



2022-2026 CEDS ANNUAL REPORT

October 1, 2024 through September 30, 2025

Submitted To:

U.S. Department of Commerce

Economic Development Administration

401 West Peachtree Street, NW, Suite 1820 Atlanta, Georgia 30308

Submitted By:

Georgia Mountains Economic Development District

Georgia Mountains Regional Commission

P.O. Box 1720

Gainesville, GA 30503-1720

(770) 538-2626

Introduction

This report is being submitted to the Economic Development Administration by Georgia Mountains Regional Commission (GMRC), which serves as an Economic Development District (EDD) for 12 counties and 37 municipalities in the Georgia Mountains Region. The purpose of this document is to report on the progress of the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) and Regional Plan implementation. The GMRC EDD's CEDS and Regional Plan document was adopted in September 2022 to cover a five-year period. This report serves as one of the CEDS Annual Performance Reports required for submission to EDA's Atlanta Regional Office.

This CEDS Annual Performance Report includes the following twelve (12) counties by the GMRC EDD: Banks, Dawson, Franklin, Habersham, Hall, Hart, Lumpkin, Rabun Stephens, Towns, Union, and White Counties.

The following summary outlines the CEDS and Regional Plan's seven (7) goal areas and progress that has been made in each goal area.



GOAL 1

Natural and Cultural Resources

GOAL: To conserve, protect and promote the environmental, natural and cultural resources of the region.

- Towns County continues to work diligently to combat the infestation of the invasive parrot-feather plant in Lake Chatuge. The Georgia General Assembly allocated \$400,000 to the Georgia Department of Natural Resources to treat and control parrot feather in the Georgia portion of Lake Chatuge.
- Towns County is working with the Tennessee Valley Authority on a revised plan of action to address repairs and safety modifications to the spillway at Chatuge Dam to ensure the continued economic well-being for the local economy.
- The Town of Gillsville continues to move forward with plans to construct Stonethrow Park, which will include a playground area, picnic area, pavilion, restrooms, a trail, and parking facilities.
- Towns County opened a new splash pad at Towns County Park at Lake Chatuge in May 2025 and continues to move forward with plans to construct a community pavilion.
- The City of Young Harris continues to move forward with the construction of a new park with amenities including a playground and picnic area, educational amphitheater, freshwater snorkeling, a creek walk trail, restrooms, and parking facilities.
- The City of Flowery Branch received \$1 million in Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) funding for Phase 1 of the construction of the Flowery Branch Bay Park Trail, a multi-modal trail that will extend from Flowery Branch Bay Park on Lake Lanier through downtown Flowery Branch to Hall County's Highlands to Islands Trail.
- The City of Cornelia is continuing construction of a sloping lawn and event stage to create a 1,000-seat open-air amphitheater for events and concerts in the heart of downtown. The first event at the proposed site, the Cornelia Music Festival, was held in May 2025. The project will benefit 130 downtown businesses and will further contribute to the revitalization of downtown Cornelia.

- White County is applying for Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Program (GOSP) funding to extend an existing biking trail system and to build a pump track in Yonah Preserve. An application will be submitted in October 2025.
- The Downtown Development Authority of Hartwell is applying for Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) funding to make interior improvements to the historic building that houses the Hart County Community Theatre. Proposed improvements include installation of ADA-accessible bathrooms, new seating, balcony renovations, an emergency exit, and code-required upgrades to electrical and fire suppression.



GOAL 2

Land Use

GOAL: To promote and coordinate land use planning and management that supports the other goals and ambitions for the region.

- Business expansion and new business recruitment continue to remain strong throughout the Georgia Mountains EDD, particularly along the region's principal arterial corridors (I-85, I-985/GA 365, and GA 400).
- The Rural Zone Program, which was developed by the Georgia General Assembly, enables the establishment of up to 10 zones per year to enable businesses and investors to obtain tax credits for qualified activities occurring within designated Rural Zones. Credits are available for job creation activities, investment in downtown properties, and renovation of properties to make them usable. Georgia Mountains Regional Commission EDD currently has four communities participating in the Rural Zone Program: the City of Clayton, the City of Dawsonville, the City of Hiawassee, and the City of Lavonia.
- The PlanFirst Program, which was created by the Georgia Department of Community Affairs in 2015, recognizes communities that demonstrate exemplary implementation of their Local Comprehensive Plan. The Georgia Mountains Regional Commission EDD currently has two communities with a PlanFirst designation: the City of Cornelia and the City of Toccoa.
- Construction continues to take place on the Blue Ridge Connector, the new inland port based in Hall County that will connect Northeast Georgia with the port of Savannah. The facility's construction is expected to be completed in early 2026. The connector will feature 104 acres of terminal area, 18,000 feet of tracks, and 14 gantry cranes to increase the site's productivity. The facility will have the capacity to ship 200,000 containers per year, and it is expected to create 63,000 jobs within the region, with 9,682 jobs expected to directly impact Hall County.



GOAL: To provide adequate facilities, utilities, and infrastructure in all areas to support existing business and industry, enable expansion, and recruit new business, and to support efficient growth and development patterns that will protect and enhance the region's quality of life.

- The Georgia Department of Transportation continues to work on the Young Harris Bypass as well as the SR 515/SR 2/US 76 road widening project. These projects will improve access to the community and will further develop Appalachian Development Highway System (ADHS) Corridor A.
- White County constructed a new recreation center on its Yonah Preserve property adjacent to its baseball/softball complex. The grand opening was held in May 2025. The center features two full-size basketball courts that can be converted into additional practice courts, four volleyball courts, or six pickleball courts.
- White County procured \$3 million in funding from the State of Georgia for the construction of a new library and is working with state and federal legislators to obtain additional funding for the project. The County is moving forward with the design phase of the project.
- The City of Hartwell is finalizing upgrades to its wastewater treatment plant to increase sewer capacity, remove trash and grit, remove residual water from waste, and improve the aeration system. These improvements are required to treat additional sewage produced by new industries like Nestle Purina PetCare Company.
- The Lumpkin County Development Authority received an \$11,275,000 State Fiscal Recovery Fund grant award for the engineering, design, and construction of a new wastewater treatment plant and collection system in the southern part of the County to support the new Northeast Georgia Medical Center-Lumpkin facility along Georgia SR 400. Construction is expected to be completed in April 2026.
- The Rabun County Water and Sewer Authority (RCWSA) has received \$250,000 in Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) funds to prepare a comprehensive master plan for the water and sewer systems that were acquired from the City of Clayton.

- The City of Cleveland received \$17,987,591 from the Economic Development Administration (EDA) and \$1,000,000 from the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) for wastewater treatment plant upgrades to support job creation and economic growth. The project is expected to create approximately 141 jobs and generate over \$127 million in private investment.
- The City of Cornelia received \$1,149,600 in Railroad Crossing Elimination (RCE) funding through the Federal Railroad Administration for the construction of a pedestrian bridge over railroad tracks from Front Street to the City's Big Red Apple (a historical landmark) to facilitate the safety and mobility of people and goods through downtown Cornelia.
- The City of Lavonia has secured a \$5 million loan from the Georgia Environmental Finance Authority (GEFA) for the first phase of improvements to its water treatment plant. This phase will address increasing the efficiency of the plant, and the City will pursue alternative sources of funding to address increasing the capacity of the plant, which is the proposed second phase of the project.
- The City of Dawsonville received \$2 million from two (2) Transportation Alternative Program (TAP) grants from the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) to fund the preliminary engineering phase of roundabouts and sidewalk improvements at two downtown intersections.
- The City of Baldwin is applying for Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) funds to perform improvements to the solids handling process at its wastewater treatment plant.
- The City of Sky Valley has applied for Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) funds to construct a sanitary sewer collection and treatment system.
- The EDD and CEDS Committee recognizes the need for more investment in resilient infrastructure (e.g., water, wastewater, stormwater, energy, broadband) to protect it from extreme weather events.
- The City of Hartwell is applying for ARC funding to construct sidewalks downtown to create connectivity between its shops, restaurants, public schools and residential areas.
- The City of Lavonia has been awarded an ARC grant to perform downtown streetscape improvements including signaled crosswalks, directional signage, and landscaping.
- GMRC is coordinating an aerial photography and light detection and ranging (LiDAR) acquisition project during leaf-off conditions in early 2026 for ten (10) counties and three (3) municipalities.



GOAL: To stimulate and strengthen the regional economy through a collaborative effort embracing global trends resulting in job creation and retention, capital investments, and thereby enhancing the tax base and quality of life in the Georgia Mountains Region.

- King's Hawaiian will invest approximately \$54 million in expanding its facility in Oakwood. This will create more than 135 new jobs. The expansion will add a new production line to the existing 150,000-square-foot facility in the Oakwood South Industrial Park. Startup of the new line is expected in the second quarter of 2026.
- The City of Royston received \$400,000 in Community Development Block Grant-Employment Incentive Program (CDBG-EIP) funding for the construction of a new water line to serve Dill's Food City grocery store. Dill's will invest \$10 million in rebuilding the store, which burned in February 2024, and this project will result in at least 40 recovered jobs for the community.
- Georgia Mountains Regional Commission EDD continues to partner with the Georgia Tech Center for Economic Development Research on a study of the region's future strategies for artificial intelligence (AI) technology, especially as it relates to the manufacturing sector. The region's pilot project, an AI 101 Training for Local Governments, took place in October 2024. A steering committee was formed in 2025 to provide expertise and insight into the development of a statewide AI strategic plan aimed at providing specific regional recommendations to enhance the State of Georgia's AI capabilities and infrastructure. Three meetings were held to finalize the strategic plan and regional recommendations. This project was made possible through funding from EDA's Build Back Better Regional Challenge program.



GOAL: Facilitate the development of highly trained, educated workforce to meet business & industry's evolving needs and provide our region with a sustainable competitive advantage for recruiting new and expanding/existing industry.

- Hart College and Career Academy is offering the only Marine Engine Technology Pathway in the State of Georgia. In this pathway, students can access classes for Foundations of Marine Engine Technology, Marine Electrical Systems, and Marine Engine Drive Systems.
- North Georgia Technical College's Blairsville Campus will soon be the location of a driving pad for the Commercial Truck Driving and Electrical Lineworker programs. The program will train approximately 20 truck driving students per semester with a program completion timeline of 8 weeks per student. The program will serve approximately 50-60 students annually.
- Lanier Technical College has added a new program designed to equip students for careers in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Automation. The AI and Automation Technical Certificate of Credit (TCC) Program will include four (4) TCCs to provide graduates with a working knowledge of AI and the manufacturing systems it controls: Artificial Intelligence and Automation, Industrial Wiring, Programmable Control Technician I, and Programmable Control Technician II. The program was designed in coordination with the Georgia AIM Grant.
- WorkSource Georgia Mountains has continued meeting with Career, Technical, and Agricultural Education programs throughout the region. Economic developers and employers are invited to share needs and collaborate on solutions.
- WorkSource Georgia Mountains integrates employability skills into all its customized training.
- WorkSource Georgia Mountains continues its supervisory skills training programs with curriculum created by local employers. It is available at North Georgia Technical College and Lanier Technical College.

- WorkSource Georgia Mountains just graduated its third Quality Control Apprenticeship class. This apprenticeship is available to employers regionwide.
- WorkSource Georgia Mountains is streamlining its Industrial Maintenance Apprenticeship for easier employer participation.
- WorkSource Georgia Mountains has partnered with The Salvation Army and Good News at Noon, a 501(c)(3) social services organization based in Hall County, to train the shelter population. The first cohort has completed its training, and there are plans for ongoing training.
- Georgia Mountains Works developed and hosted “Apprenticeship Navigator,” a five-part webinar to educate employers on the ins and outs of apprenticeships.
- WorkSource Georgia Mountains is connecting prospective applicants in the region with the Public Service Apprenticeship Program through the Apprenticeship Office of the Technical College System of Georgia. This program offers a \$5,000 reimbursement per apprentice to help offset the costs of training programs available at Lanier Technical College or North Georgia Technical College.
- Offered in partnership with Workforce Strategies Group, LLC and the Georgia Mountains Manufacturing Sector Strategy, North Georgia Technical College’s Leadership Excellence and Development (LEAD) Program and Lanier Technical College’s Supervisor and Industry Leadership (SAIL) Program equip emerging leaders with the tools to succeed. Delivered in 12 weekly four-hour sessions (48 hours total), these programs combine classroom learning with practical workplace applications using the proven “Hear-See-Do” method to ensure lasting impact. Led by subject-matter experts, LEAD and SAIL cover essential leadership skills including communication, emotional intelligence, continuous improvement, HR basics, performance management, safety, problem solving, and effective meetings, and they are designed to build confident, capable leaders for today’s workplace.
- The Georgia Mountains Works website now partners with the State of Georgia’s employment system, the WorkSource Georgia Employment Network, to share job opportunities. It is updated consistently for employers, parents, and education, and a monthly newsletter is sent to all partners.
- Short-term training programs for adults and youth remain a key regional priority, equipping individuals to enter the workforce quickly while ensuring they possess the in-demand skills employers require.

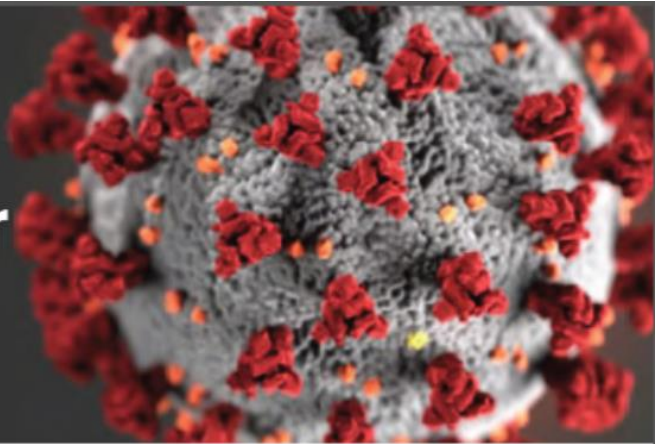


GOAL: Facilitate coordination of housing development with planning for infrastructure and overall community development for long-term sustainability, in every community in the region.

- Stephens County had a groundbreaking for Phase 1 of the County's first planned unit development known as Heritage Rise that will feature 90 units spread across three multifamily buildings, along with a clubhouse and amenities. This phase is expected to be completed around April or May 2026.
- The Cleveland Downtown Development Authority is considering applying for funds through the Georgia Rural Workforce Initiative to work with the Fuller Living Project to bring a modular housing development to the City.
- Union County was selected to be part of the Georgia Initiative for Community Housing (GICH).
- The City of Hartwell has begun its Neighborhood Revitalization Program which is being funded by Community HOME Investment Program (CHIP) from the State of Georgia and Community Project Funding from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development. The project will feature the rehabilitation of owner-occupied housing as well as historic preservation and construction of new housing in the City's historically African American neighborhood.

GOAL 7

Pre-Disaster Mitigation



GOAL: Encourage disaster resiliency, extending beyond emergency responsiveness for advance planning and organizational capacity to address vulnerabilities, and to enable rebuilding and recovery afterwards in a manner that offer healthier, sustainable communities, and more robust regional economies.

- The City of Cleveland has been awarded \$17,987,491 in EDA Disaster Supplemental funds and awarded \$1,000,000 in Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) funds to construct critical wastewater treatment plant upgrades. These upgrades are for treatment and capacity to meet new required federal environmental standards to serve the City's 333 non-residential wastewater customers and to make the City more resilient to severe weather events. These upgrades will include the installation of a backup generator system to help the plant maintain power so wastewater can continuously be treated through severe weather events.
- The City of Hartwell's wastewater treatment plant upgrades, made possible by two EDA grants of \$2.5 million and \$902,500, will make the facility more resilient to future severe weather events. The first phase of improvements is completed, and the second phase is almost complete.
- The City of Hartwell is installing a fixed generator at its wastewater treatment plant to provide a reliable source of power to ensure that operations can continue even in the event of a power outage.
- The City of Baldwin is applying for Economic Development Administration (EDA) Disaster Supplemental funds to make improvements to the headworks system at the City's wastewater treatment plant and to make the plant more resilient to extreme weather events like those suffered during Hurricane Helene.
- Stephens County is in the final stages of developing a Hazard Mitigation Plan with Georgia Mountains Regional Commission.
- Plans must continue to be made to address emerging cybersecurity issues such as problems with network and broadband security.