



ADVANCE

GREATER BIRMINGHAM

Annual Performance Report 2023



Advance Greater Birmingham - Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy Annual Performance Report

December 2023

Prepared by Regional Planning Commission of Greater
Birmingham



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INTRODUCTION & PURPOSE

[Advance Greater Birmingham: 2023-2028](#), the current Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) for the Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham's (RPCGB) service area, serves as a roadmap to support economic development projects and programs throughout the six counties and 84 communities in the Greater Birmingham region. This document is the first of four annual progress reports for the 2023 – 2028 CEDS, and it summarizes the progress the region, which includes Blount, Chilton, Jefferson, Shelby, St. Clair, and Walker counties in Central Alabama, has made towards combatting area challenges and fulfilling regional needs. More information about the regional CEDS document can be found on the RPCGB Economic Development [website](#).

The 2023 Annual Performance Report was created by RPCGB Economic Development staff with the approval of the CEDS Steering Committee and RPCGB Board of Directors. The Plan was developed in accordance with U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) regulations 13 C.F.R. § 303.7 and under guidance issued on January 21, 2015.

SECTION I: CEDS OVERVIEW

As an Economic Development District (EDD), the RPCGB is charged with updating and implementing a regional CEDS plan every five years. To assist with the plan's implementation, the RPCGB provides technical assistance services to regional counties and communities. Services include transportation and community planning, project development assistance, grant proposal development, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping, specialized market studies, economic forecasting, and economic development strategic planning. 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), the CommuteSmart transportation incentives program, the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), and the area's Medicaid Waiver program. The RPCGB seeks to utilize the CEDS planning process and its technical assistance capacity to identify regional economic needs and offer implementation strategies to assist member governments in project development on a municipal, county, and regional level.

The Advance Greater Birmingham CEDS plan was adopted in September 2023 and was developed through feedback from the CEDS Steering Committee and feedback from regional stakeholders. An overview of the mission, vision, and goals of the plan are outlined on the next page.

MISSION

The mission of the 2023-2028 CEDS is to guide economic development projects in the six county area:

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 centered on collaboration and regional partnerships:

Greater Birmingham 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.

CEDS OUTCOMES

The Advance Greater Birmingham 2023-2028 CEDS aims to accomplish several outcomes. One objective is to outline an approach to coordinate growth and prosperity, building on the region’s strengths and opportunities. Another is to present comprehensive and inclusive strategies for prioritizing key regional industry clusters while emphasizing regional collaboration. The CEDS also aims to 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.

CEDS PRIORITY GOALS

The priority goals from the Advance Greater Birmingham 2023-2028 CEDS are as follows:



1. Workforce Development and 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 and 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.

SECTION II: REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

1. EMPLOYMENT & GROWTH TRENDS

Alabama's unemployment rate was at a near record low in September 2023 at 2.2 percent, down from 2.6 percent in September of 2022.¹ This decline follows the previous consistent decrease in unemployment that was occurring throughout the region prior to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Similarly, the unemployment rate in the Birmingham-Hoover Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) has also continued to decrease, from 2.3 percent in September 2022 to 2.0 percent in September 2023.² In September 2023, the total number of unemployed persons increased from 12,756 in the year prior to 13,016.³ The total civilian labor force is 568,726, up from 564,662 in 2022.⁴ The main employment sectors laid out in the CEDS include manufacturing, healthcare, and technology. Of these, manufacturing and healthcare have increased employment in the last year while technology has not changed. The largest area of growth was in Health Care and Social Assistance sector, which increased by 6.1 percent from September 2022 to September 2023.⁵

Regarding the EDD six-county service area, all counties within the region have experienced consistent unemployment rates since September 2022. Of the 6 counties, Chilton and Walker remained the same while Shelby, St. Clair, and Blount increased by 0.1% and Jefferson decreased by 0.1%.⁶ The weekly wage rate continues to widen among the counties in the region. Jefferson and Shelby counties have the highest average weekly wages, averaging \$1,401 in Jefferson and \$1,323 in Shelby respectively, while Blount, Chilton, St. Clair, and Walker counties all averaged less than \$1,000.⁷ Though the gap remains, all counties in the region experienced growth in the weekly wage rate over the past year. The average weekly earnings grew marginally from \$1054.71 in September 2022 to \$1,059.44 in September 2023 in the Birmingham-Hoover MSA.⁸

2. ECONOMIC INDICATORS & RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

As the region continues to recover from the pandemic, these indicators illustrate the favorable environment for the region's economic future. The addition of over 8,000 new workers to the region's employers indicates the region is attracting skilled laborers as industries continue to grow.⁹ Additionally, the Birmingham-Hoover area remains the region with the highest employment in the state, with 565,100 people employed as of September 2023. However, the biggest workforce development challenge facing many companies and organizations within the Birmingham area is workforce availability. Competition between businesses for qualified workers is at a high point, as the unemployment rate continues to decline to low levels. This could affect expansion opportunities for companies throughout the region, as well as other factors such as relocation or recruitment.

While unemployment is important to consider, it doesn't tell the whole story; the labor force participation rate takes into account discouraged workers, whose participation can markedly change the labor supply in an area. Aside from a small dip during the pandemic, labor force participation in the region has remained largely the same year over year, moving from 57.7% in 2019 to 58% in 2023. However, the counties within the region have a wide array of participation rates, ranging from the highest participation rate in Shelby County at 69% to the lowest participation rate in Walker County at 49% (the other counties in the region performing as follows: Blount: 55%; Jefferson: 61%; St. Clair: 59%).¹⁰ The region's labor force participation rate of 58% is on par with the state's rate of 57% but falls short of the Federal rate of 63%.^{11 12}

During the last year, several new developments have occurred in the Birmingham-Hoover MSA. The Birmingham region saw \$183 million in new capital investment by new and existing companies that generated 1,259 total jobs.^{13 14} A few of these projects are outlined below.

Greater Birmingham – 2023 Projects

- The **J.M. Smucker Co.** announced plans to invest \$1.1 billion in a new manufacturing facility in McCalla, which will create 750 jobs when it begins production in 2025.¹⁵
- **Harbinson Walker International** opened a refractory production facility creating 50 jobs and **Fetch Rewards**, a new employer to the area, opened a customer support hub creating 200 jobs and generating \$1 million in capital investment.¹⁶
- **Pack Health** also announced a \$5.66 million capital investment to expand their Birmingham facility and create 200 jobs.¹⁷
- **Kratos Defense & Security Solutions** announced an \$8.6 million expansion over the next 5 years. This expansion will create 76 jobs.¹⁸

SECTION III: PRIORITY GOALS UPDATE

Projects across the region have been conducted to support and implement the goals identified in the Advance Greater Birmingham CEDS. This section will outline the goal and strategies development in the plan, as well as the regional projects completed to support each 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. Two objectives were identified for this goal:

- **Objective 1:** Improve regional, intergovernmental collaboration efforts to attract and retain talent.
- **Objective 2:** Upskill local talent to take advantage of economically desirable jobs.

Workforce Development & Retention Projects

- **Central Alabama Recompete Strategy (CARS):** The RPCGB applied for an Economic Development Administration (EDA) Recompete Pilot Program Strategy Development grant through a partnership with the Birmingham Business Alliance (BBA), Central Six Alabama Works, and United Way of Central Alabama. If funded, the strategy grant would provide a long-term, comprehensive roadmap for strategic, place-based investments to support existing resources and create region-wide solutions to address the Prime-Age Employment Gap.
- **Economic Development Strategic Planning:** The RPCGB received an Appalachian Regional Commission grant through the agency’s Partnerships for Opportunity and Workforce and Economic Revitalization (POWER) Initiative to complete an Economic Development Strategic Plan (EDSP) for all of Walker County. This plan will analyze the county’s existing market conditions as well as evaluate the development potential of Interstate-22 and the possible expansion of broadband infrastructure and outdoor recreational economy in the county.

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. Three objectives were identified for this goal:

- **Objective 1:** Encourage a multijurisdictional, collaborative effort to market the region as an attractive business destination.
- **Objective 2:** Invest in entrepreneurial and business development strategies that stimulate growth of small businesses, start-up businesses, and emerging industries.
- **Objective 3:** Expand entrepreneurial support and access to funding.

Business Climate & Entrepreneurship Projects

- **Your Town Workshop:** RPCGB staff attended Your Town, a statewide annual workshop that equips community leaders with training and ideas for strategic economic development. The strategies learned can be used to influence decision making back in their local communities, and the workshop specifically emphasized the importance of multijurisdictional collaboration and marketing to achieve economic development success.
- **Funding Partnerships:** The RPCGB supported ongoing partnership with local Community Development Finance Institutions (CDFIs) and other small business support resources, like the Economic Development Partnership of Alabama, (EDPA) to connect entrepreneurs with funding and training.

- **Regional Partnerships:** The RPCGB is a member of several working groups committed to bolstering workforce development initiatives in the Greater Birmingham region.
- **Birmingham Business Alliance (BBA):** The BBA received an EDA grant focused on evaluating the life sciences industry in the region; the grant resulted in an industry strategic plan to support biotechnology and life science sectors within the Greater Birmingham region.
- **EDA Tech Hubs:** The RPCGB is a part of the coalition, led by Southern Research, that applied for and was awarded an EDA Tech Hubs designation for the Greater Birmingham. The project will catalyze the growing technology industries in Birmingham and the surrounding areas.
- **Branding & Marketing:** The RPCGB invested in Adobe software to create a program that offers marketing and branding services for small communities to assist with placemaking and conducting economic development activities.

3. INFRASTRUCTURE

Infrastructure conditions, in terms of the CEDS Action Plan, describes 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. Three objectives were identified for this goal:

- **Objective 1:** Improve critical infrastructure to serve existing and expanding industrial and commercial development to support job creation and retention.
- **Objective 2:** Improve and expand existing transportation infrastructure to improve connectivity within the region and between neighboring communities.
- **Objective 3:** Increase broadband accessibility throughout the region, especially in under-served and under-invested areas.

Infrastructure Projects

- **Infrastructure Grant Assistance:** The RPCGB assisted communities across the region apply for and receive grant funding to support infrastructure investments:
 - **The City of Cordova:** The RPCGB assisted Cordova develop and submit a Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) through the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA). The \$368,000 grant, which RPCGB will manage on behalf of the city, was awarded to demolish vacant housing throughout the city to spur new residential development.
 - **The Town of Nauvoo:** The RPCGB assisted Nauvoo develop and submit a Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) through the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA). The \$305,463 grant, which RPCGB will manage on behalf of the town, was awarded to demolish vacant housing throughout the city to spur new residential development.

- **The Town of Maplesville:** The RPCGB assisted Maplesville with developing and submitting an Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) grant to receive funding for a large sewer infrastructure project. Combined with another grant, the \$500,000 ARC grant would contribute to a project that is over \$2 million in size and would include sewer expansion and water infrastructure improvements to 26 households and 16 businesses along 2 major state highways. This project would provide the Town of Maplesville with the potential capacity for commercial and industrial development projects.
- The RPCGB received a grant from the **Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)** for funding of brownfields assessments in 2022 to establish the Regional Brownfields Assessment Program. Since the program was initiated, funds have been used for both rural and metropolitan communities in the Greater Birmingham region for Phase I and II site assessments, including within the City of Cordova and the Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport.
- The RPCGB held **Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO)** meetings to discuss transportation needs and projects within the metropolitan planning area. The MPO decides, in cooperation with the Alabama Department of Transportation, what transportation projects are funded with the available local, state, and federal dollars. The MPO prioritizes a variety of modes such as highways, transit, freight, and bicycle/pedestrian. Lastly, the MPO is charged with coordinating both short term (four year) and long term (25 year) transportation plans.
- The RPCGB conducts a variety of **transportation-related feasibility and project studies** throughout the metropolitan planning area through the agency's Transportation Planning Department. Projects completed or ongoing during 2023 include:
 - Overton Road Traffic Study: Mountain Brook, Jefferson County
 - 16th Street North Pedestrian Improvements Study: Trussville, Jefferson County
 - Pelham-Helena Connector Trail Study: Pelham, Shelby County
 - Shades Creek to Eastwood Trail Study: Birmingham, Jefferson County
 - US-411 Intersections Study: Moody, St. Clair County
 - Pinchgut Creek Trail Study: Trussville, Jefferson County
 - US-31 Pedestrian Improvement, Access Management and Operations Study: Homewood, Jefferson County
 - New Road and Railroad Overpass Study: Chelsea, Shelby County
 - Fultondale-Gardendale New Road Study: Jefferson County
 - New Service Feasibility Study: Birmingham-Jefferson County Transit Authority

4. ECONOMIC 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. Four objectives were identified for this goal:

- **Objective 1:** Strengthen regional civic and governance systems to promote multi-jurisdictional project development.
- **Objective 2:** Support projects focused on the retainment, expansion, and/or recruitment of businesses within prominent or emerging target industry clusters.
- **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.
- **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.

Economic Resiliency Projects

- **Regional Resource Connections:** The RPCGB has been focusing more on providing information about local resources to its member governments, and the agency has implemented that goal in a variety of ways throughout 2023:
 - **County Resource Meetings:** The RPCGB's Economic Development department began scheduling county-level resource meetings in collaboration with county economic development councils. The first was held in early 2023 in Blount County, and the meeting invited several local organizations to explain their services, including the RPCGB, the Blount County Economic Development Council, the Alabama League of Municipalities, Opportunity Alabama, the Birmingham Business Alliance, and the CAWACO Resource & Development Council all participated. The RPCGB plans to have similar meetings in other counties.
 - **Retail Academy:** The RPCGB collaborated with other regional councils throughout the state to acquire funding for the Retail Academy program, a recruitment workshop for small communities hosted through Retail Strategies, a local retail recruitment firm. The City of Cordova was the local municipality who was eligible to participate from the Greater Birmingham region. This workshop series educated local leaders about statistics and potential projects in their communities, and it provided participating jurisdictions with online training courses about how to market their communities for retail opportunities.
 - **Regional Events & Partnerships:** The Birmingham Business Alliance (BBA) held its first Regional Economic Development Summit in November 2023. The RPCGB offered scholarships to officials from member governments to attend and learn more about how to conduct economic development projects, and representatives from the City of Fairfield, the City of Cordova, and the City of Tarrant received scholarships to attend. The RPCGB also gave a presentation about the importance of planning for economic development.

- **READY LDDs Grant:** The RPCGB applied for and received grant funding through the Appalachian Regional Commission’s Ready Local Development District (LDD)s program to hire an economic development fellow. The purpose of the fellowship is to build RPCGB capacity and enable member governments with the resources necessary to accomplish their economic development goals.
- **Economic Impact Studies:** The RPCGB Economic Development Department uses IMPLAN, an input/output software, to help its member governments make decisions. One project for the City of Cordova focused on determining options for development off Exit 70. The conclusions derived from the project can be used to retain, expand, or recruit businesses, as well as influence elected officials.
- **Economic Development Grant for Municipalities:** The RPCGB created the agency’s Economic Development Grant (EDG) program in October 2023. This program will assist local municipalities with economic and community development projects that align with CEDS priority goals.
- **Economic Development Strategic Planning:** The RPCGB’s Economic Development Department created the “Economic Development Strategic Plan” (EDSP) program in October 2022. The agency has received funding from two federal agencies to support these projects in local communities:
 - **USDA - Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge (RPIC):** The RPCGB received the RPIC grant award in October 2022, and this grant will support creating EDSPs for 3 jurisdictions in Walker County, the most economically distressed county in the region. These EDSPs have a specific focus on broadband connectivity, including discussion of infrastructure & availability, as well as the expansion of Outdoor Recreation within these communities. The towns included in the grant program are the Town of Parrish (completed), the Town of Nauvoo (ongoing), and the City of Dora (to be completed).
 - **ARC Partnerships for Opportunity and Workforce and Economic Revitalization (POWER) Initiative:** The RPCGB was awarded a POWER grant through the ARC in October 2023. This grant will support the development of an EDSP for Walker County, and it will build on the progress and framework established by the separate community plans. The focus of the county-wide EDSP will be on expanding the Outdoor Recreation industry within the county, as well as evaluating development potential along Interstate 22.
- **Grant Assistance:** The RPCGB assisted the City of Carbon Hill to apply for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) through ADECA to construct a new city pool. The city’s pool, constructed in 1938, had to be abandoned last year due to safety concerns, and the proposed project would help the city establish a water attraction area that would serve as the first of its kind in Walker County. Several other municipalities and organizations have submitted letters of support for this project. Once awarded, the RPCGB team would be charged with managing the grant.
- **Community Planning:** The RPCGB Community Planning Department completed the following projects in 2023:
 - Helena Comprehensive Plan
 - Harpersville Town Center Overlay District
 - Homewood Zoning Updates Moody Comprehensive Plan
 - Shelby County Comprehensive Plan

SECTION IV: DIFFICULTIES & UPCOMING

Difficulties Encountered

The RPCGB experienced minimal difficulties the past year. The award of the ARC READY LDDs grant helped extend the EDDs capacity to develop and manage projects.

Upcoming Activities

The RPCGB expects to complete the following activities during the next year:

Economic Development-

- Complete the Town of Nauvoo EDSP
- Complete the City of Dora EDSP
- Initiate the Walker County EDSP
- Establish an internal CDBG grant management system
- Hire a Projects & Initiatives Specialist to manage member government and RPCGB grants
- Assist communities with developing and submitting grant proposals for CDBG, ARC, LWCF, and other federal and state programs
- Complete the ARC READY LDDs Fellowship

Community Planning-

- Argo Comprehensive Plan and Zoning Ordinance (ongoing)
- Fultondale Comprehensive Plan and Zoning Updates (ongoing)
- Cordova Comprehensive Plan (ongoing)
- Vincent Comprehensive Plan (ongoing)
- Regional Toolkit for Creating More Resilient Communities (ongoing)
- Alabaster Comprehensive Plan (FY 2024)
- Bessemer Comprehensive Plan (FY 2024)
- Leeds Comprehensive Plan (FY 2024)

Transportation Planning-

- Kelly Creek Road Interchange Study for the City of Moody
- US-78 Traffic Operations Study for the City of Leeds
- Buck Creek Trail Extension Study for the City of Alabaster

SOURCES

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