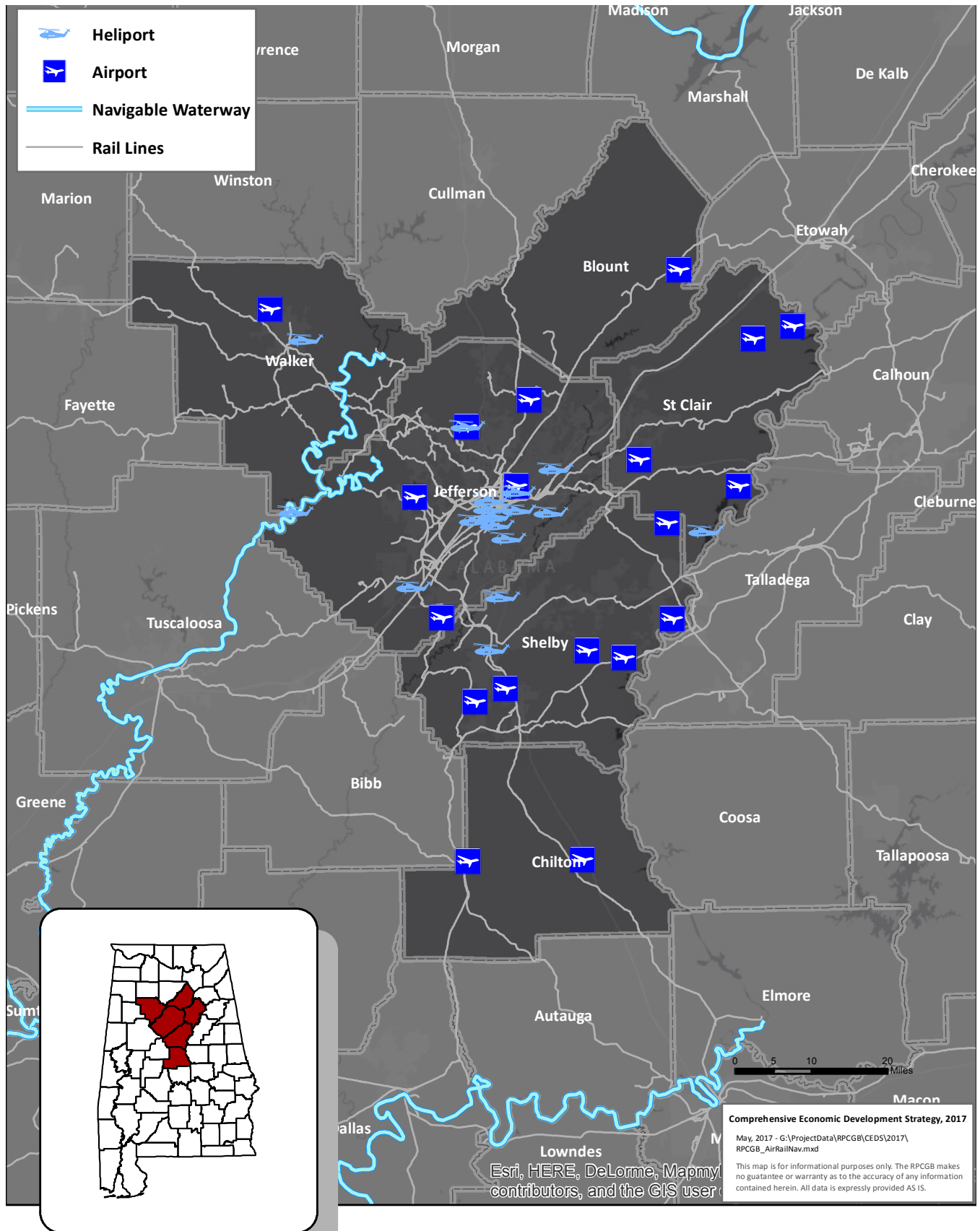
The region’s air passengers and cargo are primarily served by the Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport (BHM), the largest and busiest airport in the State of Alabama by passenger volume. However, while BHM ranks first by passenger movement in the state, cargo volumes are comparatively lower. Based on the 2020 All-Cargo Landed Weight Percentage Change report by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), BHM ranks 108th nationally by total landed weight, which was recorded at 172,919,560 pounds.³

In addition, Bessemer Municipal Airport (EKY) is a regional general aviation airport that supports heavy business aviation traffic. Currently, it primarily supports general aviation movements, although larger aircraft able to operate at this airport. EKY also supports small-scale freight operations serving the Mercedes-Vance Automotive Corridor.

Above: FlyBirmingham.com

³ Preliminary CY 2021 All-Cargo Landed Weight Percentage Change from CY19, Federal Aviation Administration

FIGURE 6: MAP OF REGIONAL AIRPORT, RAIL, AND RIVER ACCESS



WATERWAY SYSTEM

Port Birmingham is the region's access to inland waterway freight commerce. Located along the Black River in Jefferson County, on 184 acres approximately eighteen miles northwest of Downtown Birmingham, the port has served the region since 1920. It was designed in conjunction with the development of the Warrior River Barge Line, which permitted barge traffic from Birmingham to reach Mobile and New Orleans. The activity along the two-mile stretch of river primarily serves the steel and transportation industries with materials from Mobile. The port is linked to the Birmingham market and the ground transportation network by rail and highway infrastructure. The port handles bulk and break-bulk material that can be transported by barge, truck, or rail. Trucks can access this port by SR-269, which provides connections to I-65, I-22, I-59/20, and I-459. Rail service is provided by the Birmingham Terminal Railway which connects to all three Class I railroads.

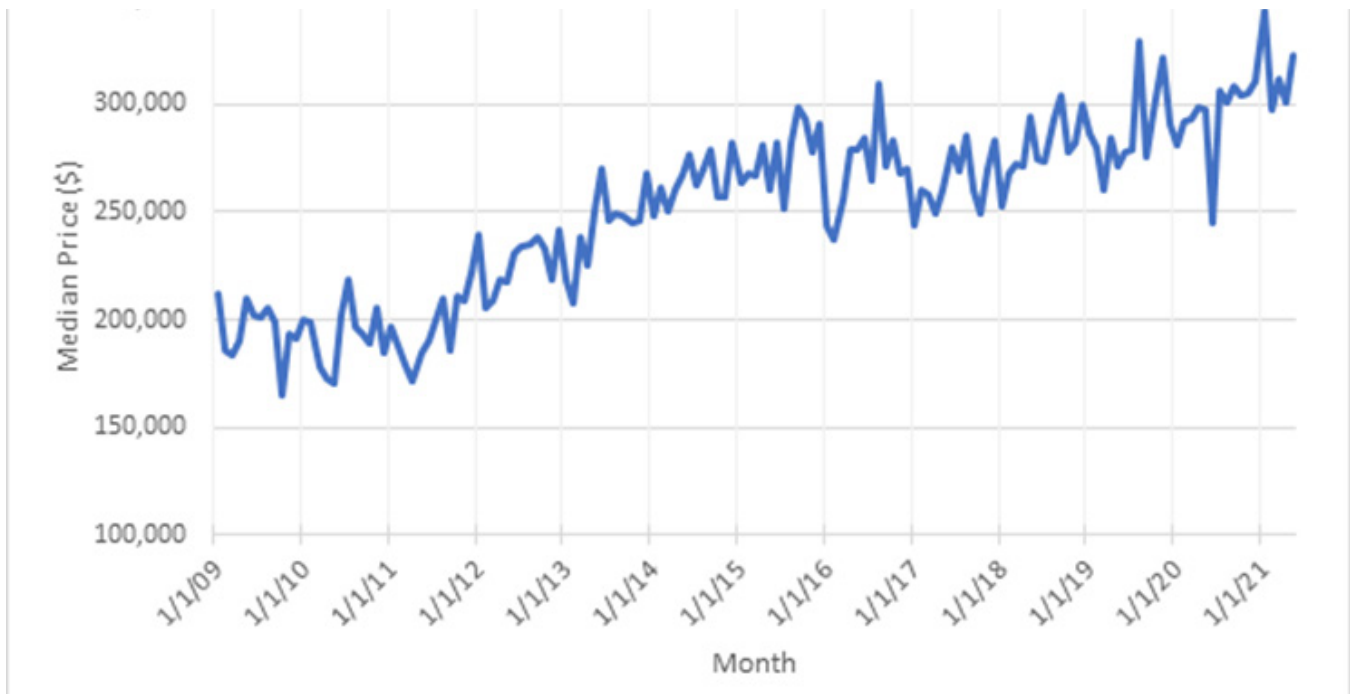
However, Port Birmingham has a large amount of untapped potential. When coal was a more significant commodity in the region, this facility processed 12 to 14 million tons of goods each year. Today, the port operates at a small fraction of its historic use. Birmingham and Jefferson County officials have made progress in improving the usage of this facility, including the development of the Birmingham-Jefferson County Port Authority (BJCPA) in 2016.

HOUSING

On average, households spend 30 to 35 percent of monthly income on housing, making construction and housing markets important sectors of the regional economy. Nearly 70 percent of all housing options are single-family detached homes within the region, with Shelby County having the highest concentration at 75 percent. Around 15 percent of all housing options are apartments, with Jefferson County having the highest availability at 61,000 units. Nearly 13 percent of all housing options are manufactured homes, and 10 percent are townhouses.

The housing units are predominantly older throughout the region. 72 percent of all housing in the region were constructed between 1940 and 1999, while only 20 percent were constructed after 2000. Jefferson County has the highest concentration of housing built before 1940 at 44.8 percent, while St. Clair County has the highest concentration of housing built after 2000 at 35.2 percent. In addition, owner-occupied housing units outweigh those owned by renter—67 percent of housing units are owned, 21 percent are rented, and 12 percent are vacant. Shelby County has the most homeowners, with 75.2 percent of occupied units being owned, and Jefferson County has the most renters, with over 30 percent of occupied units being rented. However, as housing prices have continued to rise, owning a home within the region has become increasingly difficult. In April 2009, the median price for a newly constructed house was \$189,900; in April 2021, the median price was \$301,120, a 58.6 percent increase.

FIGURE 7: MEDIAN SALES PRICE OF NEWLY CONSTRUCTED HOMES 2009 - 2021



Source: University of Alabama Center of Business and Economic Research, 2009-2021

BROADBAND

Affordable, high-quality internet access is becoming increasingly vital for working, communicating, and innovating in an increasingly digitized, globalized world. Expanding access to broadband is one of the State of Alabama’s priorities, and the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA) launched the Alabama Connectivity Plan to fund and expand the state’s current high-speed broadband network, especially in rural, underserved, and unserved communities. The plan aims to provide 100/20 broadband access to 90 percent of Alabama consumers and businesses in five years and 98 percent in ten years by increasing affordability and technical skills.

The region’s percentage of households without internet access is comparable to national averages. Nearly 20 percent of regional households currently lack access to the internet, compared to the national average of 20.6 percent. Additionally, over 14 percent of households regionally do not have computers, smartphones, and tablets that connect to internet, while 14.6 percent of households nationally do not have access to these items.

4. TARGET INDUSTRY CLUSTERS

While employment in the region has historically been tied to the successes of the iron and steel industries, the diversification of the economy and the labor force has shifted away from a good-production economy to a service-based economy. This shift has enhanced the region's ability to cope with fluctuating economic conditions and has helped to mollify the effects of recent economic downturns. This section will outline the target industry clusters for the region's economic development efforts based on data from current industrial and employment trends as well as future growth projections.

HEALTHCARE

The Healthcare and Social Assistance industry represents nearly 9 percent of total business establishments in the region and employs over 88,000 workers – over 15 percent of the region's total employment. Four of the top 10 regional employers are within the Healthcare and Social Assistance industry, with the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) being the largest with over 23,000 workers alone. It is also the fastest growing industry in the region, increasing by over 32 percent since 2000. Jobs in this field are projected to continue to grow by 19 percent by 2024.

This industry is also one of the most resilient during times of economic shock. From 2007 to 2010, Education and Healthcare Services added over 2,000 jobs to the regional economy, when most industries lost jobs. Though around 3,000 jobs were lost in this industry between 2019 and 2020, estimates for 2021 showed this industry had surpassed pre-pandemic levels.

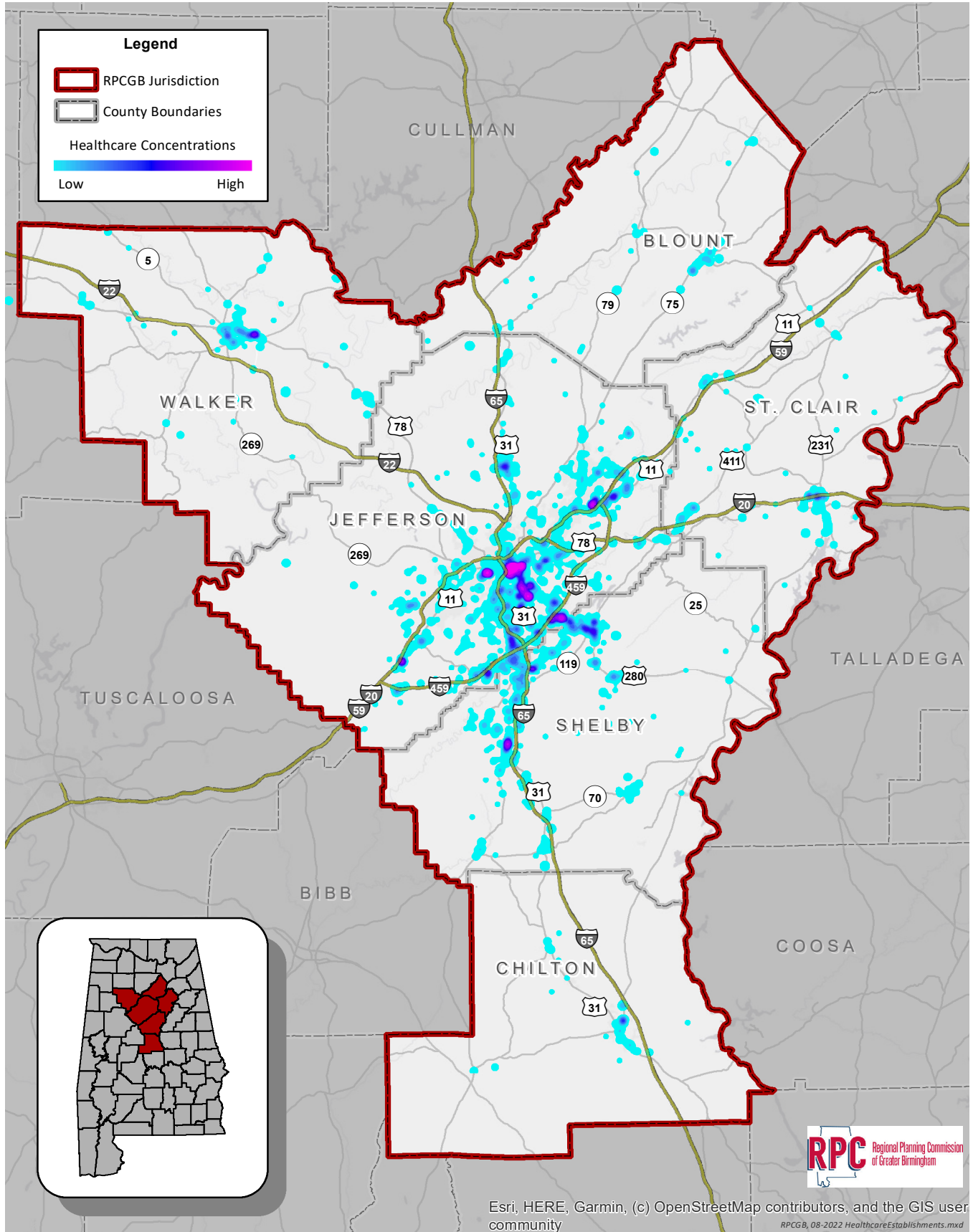


Above: Children's Hospital of Alabama (Source: www.wsp-pb.com)



Above: St. Vincent's Birmingham

FIGURE 8: CONCENTRATION OF HEALTHCARE ESTABLISHMENTS



ADVANCED MANUFACTURING

Employment within the manufacturing sector has been declining in the region for decades, which is reflective of the national trend. Since 1990, the industry has lost over 20,000 jobs within the region, and total employment has decreased by over 30 percent since 2000. The increasing diversification of the regional economy towards service-oriented industry instead of goods-producing sectors can help explain this shift.

However, a decrease in employment does not always coincide with a decrease in output, as manufacturers helped to drive Alabama's economy. Total exports in the state increased by almost 60 percent from 2009 to 2012. In 2015, the three automobile plants in Alabama have produced \$6.6 billion worth of vehicles for export. The state now ships products to 188 countries, with the top five export markets for Alabama companies including Canada, China, Germany, and the United Kingdom.

TECHNOLOGY

The Technology industry has created a foundation in the Birmingham region in a couple of ways. Biotechnology and medical research industries are primarily linked to UAB, the largest healthcare employer in the region, and Southern Research Institute, which is a leading research facility for pharmaceutical, engineering, environmental and energy industries for the state. However, there are over 400 technology companies in the Birmingham area alone, and Birmingham ranks among the top ten largest southeastern technology centers.

Though the Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services industry included some of the most susceptible jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic, the job loss and regain illustrates its resiliency to recover from economic shock. The region lost 7 percent of jobs within this industry by April 2020 but had fully recovered and even made additional hires by December 2020. In addition, the region gained nearly 10,000 Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services jobs from 2010 to 2020, indicating this industry has had a positive growth pattern since the Great Recession. The recovery patterns of this industry illustrate a potential for investments to bolster the employment opportunities to make them less susceptible to initial economic shocks and disturbances.



Above: Watco Port of Birmingham (Source: Joe Songer)



Above: Line of 18-Wheeler Trucks

LOGISTICS AND DISTRIBUTION

The ability for goods to pass through the Greater Birmingham region through multiple modes is an asset that many regions do not have. The Birmingham area's central location makes the market more competitive and increases opportunities for suppliers and buyers in the surrounding regions. There is an opportunity to expand on this existing asset by improving current infrastructure. This is a focus of the federal government, as signified by the passage of the Infrastructure Investments and Jobs Act of 2021 (IIJA), which is providing large federal investment in local infrastructure projects.

The Trade, Transportation, and Utilities industry represents the largest industry in terms of employment within the region by a large margin. This gap is likely due to the broad categorization of employment in this industry. Also, the economic diversification of the region may explain this large influx of employment, as the focus of the region has moved away from producing and manufacturing goods and into a services-based economy. However, these jobs are often seasonal and pay low wages, making the employment opportunities in this industry more susceptible to downturns. This industry lost nearly 11,000 jobs between 2007 and 2010, and approximately 9,000 between February and April of 2020. Employment rose to 110,300 in 2016, the closest to pre-recession employment in 2007, but had already fallen to 108,300 in 2019, prior to the pandemic. By 2020, this industry had lost 3,700 jobs due to the shutdowns and closures during the pandemic. Though estimates from 2021 suggest 2,500 more jobs were created since 2020, this measure is still 1,200 lower than pre-pandemic levels.



Above: American Cast Iron Pipe Company (Source: Gresham, Smith and Partners)



SECTION II

REGIONAL ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE

The Greater Birmingham’s regional economy has been characterized and shaped by its ability to respond to needs and adapt to changes. Once highly dependent on industries like iron and steel, the regional economy has diversified its industry base to include an array of sectors and supply chains. However, to continue this positive trajectory, the region and its leadership must identify the area’s strengths, challenges, and opportunities to strategically plan growth and target initiatives to enhance the workforce and meet industry needs. This section will describe the region’s recent economic performance by defining the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats as determined by the Strategy Committee and regional stakeholders. The results from the SWOT Analysis are used to describe the Advance Greater Birmingham’s Priority Goals for this CEDS in Chapter 2, and lastly, resources like Economic Resiliency Initiatives and Opportunity Zones are outlined as development resources for the region to utilize during the implementation phase of the CEDS.

CHAPTER	PAGE NUMBER
1. REGIONAL SWOT ANALYSIS	34
2. REGIONAL PRIORITY GOALS	35
3. DEVELOPMENT CONSIDERATIONS:	37

1. REGIONAL SWOT ANALYSIS

The CEDS planning process included an analysis of the region’s Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) using surveys, assessments, and committee meetings. Part of the analysis was an online survey provided to the CEDS Strategy Committee and stakeholders to identify the most pressing economic issues facing the region’s economic trajectory.

SWOT SUMMARY

Completing a SWOT analysis is critical to develop an accurate picture of the region’s current economic conditions to identify goals and implement strategies that can lead the area forward. The Greater Birmingham region has an array of economic and quality-of-life characteristics that can be leveraged for success but understanding the areas of growth and potential that exist within the region is equally as important as understanding what the strong areas are.

The information for this chapter has been formulated and condensed into the following summary based on the SWOT survey responses from the Strategy Committee and stakeholders.

STRENGTHS

- Geographic Location
- Cost of Living
- Lifestyle/Quality of Life
- Colleges and Universities; Access to educational opportunities
- Business Climate; Small Business Resources & Support
- Railroad/Port/Airport Access for Industry
- Outdoor recreation opportunities and parks
- Philanthropic and community development activity
- Natural Environment

WEAKNESSES

- Workforce/Talent Retention
- Transportation Infrastructure Conditions
- K-12 Schools
- Government / Political Leadership
- Business Sites / Real Estates
- Limited/Lack of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives
- Public Transportation Accessibility and Utility
- Water and Sewer Infrastructure Conditions
- Economic Diversity, primarily in Rural Areas
- Lack of regional cohesive marketing and message

OPPORTUNITIES

- Recruiting and expanding new industry
- Supporting existing business retention and expansion
- Reducing the gaps between industry needs and workforce skills
- Recruiting/Expanding new retail opportunities
- Regional collaboration
- Supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives for workforce/talent attraction and retention
- Starting and growing new startup companies

THREATS

- Broadband Access
- Water and Sewer Infrastructure
- Industrial Land Availability / Terrain and natural feature constraints for Site preparation and Development
- Access to public transit / alternative modes of Transportation
- Road/Highway System Conditions
- Increases in Housing Affordability

2. REGIONAL PRIORITY GOALS

The Regional SWOT survey results gave insight to many needs, challenges, and opportunities within the Greater Birmingham region. The feedback from Strategy Committee members and regional stakeholders in the SWOT Survey have been condensed into four central development priority goals. These goals are outlined in this chapter and are used in the development of the CEDS Action Plan.

1 WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT & RETENTION

This area pertains to the region’s ability to attract, retain, and continually develop a highly skilled workforce that meets the needs of current industry and can calculate future workforce changes to be adaptable to an ever-changing business environment. Over 76 percent of the total survey respondents described the region’s Workforce and Talent Retention as the number one top competitive weakness for the region. In addition, respondents also listed “Programs to attract and retain talent” and “Create career pipelines focused on retaining graduates from regional institutions” as the top two areas for important project development needs to enhance the regional economy. The inability to attract and retain population and workforce as well as the limited or lack of job opportunities were also listed as the top two threats to the region’s economic resiliency.

This priority goal will focus on supporting projects that close the gap between industry needs and workers' skillsets, develop inclusive training programs, enhance collaboration between businesses and workforce development agencies, and support the career advancement current workers.

2 BUSINESS CLIMATE & ENTREPRENEURSHIP

This priority goal concerns the region's capacity to provide business support and assistance, especially regarding start-up firms and entrepreneurs. Though the region's business climate was rated among one of the highest strengths of the region, its ability to foster small businesses through technical and financial assistance consistently ranked as a regional weakness and future threat.

This goal will focus on supporting projects that support small and start-up businesses, diversify the local tax base, attract new industries or businesses, decrease reliance on single industries, increase financing availability to start-up businesses, and enhance growth in the region's target industries.

3 INFRASTRUCTURE

This goal considers the conditions of the region's built environment, as well as structures required for different types of expanding industry, such as outdoor recreation. Improving critical infrastructure necessary for development and expansion ranked as the third highest priority for project development according to the SWOT survey, and transportation infrastructure, specifically roads and highways, was consistently rated as an area of weakness. In addition, infrastructure necessary for access to other critical assets, like the port, airports, and railroads, ranked as an increasing threat to the region's future development. The lack of reliable broadband connectivity was also ranked as a weakness for the region, and concerns about the availability of site development resources and the current conditions of critical infrastructure like water and sewer systems consistently ranked as barriers to the region's economic potential.

The goal will focus on supporting projects that improve critical infrastructure such as water and sewer systems, road and highway improvements, and broadband enhancement initiatives. In addition, this goal prioritizes projects that will include site development resources or preparation, as well as reuses of vacant properties, such as brownfields redevelopment.



4 REGIONAL RESILIENCE

This focus area prioritizes the completion of projects that contribute to the economic resiliency of the region. As defined by the Economic Development Administration (EDA), economic resilience, in terms of economic development, describes a local economy's ability to quickly recover from, withstand, and avoid an economic shock. This priority goal includes resilience efforts to respond to economic downturns, and it was developed to address the specific threats the resiliency. Specific resiliency threats collected from the survey responses are outlined below:

- Inability to attract or retain population/workforce
- Limited/Lack of job growth/opportunities
- Overreliance on one industry or employer, especially in Rural Areas
- Plant closures/relocations
- Inadequate water/sewer infrastructure
- Inadequate support for site preparation/development

This priority goal will encourage projects that alleviate barriers created through this list of threats, including supporting multi-jurisdictional collaboration and local leadership empowerment and training, as well as bolstering the local economy through strengthening the target industries for the region. In addition, this goal will support projects that diversify the local economy and enhance the quality of life of existing and future residents through strengthening the use and development of the region's unique assets, such as its natural environment.

3. DEVELOPMENT CONSIDERATIONS

ECONOMIC RESILIENCY

As defined by the Economic Development Administration (EDA), economic resilience, in terms of economic development, describes a local economy's ability to quickly recover from, withstand, and avoid an economic shock.⁴ Over the course of the last century alone, the need for local economies to have the ability to withstand economic shocks has become apparent in a variety of ways, as regional economic prosperity is increasingly linked to an area's ability to endure major disruptions to its economic base.

The Birmingham region was founded and built around its potential to become a global industrial hub. It relied heavily on the mining, production, and transportation of steel, coal, and iron until the mid- to late 20th century. The World Wars accelerated the growth of the Birmingham economy, and the external dependence on steel allowed it to survive many economic downturns and depressions since its founding. Though the heavy dependence on the coal, steel, and iron

⁴ Herbert J. Lewis, "Birmingham," *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, Alabama Humanities Alliance, Accessed June 16, 2022, <http://encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-1421>.



Above: Sloss Furnance, Birmingham, AL

industry propelled the region through the Great Depression and world wars, eventually, increased globalization, technological innovation, and the steel crisis in the early 1970s forced the Greater Birmingham area to diversify and expand its economy beyond its previous economic dependence. Without this diversification, the closing of mines, outsourcing of manual labor, and the boom of the financial and technological sectors in the late 1990s could have been the catalyst for the region's decline. Instead, the addition of 140 new industries in the 1950s launched an era of increasing economic diversification still being seen today.

However, a resilient economy is not only determined by whether economic shocks can be prevented, as some may be unavoidable, but also by how well it recovers from an unforeseeable or unavoidable disruption. In October 2008, approximately one month following the financial crisis, Alabama's unemployment rate was 5.9 percent. A year later in October 2009, the rate had shot up to 11.9 percent, the highest in the state's recent history. Alabama's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) fell by \$6 billion in the two years following the financial crisis, and the state had the fourth highest rate for bankruptcy filings in the United States. The Birmingham region's local economy also felt the hardships of the Great Recession. The region experienced the highest unemployment rate of the four largest metropolitan areas in the state, declining at a steeper rate than the national and state average.⁵ In addition, according to reports in 2019, the Birmingham-Hoover region still had not returned to the employment levels it experienced pre-recession, making it the only major metro-area in the state to not reach full recovery.

However, the post-recession economy for the region became its baseline as the COVID-19 Pandemic began in March 2020. The pandemic caused economic disruptions across the state, resulting in high unemployment rates, job loss, and economic uncertainty. The regional Pandemic Analysis Report (PAR), published by the RPCGB in June 2022, was developed to evaluate the regions' economic reactions and changes due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The report found that though employment rates skyrocketed to rates higher than what occurred during the Great Recession initially, employment returned to pre-pandemic levels by mid-2021. In addition, the major industries impacted by the closures and downturns caused by the pandemic were employed at nearly pre-pandemic rates by the end of 2021.

⁵ Ryan Poe, "Study: Recession hit Alabama, Birmingham job markets hard," *Birmingham Business Journal*, August 22, 2011, <https://www.bizjournals.com/birmingham/news/2011/08/22/study-recessionhit-alabama.html>.

The pace at which the region recovered from the economic downturns caused by the pandemic can be attributed to many factors, including economic diversification. However, there is room to improve the region’s resiliency. Around 54 percent of SWOT survey respondents rated the region’s economic resiliency as “Neutral or Average”, with only around 30 percent rating it as “Good”. To support future recovery efforts, an Economic Resiliency has been included in the Advance Greater Birmingham’s Priority Goals, and this Action Plan outlines strategies that support both Steady-State and Responsive Initiatives, as recommended by the EDA.

To learn more about Regional Economic Resilience for the Greater Birmingham Region, reference the Pandemic Analysis Report (PAR) publish by the RPCGB at www.rpcgb.org/economic-analysis-programs.

EDA RESILIENCE INITIATIVES:

Steady-State: Long-term efforts that seek to bolster the community or region’s ability to withstand or avoid a shock.

Responsive: Include establishing capabilities for the economic development organization to be responsive to the region’s recovery needs following an incident.

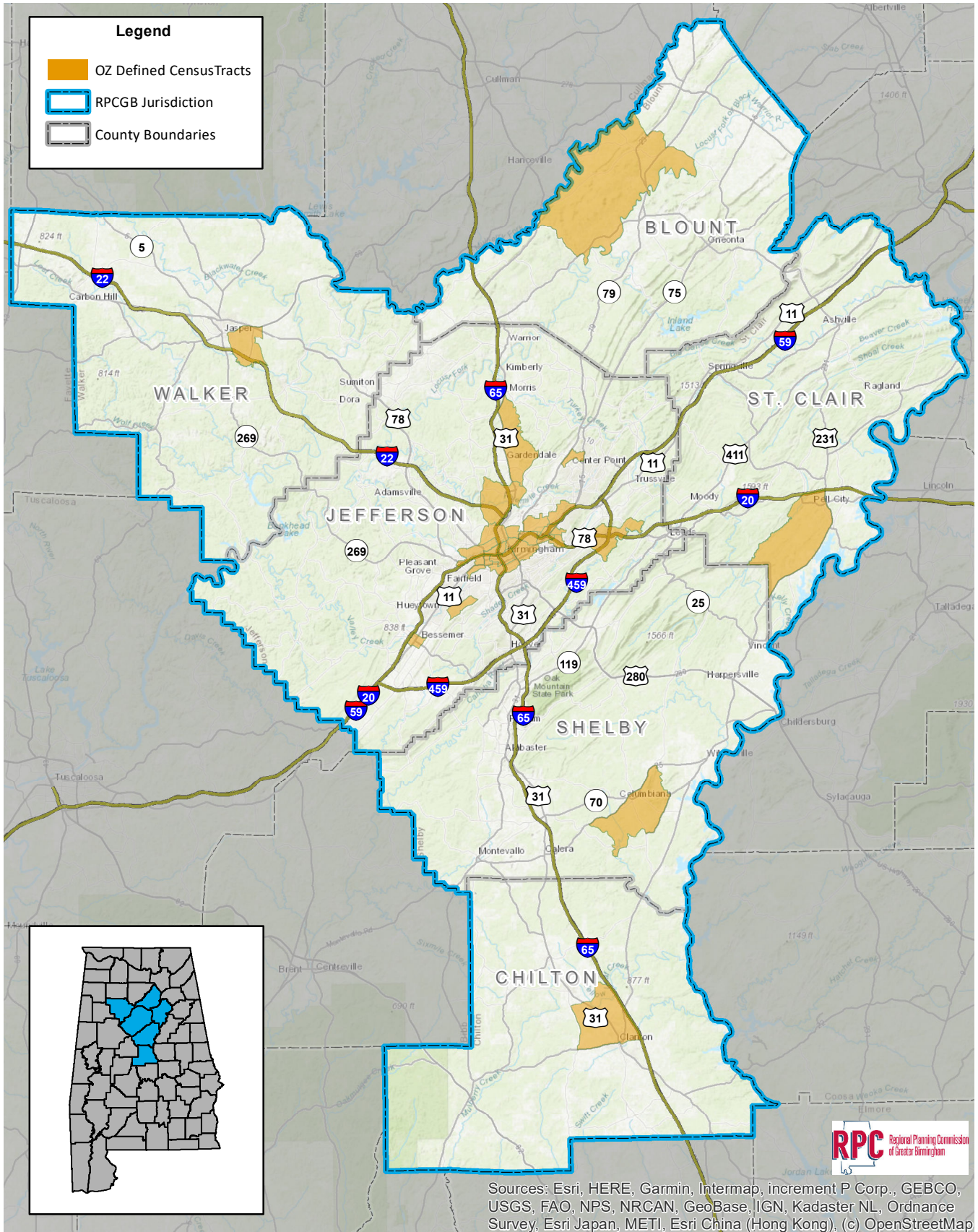
OPPORTUNITY ZONES

Opportunity Zones are designated low-income census tracts where tax incentives are available to groups or individuals who invest in an Opportunity Fund and hold their capital gains in Opportunity Zone-related assets or property. Since Opportunity Zones were created in the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017, 158 opportunity zones have been identified throughout the State of Alabama. These zones were classified as areas in need of economic development based on specific economic indicators, such as income and poverty. This program provides a path for tax-incentive investment to occur in economically distressed communities, with the goal of creating jobs in traditionally low-income areas.

Within the Greater Birmingham region, 32 opportunity zones have been identified. Jefferson County has the most zones with a total of 28; the other 5 counties within the RPCGB service area have one per county. This program has been used for many development projects within the region. In addition, a nonprofit organization called Opportunity Alabama (OPAL) was created to connect investors with investable assets in Alabama’s Opportunity Zones. The strategies included in the Action Plan will support projects within Opportunity Zones and help leverage capital investments within these Census tracks



FIGURE 9: OPPORTUNITY ZONES, GREATER BIRMINGHAM REGION





SECTION III

CEDS

ACTION PLAN

The RPCGB EDD Staff and CEDS Strategy Committee developed an implementable action plan that addresses the region’s four priority goals, based on and detailed evaluation of the SWOT analysis. The Action Plan will be utilized to help guide the process of future economic development projects and investments to address critical barriers to regional economic prosperity and resiliency. Each goal and objective are associated with specific strategies in order to provide accountability and performance measurements.

This section also includes the evaluation framework. These metrics serve as a mechanism to gauge progress on the successful implementation of the overall CEDS throughout the 5-year project period. These regular updates keep the strategic direction and action plan outlined in the CEDS current and the plan as a whole relevant.

CHAPTER	PAGE NUMBER
1. CEDS ACTION PLAN	42
2. EVALUATION FRAMEWORK	49
3. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	51

ACTION PLAN DEFINITIONS

- **Action Plan:** The strategic direction derived from the SWOT analysis, which is consistent with other relevant state/regional/local plans
- **Goal:** The broad outcomes or general intentions that build upon the CEDS's Mission and Vision, though they are often intangible.
- **Objective:** Specific and concrete approaches taken to achieve a goal or support the obtainment of the goals.
- **Strategy:** A measurable step taken to achieve an objective or support the achievement of the associated objective. Together, goals, objectives, and strategies provide a basis for decisions on the use of available resources, as well as benchmarks by which area officials, economic development stakeholders, and the community can measure performance.
- **Evaluation Framework:** Performance measures used to evaluate the organization's implementation of the CEDS and its impact on the regional economy

1. CEDS ACTION PLAN

The Action Plan is organized between each of the four priority goals, with tailored objectives outlining specific areas of implementation to achieve each goal. Each objective has various strategies that have been created to help guide project development within each objective. The plan includes a wide variety of project types, ranging from infrastructure improvements to industry-specific initiatives, to ensure a comprehensive approach to improving the regional economy and to meet the needs of communities throughout the six-county area.

Member governments and organizations utilizing this Action Plan are encouraged to contact the RPCGB's Economic Development Department for specialized assistance according to the proposed project, as needed.

PRIORITY GOAL 1:

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT & RETENTION

Workforce development is a critical component to assisting employees, businesses, and local communities prosper. This goal describes the region's ability to attract, retain, and develop a skilled workforce that meets the needs of current industry demands and quickly adapts to an ever-changing business environment.

Objective 1: Improve regional, intergovernmental collaboration efforts to attract and retain talent

- **Strategy 1.1:** Involve local public and private stakeholders in workforce development planning to defining private sector needs and existing workforce talent gaps
- **Strategy 1.2:** Create career pipelines focused on retaining graduates from regional institutions
- **Strategy 1.3:** Identify, mentor, and support young leaders throughout the region to encourage retention of talent
- **Strategy 1.4:** Strengthen programs that provide basic skills and workforce training to increase employee capabilities, improve job skills, and upgrade marketable skills
- **Strategy 1.5:** Strengthen the capacity of local workforce development agencies or initiatives

Objective 2: Upskill local talent to take advantage of economically desirable jobs

- **Strategy 2.1:** Invest in training related to high growth and target industries to establish employment pipelines and career pathways
- **Strategy 2.2:** Support wraparound services and programs which facilitate the ability of individuals to participate in workforce training (e.g., childcare, transportation options)
- **Strategy 2.3:** Support workforce readiness programs that provide skills necessary to acquire jobs with emphasis on preparedness for high growth/high demand industries
- **Strategy 2.4:** Invest in nontraditional/alternative training and recruitment programs to ensure equity in workforce training
- **Strategy 2.5:** Develop new and expand on current short-term training opportunities such as apprenticeships, on-the job training, and work-based learning

- **Strategy 2.6:** Enhance coordination between businesses and workforce training centers create specialized skills training opportunities to increase the ability for workers to better shift between jobs and industries
- **Strategy 2.7:** Develop and expand equitable career pathways for all Greater Birmingham region residents, including Veterans, those with disabilities, underserved populations, and those with high barriers to success

PRIORITY GOAL 2: ***BUSINESS CLIMATE & ENTREPRENEURSHIP***

The ability for existing and future businesses to thrive and entrepreneurs to be supported is crucial to the enhancement of the innovation and overall health of the regional economy. This goal focuses on projects that support the region's capacity to attract and retain successful businesses in a variety of industries, including efforts to increase support services, infrastructure, and communication networks.

Objective 1: Encourage a multijurisdictional, collaborative effort to market the region as an attractive business destination

- **Strategy 1.1:** Develop a collaborative and regional brand, marketing strategy, and promotional media emphasizing the advantages of the region's competitive advantages
- **Strategy 1.2:** Create regional database of land parcels consisting of existing and potential industrial parks and commercial spaces; use to develop pipeline of projects or regional marketing opportunities
- **Strategy 1.3:** Include the region's "quality of life" attributes, such as the low cost of living and outdoor recreation, as a necessary component of business recruitment and retention efforts

Objective 2: Invest in entrepreneurial and business development strategies that stimulate growth of small businesses, start-up businesses, and emerging industries

- **Strategy 2.1:** Diversify the local economic stature through programs and/or projects focused on supporting the growth and development of new industries
- **Strategy 2.2:** Promote the expansion of new "traded" industrial sectors to increase the flow of out-of-state and international investment into the region
- **Strategy 2.3:** Establish partnerships between private and public organizations to enhance collaboration in strategy development

Objective 3: Expand entrepreneurial support and access to funding

- **Strategy 3.1:** Create partnerships among local municipalities, Main Street organizations, chambers of commerce, and economic development councils to establish channels for entrepreneurial investment projects, technical assistance, and capital opportunities
- **Strategy 3.2:** Initiate entrepreneurial support programs, such as economic gardening initiatives
- **Strategy 3.3:** Support programs that assist entrepreneurs in market/business development, including business incubators and access to capital initiatives
- **Strategy 3.4:** Coordinate with local financing agencies to help startups and other small businesses access funding

PRIORITY GOAL 3: **INFRASTRUCTURE CONDITIONS**

Infrastructure conditions, in terms of the CEDS Action Plan, describes of the conditions of the region's "built environment," including infrastructure needed for expansion of different industries. Investments in critical infrastructure are necessary to improve regional recruiting and retention efforts and prepare the region for further development.

Objective 1: Improve critical infrastructure to serve existing and expanding industrial and commercial development to support job creation and retention

- **Strategy 1.1:** Support enhancements and rehabilitation of existing water and sewer infrastructure to support existing and future demand
- **Strategy 1.2:** Invest in site development resources to assist municipalities and counties with preparing locally owned land parcels to be competitive for commercial and industrial development opportunities
- **Strategy 1.3:** Support the creation/expansion of industrial access roads and other physical infrastructure to serve new and expanding industrial and commercial development
- **Strategy 1.4:** Assist in the provision of necessary infrastructure for reuse and/or improvement of downtown and mainstreet areas.
- **Strategy 1.5:** Identify brownfield properties throughout the region and prioritize for redevelopment and planning efforts

Objective 2: Improve and expand existing transportation infrastructure to improve connectivity within the region and between neighboring communities

- **Strategy 2.1:** Invest in multi-model transportation measures to enhance the region's competitive advantages associated with connectivity, such as construction of access roads or expansions at the port or regional airports
- **Strategy 2.2:** Support public transportation forms by investing in public transit options, such as expanding public transportation routes and service areas and increasing bus frequency
- **Strategy 2.3:** Design active, non-motorized pedestrian and bicycle routes and/or offer incentives to take non-motorized or public transit to provide a more comprehensive range of transportation and minimize the social impact of the transportation system on the regional air, water, and land quality
- **Strategy 2.4:** Improve existing roads and interchanges by to address traffic congestion, provide reliable travel times, and improve driver safety
- **Strategy 2.5:** Support projects that improve port and airport capacity for the movement of goods to increase exports and imports into the region
- **Strategy 2.6:** Support projects identified in the 2050 Regional Transportation Plan published by RPCGB and the Birmingham Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO)

Objective 3: Increase broadband accessibility throughout the region, especially in under-served and under-invested areas

- **Strategy 3.1:** Invest in innovative and sustainable technology to provide more efficient service to a wider range of residents and meet future demand
- **Strategy 3.2:** Fund career centers to provide training to utilize technology, including equipment maintenance and the digital skills needed to navigate the internet, prioritizing underserved areas and communities with a relatively higher concentration of seniors and lower-income adults
- **Strategy 3.3:** Support projects identified in the Alabama Connectivity Plan published by the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA)

PRIORITY GOAL 4: **REGIONAL RESILIENCE**

This focus area prioritizes the completion of projects that contribute to the economic resiliency of the region. As defined by the Economic Development Administration (EDA), economic resilience, in terms of economic development, describes a local economy's ability to quickly recover from, withstand, and avoid an economic shock.

Objective 1: Strengthen regional civic and governance systems to promote multi-jurisdictional project development

- **Strategy 1.1:** Establish information networks or develop telecommunications initiatives among regional stakeholders to foster interconnection between metropolitan and rural areas to share resources and strategies for regional economic growth
- **Strategy 1.2:** Promote the partnering of member governments of like-interested projects in order to maximize the use of resources
- **Strategy 1.3:** Facilitate collaboration among interregional organizations and facilitate connections to the public, private, and nonprofit sectors
- **Strategy 1.4:** Enhance coordination and cooperation among regional leaders and agencies in terms of planning for economic shocks and developing economic resilience

Objective 2: Support projects focused on the retainment, expansion, and/or recruitment of businesses within prominent or emerging target industry clusters

- **Strategy 2.1:** Support the development of educational programs to increase the labor force in the target industries
- **Strategy 2.2:** Invest in training related to target industries, including the expansion of co-op and alternate training opportunities, to decrease the gap between local industrial employment needs and local workforce skills
- **Strategy 2.3:** Convene local industry and government leaders to strategize opportunities to attract and retain leadership talent to support the growth in target industries
- **Strategy 2.4:** Support intergovernmental and regional efforts to strengthen workforce development strategies impacting the expansion of target industries

Objective 3: Support the empowerment of local elected leaders, municipal officers, planning commissions and boards, chambers of commerce, and economic development councils to strengthen communities and plan for future development within their jurisdictions

- **Strategy 3.1:** Educate elected officials and local leaders on planning and economic development principles and tools
- **Strategy 3.2:** Conduct comprehensive and/or economic development planning efforts to the define the public’s vision for community resilience and design an action plan for its implementation to create communities where all residents and workers would want to live and work
- **Strategy 3.3:** Use existing task forces and partnerships as outreach mechanisms to educate and incentivize the redevelopment of sites

Objective 4: Leverage the region’s natural assets to continue investment in outdoor recreation, increasing eco-tourism to generate revenue and bolster the regional economy

- **Strategy 4.1:** Support the strategic development of heritage tourism by investing in downtown redevelopment, gateway communities, historic districts, and other unique local community features
- **Strategy 4.2:** Support the increase of employment and sales in the travel and heritage tourism industry, particularly in the areas of outdoor recreation, convention attractions, and historical interests
- **Strategy 4.3:** Increase physical accessibility to outdoor recreation facilities through universal design and enhancement of diversity, equity, and inclusion of outdoor recreation facilities and programs
- **Strategy 4.4:** Increase public awareness of regional natural assets by creating marketing materials and programs to invite in-state residents and out-of-state visitors to participate in outdoor recreation opportunities



2. EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

The purpose of the Evaluation Framework is to ensure the strategic direction outlined in the CEDS is regularly analyzed and adjusted based on new trends, project achievements, or unforeseen economic situations. Annual evaluations of the CEDS process also assures that, through the performance measures identified in this framework, the plan as a whole will remain relevant throughout the project period. This chapter should be used during the project development process to ensure data points are documented to measure the ultimate success of the CEDS implementation process.

The evaluation metrics selected for analysis in this framework include traditional and nontraditional economic performance measures to provide a comprehensive analysis of regional impact. Specific metrics have been assigned to each of the Priority Goals, and these measures will be evaluated on an annual basis. The RPCGB EDD staff will post and distribute the results of each annual evaluation over the next five years, and the CEDS Strategy Committee will adjust the goals as needed throughout the five-year planning period when changing strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities are identified. The flexibility to adjust metrics helps to ensure the CEDS is focused on relevant strategies is critical for achieving continued economic prosperity.

PRIORITY GOAL 1: WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT & RETENTION

- Regional Labor force Participation Rates
- Regional Employment to Population Ratio for Region
- Regional Unemployment Rate for Region
- Regional Wages Changes
- Regional Household Poverty Level Changes

PRIORITY GOAL 2: BUSINESS CLIMATE & ENTREPRENEURSHIP

- Total Number of Regional Businesses
- Total Number of Businesses per NAICS Code
- Total Number Regional Employees
- Total Number Employees per NAICS Code
- Total Number of Women-Owned Employer Firms
- Total Number of Minority-Owned Employer Firms

PRIORITY GOAL 3: INFRASTRUCTURE CONDITIONS

- Number of new shovel ready sites developed and/or marketed
- Amount of state infrastructure investments made in region
- Amount of federal infrastructure investments made in region
- Number of applications applied for and awarded for infrastructure funding in the following areas:
 1. Broadband: Increase connectivity
 2. Transportation: Creation of access roads; improvement of current road conditions; expansion/rehabilitation of water and sewer infrastructure
 3. Freight: Improvement of port, airports, and railways
 4. Utilities: Environmentally sustainable initiatives and renewable energy projects

PRIORITY GOAL 4: REGIONAL RESILIENCE

- Number of municipal planning projects conducted in region
- Number of applications applied for and awarded for non-infrastructure funding
- Document any projects capitalizing on natural assets to utilize for economic development, such as outdoor recreation or other initiatives that support economic diversification

All report findings and priorities, as well as goals, objectives, and strategies, are specifically endorsed and adopted to comply with requirements set forth by the U.S Department of Commerce, Economic Development Administration (EDA) for the six-county region of the Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham's Economic Development District (EDD).

3. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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- Dr. Ray Morris, PhD, Deputy Executive Director
- Jesslan Wilson, MPA, Director of Economic Development
- Brett Isom, GIS Manager
- Sarah Thomas, Economic Development Coordinator
- Trevor Felixbrod, Economic Development Intern
- Hanxi Zhu, Economic Development Intern

