

**Economic
Development
Draft**

CHAPTER 3
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ELEMENT

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Introduction

The Economic Development Element of the Comprehensive Plan 2040 Update provides an inventory and assessment of the region's economic base, labor force characteristics, and economic development opportunities and resources. This element explains the foundation of the Savannah Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) and provides a complete picture of the area's workforce, major industries, and strategic direction for economic growth through 2045.

The economic development policies and activities of Chatham County and the City of Savannah are intentionally designed to encourage development and expansion of businesses and industries that create quality employment opportunities aligned with regional workforce capabilities, community values, and long-term sustainability.

In preparing this update, particular attention has been paid to the structural shift in the regional economy driven by the recent logistics boom and the arrival of the Hyundai Metaplant, which together are increasing demand for technical skills while putting new pressure on regional housing and transportation systems.

Regional Economy

Savannah Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) Overview

The MSA, comprised of Chatham County, Effingham County, and Bryan County, creates an integrated economic system where residents and workers regularly cross county lines for employment, services, and commerce. The MSA encompasses approximately 431,589 residents per the 2024 ACS 5-Year Estimate, growing at approximately 1.8% annually, making it Georgia's third-largest metropolitan area after Atlanta and Augusta.

The region has demonstrated sustained economic growth and resilience. Per the Georgia Department of Labor, regional employment reached 199,762 jobs in the second quarter of 2025, with recent expansion driven by advanced manufacturing, continued port operations, tourism recovery, and logistics growth. The Hyundai Motor Group Metaplant America (HMGMA) facility in adjacent Bryan County and its supplier ecosystem represent the most significant new employment driver in the region's recent economic history. Recruitment of the Hyundai Motor Group Metaplant America was led by a regional Joint Development Authority, reflecting the multi-county nature of the project's benefits and workforce.

In parallel with these private investments, regional partners have launched the Regional Industry Support Enterprise (RISE) initiative to help align workforce, supplier development, and infrastructure planning with the needs of advanced manufacturing firms. RISE functions as a collaborative platform that convenes local governments, educational institutions, workforce agencies, and major employers to identify shared bottlenecks; such as skills gaps, transportation constraints, and supplier capacity; and to coordinate targeted solutions that support the long-term success of the Hyundai Metaplant and its supplier network.

Chatham County remains the primary economic engine of the Savannah MSA, hosting a substantial concentration of the region's physical job opportunities. Per the Bureau of Labor Statistics Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW) program, in first quarter

2025, there were 170,424 jobs located within the county's borders across approximately 11,012 business establishments. This 'place-of-work' figure significantly exceeds employed residents, confirming its status as a major regional destination that supports both local workers and a large daily influx of commuters from neighboring jurisdictions.

Taken a step further, Chatham County's role as the regional employment core is evidenced by the imbalance between jobs and available housing. There are approximately 158,617 households within the entire SMA. With 170,424 physical jobs located in Chatham County compared to only 137,422 housing units, Chatham maintains a jobs-to-housing ratio of 1.24. This ratio indicates that the County's economic activity far outpaces its internal housing capacity, necessitating the large-scale daily in-migration of workers from Bryan and Effingham counties, as well as locations external to the MSA, thus placing sustained pressure on the regional transportation network.

The region's economy is characterized by diversification across six major sectors: logistics and Port operations, advanced manufacturing, tourism and hospitality, healthcare, military and federal government, and creative industries. This diversification has provided resilience during economic cycles, particularly evident during COVID-19 recovery. See Figure 4.2 in the Land Use Element for a description of Major Employment Sectors.

Labor Force Characteristics

Employment Profile

The labor market in the Savannah area is currently undergoing a period of steady expansion and structural change. By the second quarter of 2025, total employment reached nearly 200,000 workers, marking a modest annual increase of 1.4%. While the local unemployment rate rose slightly from 2.9% to 3.1% over the past year, these figures continue to signal a highly competitive job market that outperforms national benchmarks.

The region's labor force participation rate has remained steady at 65.5%. This stability suggests a balanced demographic shift: while the local population is aging, the area continues to successfully attract new working-age residents who are filling essential roles in the growing economy. The average weekly wage, derived from the statistics in Figure 3.1, was \$1,184 in 2025, representing a 4.3% increase from 2024. The median household income in the MSA was \$74,632 in 2023.

Commuting Patterns and Labor Shed

The Savannah SMA functions as an integrated labor market where workers routinely cross jurisdictional boundaries for employment. Daily commuting flows underscore the region's economic interdependence and the role of Chatham County as both a job center and a residential community.

Employment By Industry - Savannah MSA			
Sector	Employment	Percent	Weekly Wage
Trade, Transportation & Utilities	48,410	24.2%	\$1,118
Accommodation & Food Services	28,201	14.1%	\$583
Health Care & Social Assistance	27,742	13.9%	\$1,253
Manufacturing	24,642	12.3%	\$1,803
Retail Trade	23,422	11.7%	\$794
Government	24,927	12.5%	\$1,291
Professional & Business Services	21,818	10.9%	\$1,063
Education & Training	3,987	2.0%	\$1,471
Construction	9,432	4.7%	\$1,403
Finance & Insurance	3,065	1.5%	\$1,926

Source: Georgia Department of Labor, Area Labor Profile for Savannah SMA, December 2025

Figure 3.1 - Employment by Industry - Savannah MSA

According to Census OnTheMap and Longitudinal Employer–Household Dynamics (LEHD) data, a substantial share of workers employed in Chatham County reside in surrounding counties, with 45.3% of the workers in Chatham County residing in other locations, including 5.3% from Bryan County, 9.6% from Effingham County, and roughly 3.5% each from both Bulloch and Liberty Counties. Conversely, over one-quarter of Chatham County residents commute to jobs throughout the broader Savannah MSA and Coastal Georgia, although the majority of Chatham County residents live and work within the County. This bi-directional movement reflects the concentration of employment opportunities in industrial corridors and port-adjacent areas, contrasted with significant residential growth in west Chatham, Bryan County, and Effingham County.

Inbound and Outbound Employment Travel Patterns		
Employment Location	Number	%
Employed in Chatham County	168,123	100.0%
Employed in Chatham County but Living Outside	76,134	45.3%
Employed and Living in Chatham County	91,989	54.7%
Living in Chatham County	126,561	100.0%
Living in Chatham County but Employed Outside	34,572	27.3%
Living and Employed in Chatham County	91,989	72.7%

Source: US Census OntheMap 2023

Figure 3.2 - Inbound and Outbound Employment Travel Patterns – Chatham County

Commuting flows are characterized by four key dimensions: where Chatham County workers live, where Chatham County residents work, the directional distribution of jobs within the county, and the destinations of outbound commuters. Inbound workers cluster along major highway corridors such as Interstates 16 and 95, U.S. 17, and key arterials connecting Pooler, Richmond Hill, Rincon, and unincorporated Chatham County to employment hubs in Savannah, Garden City, and Port-adjacent industrial areas.

Commute times generally remain within a regional range that makes cross-county employment feasible, but growth pressures and congestion on key routes may increase travel times in the absence of transportation investments on a regional basis. Understanding commuting and labor shed patterns is essential for aligning workforce strategies, transit planning, housing policy, and economic development initiatives so that residents across the MSA can reliably access emerging job opportunities.

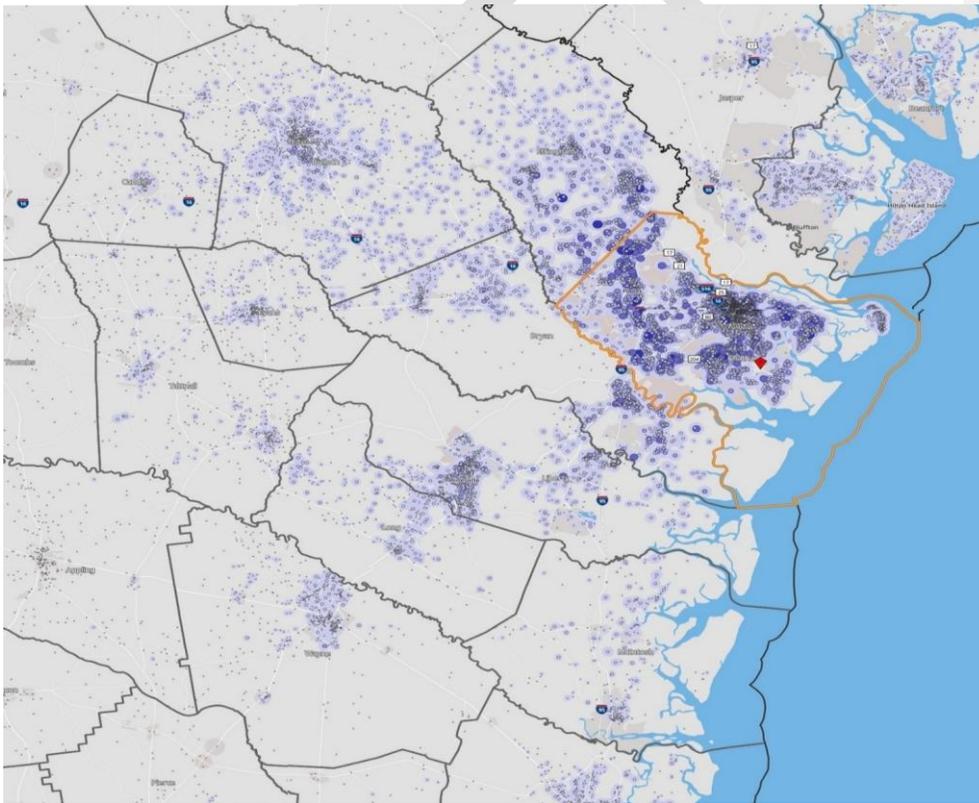


Exhibit 3.1 - Worker Place of Residence Employed in Chatham County

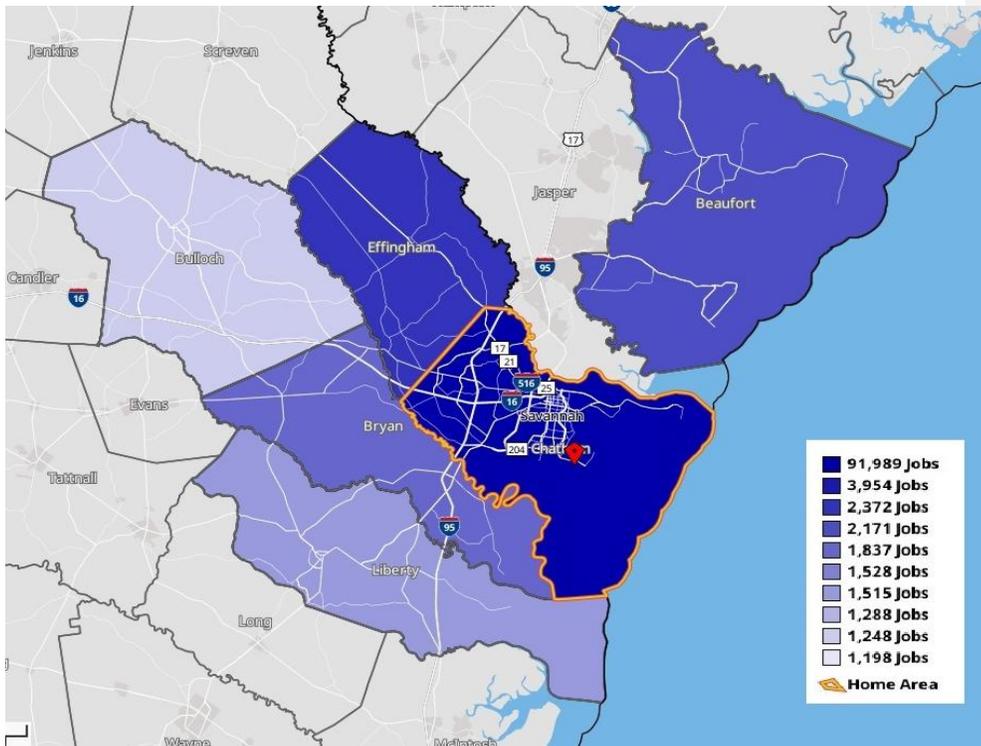


Exhibit 3.2 - Where Chatham County Residents Work

Workforce Education and Composition

Educational Attainment

As presented in the Community Profile and Quality of Life chapter, the region benefits from several four-year universities (Savannah State University, Georgia Southern University's Armstrong Campus, Savannah College of Art and Design) and Savannah Technical College, which collectively produce approximately 78,000 student enrollments annually with significant graduation output. According to the ACS 2024 5-Year Estimates, approximately 90% of the population over 25 has completed high school or equivalent; over one-third countywide have attained a B.A. or higher, and 12% furthered their education with a graduate or professional degree.

Workforce Equity and Inclusive Economic Development

Ensuring that economic development benefits reach across all demographic groups remains a priority. Historical income and wealth disparities persist, with median household income varying significantly by neighborhood and demographic group. The region's median household income of

\$74,632 masks important variations: while some districts report incomes exceeding \$90,000, others fall below \$50,000.

From the Comprehensive Plan 2024 Update survey responses, objectives residents feel most strongly about relate to improving and preparing the current and future workforce for economic success. Technical college graduates from underrepresented populations remain underutilized in advanced manufacturing and logistics sectors. Strategic efforts to expand recruitment, training partnerships, and mentorship programs targeting African American, Hispanic, and female workers in high-wage technical fields represent ongoing opportunities to build more inclusive prosperity.

Workforce equity initiatives should integrate with infrastructure planning, housing affordability measures, and accessible transportation; recognizing that employment access requires not just job availability but also affordable pathways to work.

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Economic Base and Major Economic Drivers

Overview

The Savannah region's economy rests on six complementary pillars, each with distinct characteristics, employment signatures, and growth trajectories:

- **Logistics, Transportation & Port Operations**
- **Advanced Manufacturing & Aerospace**
- **Tourism & Hospitality**
- **Healthcare**
- **Military & Government**
- **Creative Industries & Technology**

Georgia Ports Authority and Logistics Ecosystem

The Port of Savannah, operated by the Georgia Ports Authority, represents the region's most globally significant economic asset. The Port is the third-busiest container terminal in the United States and the largest single-terminal container facility in North America. Its contribution to the Georgia State Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is \$59 billion annually, generating \$3.8 billion in sales and local taxes, and supporting roughly 561,000 direct and indirect jobs. Due to its coastal location and direct access to port, rail, airway, and interstate transport systems, Chatham County is often the first choice for international operations looking to locate in the United States. Proactive organizations such as the World Trade Center Savannah (WTCSav) and Savannah Economic Development Authority (SEDA), aid in connecting international companies to contacts, programs, and potential sites, thereby driving growth within the region. Goods entering the Port of Savannah can be shipped quickly to other nearby large metropolitan areas, thereby contributing to the growing hauling industry.

The Port of Savannah's continued expansion and modernization have positioned it as a critical piece of East Coast container infrastructure. The recently completed Savannah Harbor Deepening Project increased channel depth to 54 feet at high tide, enabling larger Neo-Panamax vessels to call with fewer tidal restrictions. The Peak Capacity project added 820,000 TEUs of additional capacity. The Mason Mega-Rail Terminal provides the largest on-dock rail capacity at any North American port.

Inland Expansion: Georgia Ports Authority's Blue Ridge Connector, opening in early 2026 near I-985 in Gainesville, will deliver 200,000 containers annually via rail to the Port of Savannah, extending the Port's hinterland reach.

Port Performance (FY 2024)

- Containers (TEUs) Handled:** 5.25 million (FY 2024)
- Market Share:** 22% of East Coast container trade; 11.6% of all U.S. containerized exports
- Shipping Connections:** 160 countries, 800+ direct ports globally
- Freighter Lines:** 30 major lines operating regularly

Logistics Sector Growth: Port expansion has catalyzed significant logistics and distribution facility development. Companies including Burlington Stores, Bradshaw Homes, Aertssen Logistics, and numerous cold-storage and food-processing facilities have announced major investments. These projects represent a total of over 1,400 announced jobs with more than \$1 billion in private investment in the immediate Savannah region since 2022.

Advanced Manufacturing and Aerospace

Manufacturing represents the region's second-largest private employment sector (12.3% of MSA employment) and commands the highest average wages. The sector has experienced significant transformation and growth.

Aerospace Cluster: Gulfstream Aerospace Corporation remains the region's largest manufacturer, employing approximately 13,144 workers. The company's long-standing presence and continued expansion have catalyzed a robust aerospace supply chain. Over 30 aerospace-related companies operate in the region, creating a true aerospace cluster with advanced manufacturing, engineering, and technical capabilities.

Aerospace Manufacturing Profile 2025

Establishments: 400
Employment: 24,642 (up 4.3% from prior year)
Average Weekly Wage: \$1,803 (highest of all private sectors)
Specialization: Transportation equipment, aircraft/aerospace, chemicals, food processing, paper products

Hyundai Motor Group Metaplant America (HMGMA): The announced \$7.6 billion joint investment between Hyundai Motor Group and LG Energy Solutions represents a transformational event for the region. Key economic impacts of the facility, located in Bryan County, include:

- Direct Employment: 8,500 jobs projected at full capacity (operational ramp-up through 2025-2026)
- Current Status: First vehicles (IONIQ 5) began production in Q3 2024; ramping to full capacity through 2025
- Production Capacity: 300,000 electric vehicles annually
- Supply Chain Impact: 40+ tier-1 and tier-2 supplier facilities announced for the region, creating additional 2,000+ jobs
- Payroll Impact: Average wage of \$58,000 per job announced

The HMGMA facility drives significant secondary impacts: residential construction, infrastructure expansion, supplier consolidation, and workforce training demands. Population in Bryan County is projected to grow 13% by 2031, concentrated in areas near the facility.

Other Major Manufacturers:

- SNF Savannah: 1,766 employees (water treatment chemicals)
- Georgia-Pacific: 1,045 employees (forest products)
- JCB: 982 employees (construction equipment)
- Medline Industries, Anatolia Tile, and numerous food processing facilities

Tourism and Visitor Economy

Tourism remains a vital economic driver and cultural cornerstone. The 2023 visitor economy generated \$4.75 billion in direct spending with an estimated total economic impact of \$12+ billion including indirect effects. The majority of revenue is attributed to lodging, followed by food and beverage. Travel to Savannah is generally leisure, although business travel is becoming more prevalent.

Recovery and Growth: The leisure and hospitality sector was significantly impacted by COVID-19 but has achieved full recovery and exceeded pre-pandemic performance.

Visitation surged in 2022-2023 as travel patterns normalized and new tourism products (Plant Riverside District, renovated historic hotels, enhanced riverfront amenities) attracted diverse visitor segments.

Product Development: New tourism investments position Savannah for continued growth:

- Plant Riverside District: 500,000+ square feet with dining, entertainment, 350 hotel rooms
- Ritz Carlton (Johnson Square): 160 rooms, 2025 opening
- Left Lane Hospitality (Manger Building conversion): 230 rooms, 2026 opening
- Tide-to-Town Trail System: \$10 million investment in multimodal connectivity
- Savannah Waterfront Redevelopment: \$30 million in capital improvements planned

Convention and Business Travel: The Savannah Convention Center drives substantial economic activity, hosting 160+ events annually and approximately 200,000 tourists. The facility generates \$1.4 billion in economic impact over its 20-year lifecycle and supports an estimated 28,000 tourism and hospitality jobs.

The region's 2015 preservation of the Oglethorpe Plan and Historic District, combined with investment in cultural attractions and natural amenities (Forsyth Park, riverfront, beaches), ensures tourism's continued appeal.

Tourism Performance (2023)

Annual Visitors: 17.3 M (10 M overnight, 7.3 M day visitors)

Direct Spending: \$4.75 billion

Room Tax Revenue: \$48.7 million

Supported Jobs: 27,000-28,000 direct hospitality jobs

Lodging Supply: 18,767 rooms (with 480+ new rooms announced through 2025-2026)

Visitor Composition

Type: 89% leisure travel; 11% business and convention
68% repeat visitors, averaging 2.8-night stays

Primary interest categories: Historic sites/cultural activities, culinary experiences, outdoor recreation, shopping, entertainment

Healthcare Sector

As the population of the area ages, access to healthcare will become increasingly more crucial. This sector already comprises a large portion of the economy, as it is one of the top 10 employment segments in the area. Healthcare has emerged as a major employment sector and economic driver. The sector comprises 13.9% of MSA employment (27,742 jobs) with above-average wages (\$1,253 weekly, Q2 2025).

Major Healthcare Facilities:

- Memorial Health University Medical Center (HCA Healthcare): 900+ employees, Level 1 trauma center, pediatric hospital, neonatal ICU, stroke center; \$325+ million invested in capital improvements since 2018
- St. Joseph's/Candler Health System: 700+ employees with expanding Bryan County presence (2024 Richmond Hill campus opened)
- Medical College of Georgia Savannah Campus: Four-year medical degree program launched at Georgia Southern University in partnership with St. Joseph's/Candler
- Ambulatory Care & Clinics: Expanding network of freestanding ERs, urgent care, specialty practices

Growth Drivers

Aging population: 65+ cohort growing fastest)

Expanded specialties: women's health, robotic-assisted surgery, orthopedics, comprehensive cancer care

Medical education expansion: MCG Savannah, nursing programs, allied health training

Growth: Healthcare employment projected to grow 3-4% annually through 2030

Military and Government

Fort Stewart and Hunter Army Airfield (HAAF) represent major economic anchors with profound regional impact. HAAF is the sister installation to Fort Stewart and located within the Savannah city limits. Its mission is to provide air transport to Fort Stewart, home of the 3rd Infantry Division, located nearby. HAAF, centrally located in Savannah, plays a critical role in the installation's deployment capabilities as a power projection platform with access to rail, port operations, and a major interstate road network.

Strategic Importance:

- HAAF operates the longest Army runway on the East Coast
- Strategic deployment capability: full equipment load and deployment within 18-hour timeline
- Supports 3rd Infantry Division's rapid power projection mission
- Critical infrastructure for regional employment, spending, and property tax base

Fort Stewart/HAAF Profile

Combined Acreage: 285,000 acres (Fort Stewart); 5,400 acres (HAAF, Savannah)

Military Personnel: 20,850

Civilian Employees: 4,153

Total Employment: 25,000

Combined Annual Payroll: \$1+ billion

Estimated Regional Economic Impact: \$4.9 billion annually

The direct spending from military operations, staff, and residents helps to sustain local communities by creating employment opportunities across a wide range of sectors, both directly and indirectly. Active duty and civilian employees spend their military wages on services such as retail, food service, real estate, and education. The Savannah MSA also benefits from defense contracts with private companies for equipment, supplies, construction, and various services such as health care and information technology.

Government Workforce: Beyond Fort Stewart/HAAF, approximately 24,927 MSA residents work in government positions (12.5% of MSA employment), including City of Savannah, Chatham County, school boards, state agencies, and federal offices.

Creative Industries and Technology

Savannah has developed a distinctive economic niche in creative industries: motion picture/television production, digital media, music, visual arts, and design complemented by growing technology and knowledge-based services.

Film and Entertainment Production:

Georgia ranks #1 nationally for film production incentives and facilities. Savannah's contribution to this statewide industry. Notable recent productions include: Disney's Lady and the Tramp (2019, \$51M spending impact alone); Forrest Gump, Midnight in Paris, The Hunger Games series, and numerous television productions (Outer Banks, Daytona, etc.)

The Savannah Regional Film Commission, an AFCI certified Film Commission, is the central point of contact for entertainment production in the Chatham County region. The Film Commission promotes the Savannah region as a premier film destination for motion picture, television, and commercial productions. The Film Commission functions as a liaison between film companies and the municipalities in the Chatham County region, in addition to providing location assistance and coordination with local crew and support services. The Film Commission is a division of the Savannah Economic Development Authority (SEDA). In addition to the state of Georgia's tax incentives, the Savannah Regional Film Commission offers a local entertainment production rebate available for qualified productions.

Direct Spending Impact (2019): \$2.9 billion statewide; Savannah region's share approximately \$500M-\$700M

Support Infrastructure: Savannah Regional Film Commission, production studios, diverse locations (historic squares, waterfront, marshlands, beaches), local crew resources

Employment: 1,000+ direct jobs in production, post-production, equipment rental, location management

Creative Coast Initiative: Established in 1997, Creative Coast functions as a public-private partnership to support entrepreneurial creative businesses. Focus areas include:

- New media and digital content
- Visual arts and design
- Music and performance
- Food culture and culinary innovation
- Technology startups

Since the development of the Creative Coast in 1997, numerous organizations and efforts have come together to better meet the needs of Savannah's creative community. By focusing on creative entrepreneurialism, technology, new media, art, music, and food culture, these groups are helping to support and shape the future of Savannah. Additionally, the Creative Coast and others continue to market and bring in high tech and knowledge-based businesses to the area as highly technical jobs have been identified as a needed resource to improve economic growth in the region

Tech Sector Growth:

- Savannah Logistics Technology Corridor (SLTC): Designated in 2018 to support logistics technology development and innovation along I-16/I-95 corridors
- Tech startups and companies attracted by quality of life, lower cost of living, educated workforce, business-friendly environment
- Growing number of coworking spaces, incubators, and technology business parks

Competitive Advantages:

- Presence of Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD): 4,500+ students, faculty expertise, facility resources
- Educated, creative workforce
- Cultural vibrancy and quality of life
- Reasonable cost of living compared to other creative hubs

Business Profile

Largest Employers

The Savannah MSA's employment base includes a mix of major private employers, public institutions, and federal and military installations. Large enterprises provide a substantial share of total jobs, especially in manufacturing, healthcare, logistics, education, and government.

Key employers include Gulfstream Aerospace Corporation, major hospital systems such as Memorial Health University Medical Center and St. Joseph's/Candler, the Savannah-Chatham County Public School System, Savannah Technical College and other higher education institutions, local governments, and large logistics and manufacturing firms associated with the Port of Savannah and the Hyundai Metaplant and its suppliers.

Based on Georgia Department of Labor data, the following are the largest employers in the Savannah MSA. Service industry employers, such as hospitals, retail, and grocery stores, represent the bulk of these major employment centers.

Top Employers in Savannah MSA		
Candler Hospital, Inc.	Gulfstream Aerospace Corp	St. Joseph's Hospital, Inc
Savannah Health Services, LLC	Gulfstream Services Corporation	Savannah College of Art and Design
Gateway Terminals, LLC Walmart	Publix Super Markets, Inc.	FedEx

Source: Georgia Department of Labor Area Labor Profile for Savannah MSA (12.25)

Figure 3.3 – Top Employers in Savannah MSA

Small Business and Large Employer Mix

While a relatively small number of very large employers account for a significant share of total jobs, the majority of business establishments in the Savannah MSA are small firms with fewer than 20 employees. Small businesses play a critical role in entrepreneurship, innovation, neighborhood vitality, and economic resilience, even as mega-projects such as the Hyundai Metaplant and major port-related facilities shape regional employment trends.

The region's economic development strategy must balance the attraction and retention of large employers with continued support for small and medium-sized enterprises, including locally owned firms and startups. This includes ensuring access to capital, technical assistance, and streamlined permitting processes that are accessible to businesses of all sizes.

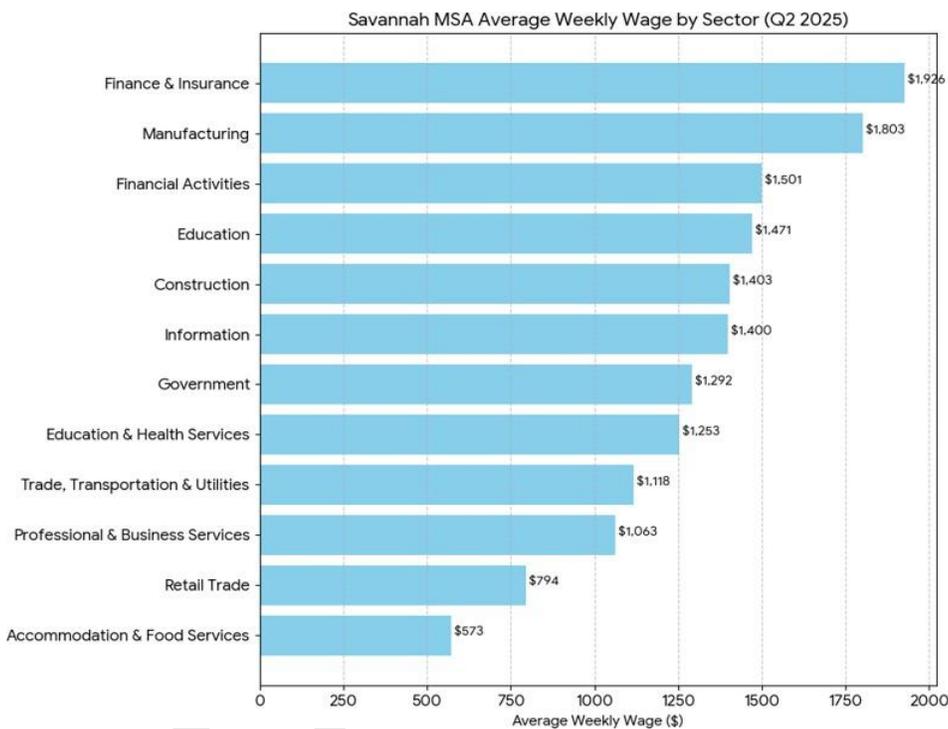
Employer Characteristics		
Employee Size Class	Number of Establishments	Total Employment
0-4	8,134	9,821
5-9	1,955	13,126
10-19	1,423	19,324
20-49	1,148	34,630
50-99	363	24,714
100-249	231	34,089
250-499	45	15,794
500-999	17	11,407
1,000+	11	34,743
Total	13,327	197,648

Figure 3.4 - Employer Characteristics in Savannah MSA

Income and Wage Structure

Average pay in the Savannah region has risen consistently as local businesses compete for workers and high-paying industries like manufacturing and finance continue to expand. Even with these gains, local weekly pay still trails the national average for major cities. This gap highlights a need for the region to attract companies that provide not just jobs, but careers with competitive salaries that can support a household.

The best-paying jobs are currently found in "industrial" sectors—such as aircraft parts, chemicals, and advanced manufacturing—as well as in professional fields like finance and technology. In contrast, many of the region's largest employers in the tourism, retail, and hospitality sectors offer much lower pay. While these service jobs are vital because they provide many people with their first start in the workforce, the disparity in pay between the industrial and service sectors remains a central challenge for the region's economic growth.



Source: Georgia Department of Labor, Area Labor Profile for Savannah MSA (December 2025)

Figure 3.5 - Savannah Weekly Wage by Sector

Industry Breakdown

The organizational landscape of the Savannah MSA is characterized by a high volume of small-scale entrepreneurial activity balanced by a few large-scale institutional anchors. While the vast majority of the region's 13,327 establishments are small businesses, with over 60% employing fewer than five people, employment remains heavily concentrated in a select group of large-scale operations. This is most evident in the government sector, where only 199 establishments provide stable, middle-wage employment for nearly 25,000 residents, averaging 125 workers per location. This structural duality, consisting of a vibrant

small-business ecosystem operating alongside a highly centralized public and industrial core, forms the basis of the region's economic resilience and will be a primary focus of the strategic goals aimed at fostering long-term stability and growth.

Industry Breakdown - Savannah MSA			
Economic Domain	Establishments	Employment	Avg. Weekly Wage
Goods - Producing	1,524	34,351	\$1,701
Service - Producing (Private)	10,797	140,483	\$1,003
Government	199	24,928	\$1,292
Unclassified	807	45	\$1,146
Total Savannah MSA	13,327	199,807	\$1,184

Figure 3.6 – Industry Breakdown – Savannah MSA

Wage Competitiveness

While the Savannah MSA has seen consistent wage growth, the region continues to navigate a gap in national wage competitiveness. As of the second quarter of 2025, the average weekly wage in the Savannah MSA reached \$1,184, a notable increase reflecting the region's expanding industrial and logistics base. However, this figure remains approximately 15% below the national metropolitan average. This disparity is most pronounced in the Service and Hospitality sectors, whereas the local Manufacturing and Finance sectors have reached near-parity with national trends, offering weekly wages of \$1,803 and \$1,926 respectively. Closing this overall wage gap is essential not only for improving the standard of living for local residents but also for ensuring the region can continue to attract and retain highly skilled talent in an increasingly mobile national labor market.

Growing vs. Declining Industries

Growing Industries - Which Industries Are Growing?

Regional employment forecasts and recent project announcements indicate that the fastest-growing industries through 2035 will include healthcare and social assistance, advanced manufacturing, logistics and distribution, construction, and professional and business services. Growth is driven by demographic trends, port expansion, the Hyundai Metaplant and supplier network, continued tourism strength, and ongoing infrastructure and residential development.

Based on available workforce development data and economic forecasts from the Georgia Department of Labor, the following industries are projected to experience fastest employment growth:

Projected Employment Growth				
Industry	2024 Employment	Projected 2030	Growth	Annual Growth
Healthcare & Social Assistance	27,742	31,200	3,458	2.20%
Accommodation & Food Services	28,201	29,800	1,599	1.10%
Manufacturing	24,642	27,500	2,858	2.20%
Construction	9,432	10,500	1,068	2.30%
Professional & Business Services	21,818	23,400	1,582	1.40%
Government	24,927	25,600	673	0.60%
Note: Projections based on Georgia Department of Labor industry trends, HMGMA ramp-up, and regional growth patterns. Actual outcomes dependent on trade policy, interest rates, and infrastructure investments.				

Figure 3.7 – Savannah-Chatham County: Projected Employment Growth

Targeted Growth Industries

Manufacturing, Ports, and Logistics

Manufacturing, ports, and logistics continue to function as a core regional growth engine, now amplified by the Hyundai Metaplant, expanded container capacity, and inland port investments. These sectors offer some of the region’s highest average wages and extensive supply chain opportunities across multiple counties.

Healthcare and Life Sciences

Healthcare remains one of the fastest-growing industries due to population aging, expanded specialty services, and the growth of medical education programs. Emerging opportunities in life sciences, medical technology, and health services integration strengthen this sector’s long-term outlook.

Creative and Technical Services/Technology

Creative and technical services, including design, digital media, software development, and logistics technology, are increasingly intertwined. The Savannah Logistics Technology Corridor, SCAD’s creative talent pipeline, and growing tech entrepreneurship support the emergence of a blended creative-tech network.

Entertainment Production

Film and entertainment production remain high-growth segments, supported by state tax incentives, Savannah’s historic urban fabric, and specialized training programs in film and media. This industry generates high-value spending and offers a range of creative and technical career pathways.

Retail Logistics and E-Commerce

The growth of e-commerce has driven demand for distribution centers, fulfillment hubs, and last-mile logistics, reinforcing the region's role as a logistics hub beyond traditional port activities. This sector overlaps with manufacturing and warehousing but warrants continued attention for land use, transportation, and workforce implications.

Emerging Sectors

Advanced Energy and Climate-Resilient Infrastructure Investments in electric vehicle manufacturing, battery production, and advanced materials point to emerging opportunities in advanced energy and clean technologies. In parallel, demand for infrastructure upgrades and climate-resilient design is expected to grow as communities adapt to sea level rise, storm impacts, and aging infrastructure systems.

Declining Industries - Which Industries Are Shrinking?

While the regional economy is growing overall, several sectors are projected to experience flat or declining employment through 2035 due to technological change, automation, changing consumer behavior, and long-term structural trends. These may include traditional print publishing, selected manufacturing niches, some brick-and-mortar retail segments, and certain administrative or back-office functions.

Declining Industries				
Industry	2022 Base Employment	Projected 2032	Total Change	Percent Decline
Publishing Industries	330	220	-110	-33.20%
Private Households	1,260	1,150	-110	-8.70%
Printing & Related Support	640	540	-100	-15.00%
Forestry and Logging	820	730	-90	-10.70%

Figure 3.8 – Declining Industries

In the context of regional economic data, the "Private Households" category refers to individuals who are employed directly by private residences to provide domestic services. Unlike typical businesses or commercial agencies, these are informal or direct-hire relationships where the employer is the homeowner. This category includes essential support roles such as nannies, housekeepers, private cooks, gardeners, and personal caregivers. The projected decline in this sector does not suggest a drop in demand for these services; rather, it reflects a structural shift toward the "professionalization" of domestic work. Tasks that were once performed by direct household employees are increasingly being outsourced to specialized service firms and gig-economy platforms, moving those jobs into the administrative and professional service sectors of the formal economy.

Economic Resilience and Recovery

COVID-19 Pandemic Impact and Response

The region experienced significant but manageable disruption from COVID-19. Initial 2020 lockdowns caused sharp employment declines, with unemployment briefly exceeding 6%. However, the region's economic diversification proved protective.

The regional economic timeline since 2020 illustrates a clear transition from a sharp contraction to a period of record-setting expansion, based on U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), Local Area Unemployment Statistics (LAUS), 2019-2025; and Georgia Department of Labor, Workforce Statistics Division reporting. The initial impact of the pandemic in 2020 was marked by a peak unemployment rate of 6.9% and a 4.2% decline in total employment. This was followed by a swift recovery phase during 2021 and 2022, where employment surged by 5.8%. This rebound was driven by the reopening of local businesses and the rapid acceleration of high-growth sectors, particularly e-commerce logistics and outdoor tourism.

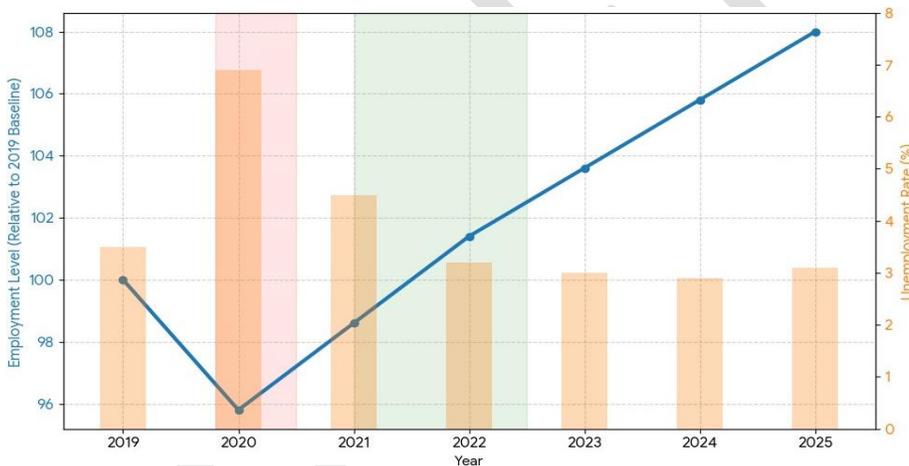


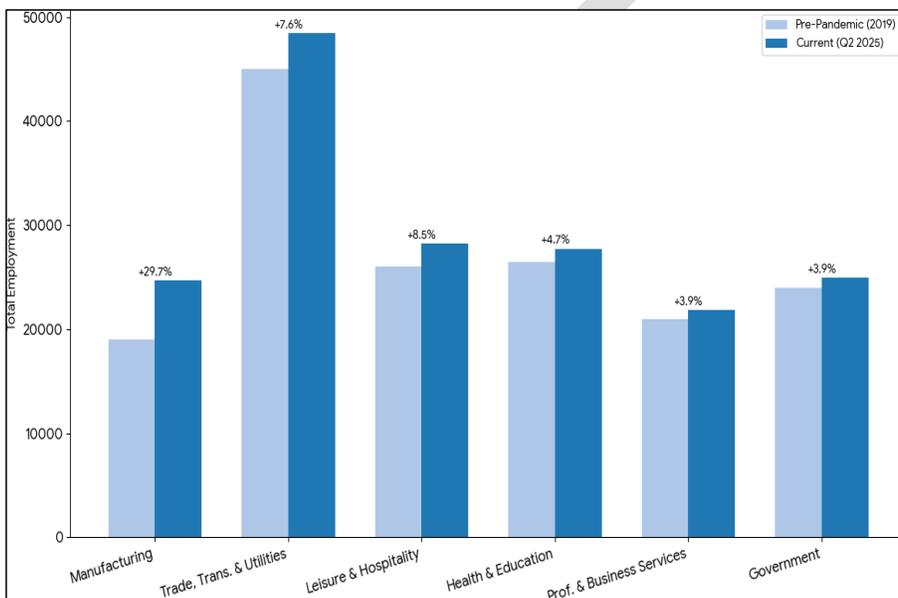
Figure 3.9 - Savannah MSA Economic Transition Recovery & Expansion 2020-2025

Between 2023 and 2025, the region entered a stage of sustained expansion as unemployment normalized to the 3% range. By early 2025, the local labor market reached a historic milestone, with regional employment levels exceeding pre-pandemic benchmarks by 8%. This growth trajectory underscores the area's successful pivot toward a more modern, logistics-oriented economic base.

The regional economic recovery has been defined by varying trajectories across its core sectors. The hospitality industry, which was initially the hardest hit, demonstrated a remarkable rebound, fully recovering by late 2022 and exceeding pre-pandemic visitor levels by 2023. In contrast, the manufacturing sector proved highly resilient throughout the

period, as aerospace and port-related operations remained functional. Similarly, the healthcare sector underwent significant expansion, driven by the development of new facilities and increased staffing requirements to meet regional demand.

The logistics sector experienced an accelerated growth phase, spurred by the surge in e-commerce, and has maintained its upward momentum through 2025. Finally, the government and military sectors provided a vital stabilizing force for the Savannah MSA, maintaining consistent employment levels and providing a reliable revenue base that supported the region during the broader economic transition.



Source: Savannah Economic Development Authority (SEDA) 2019 Annual Review; and Georgia Department of Labor Q2 2025 Area Labor Profile

Figure 3.10 – Savannah MSA Employment Comparison: Pre-Pandemic vs. Current

The regional economy demonstrated significant strength during recent periods of instability, largely due to a well-balanced and diversified industrial base. By maintaining an environment where no single industry represents more than 15% of total employment, the Savannah area successfully navigated sectoral shifts, allowing growth in emerging fields to offset temporary losses elsewhere. This stability was further anchored by "essential services." These included healthcare, food production, and government and military operations, which remained fully operational throughout the recovery period.

A critical driver of this resilience was the Port of Savannah. As a piece of national trade infrastructure, the Port not only prioritized continuous operations but actually expanded its activity, serving as a reliable economic engine while other global logistics hubs faced disruptions. Local businesses also showed a remarkable capacity for innovation, quickly adapting to new operational models such as remote work, curbside services, and outdoor dining, while the tourism sector successfully pivoted to highlight the region's expansive outdoor attractions.

The flexibility of the local workforce also played a vital role, supported by a robust technical training infrastructure that allowed workers to quickly gain new skills for emerging opportunities. This individual adaptability was reinforced by a highly coordinated response from municipal leaders, business associations, and regional nonprofits. Together, these factors created a unified support system that protected the region's economic health and set the stage for the sustained expansion currently being observed.

Post-Pandemic Trends and Emerging Challenges

Several critical economic patterns have emerged since 2022 that will shape the region's growth through 2045:

- **The Housing Affordability Gap:** The local population is growing by about 1.8% each year, but the construction of new homes has not kept pace. In Chatham County, median home prices reached \$370,000 in 2024, a 56% increase from just five years ago. While average rents are around \$1,284 per month, there is a severe shortage of housing that is affordable for the core workforce earning between \$40,000 and \$60,000. This gap makes it difficult for companies to recruit the staff they need, especially for technical and service roles that keep the region running.
- **Competition for Workers:** With unemployment sitting at a very low 3.1%, nearly everyone who wants a job has one. While this high demand for workers has pushed average pay up by 4.3% annually, those gains are often swallowed up by the rising costs of housing, childcare, and transportation. As a result, finding and keeping reliable employees has become the number one challenge for local business owners.
- **Infrastructure and Coastal Risks:** Our coastal location and older drainage and road systems face long-term risks from rising sea levels and more frequent flooding. From an economic standpoint, these aren't just environmental issues; they are direct threats to the stability of our business districts and industrial zones. Ensuring that our ports and commercial corridors can stay open and functional during storms is vital to keeping the region competitive.
- **Global Trade Uncertainty:** Because so much of our local economy depends on the Port of Savannah, we are highly sensitive to changes in international trade rules. Shifts in government trade policies or new taxes on imported goods (tariffs) can create "headwinds" for our manufacturing and shipping companies. To stay strong, the region must be ready to adapt its strategy if global shipping patterns change.

- **An Aging Population:** Residents aged 65 and older are the fastest-growing group in our community. This shift creates a massive opportunity for our healthcare and senior-service industries, but it also means there are fewer younger people entering the workforce to replace those who retire. As more people leave the workforce, the region will need to find new ways to fill essential jobs and maintain a stable tax base for local services.

Workforce Education and Preparedness - Higher Education Institutions

The region benefits from four major higher education institutions producing skilled graduates:

Savannah State University

- Enrollment: 4,200+
- Focus Areas: Liberal arts, STEM, business, teacher education
- Regional Role: Historically Black University with strong recruitment in African American communities and diaspora; partnership with Fort Stewart/HAAF for military education

Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD)

- Enrollment: 4,500+
- Focus Areas: Design, architecture, visual arts, film, digital media, fashion, business
- Regional Role: Major driver of creative industries cluster; faculty expertise attracts companies; graduates fill design/creative positions in local and national firms

Georgia Southern University - Armstrong Campus

- Enrollment: 7,000+
- Focus Areas: Engineering, business, health professions, education, liberal arts
- Regional Role: Engineering program supports aerospace/manufacturing sectors; nursing and allied health programs serve healthcare sector; MCG Savannah partnership expanding medical education

Savannah Technical College

- Enrollment: 12,000+ (including dual enrollment)
- Focus Areas: Nursing, healthcare, aviation maintenance, welding, electrical, HVAC, manufacturing technology, logistics, culinary arts, information technology
- Regional Role: Primary workforce development institution; strong alignment with manufacturing, healthcare, hospitality sectors

Technical Education and Workforce Training

Savannah Technical College represents the primary workforce development institution, with enrollment exceeding 12,000 across certificate, diploma, and degree programs.

Program Highlights (2024 Graduates)

Technical Education and Workforce Training			
Program	Graduates	Trend	Employment Alignment
Welding	495	↑ Growing	Manufacturing, Construction
Nursing Assistant	161	↑ Growing	Healthcare
HVAC Technician	105	↑ Growing	Construction, Facilities
Aircraft Maintenance	60	↑ Growing	Aerospace, Aviation
Commercial Truck Driver	160	→ Stable	Logistics, Transportation
Cosmetology	142	→ Stable	Hospitality, Services
Heating/AC/Refrigeration	105	↑ Growing	Construction, Facilities

Source: Technical College System of Georgia via GDOL MSA Labor Profile

Figure 3.11 – Savannah-Chatham County: Technical Education and Workforce Training 2024

Program Alignment with Employer Demand:

Strong growth in welding, HVAC, nursing, and aircraft maintenance reflects robust employer demand in manufacturing, construction, and healthcare sectors. Declining enrollments in mechanical drafting and nursing aide positions suggest workforce transition to higher-skill occupations.

Challenges:

- **Graduate Placement:** Not all graduates remain in region; many move to Atlanta or other coastal cities
- **Program Capacity:** HVAC and welding programs operate near capacity; expansion needed to meet demand
- **Credential Recognition:** Alignment with industry certifications (AWS for welding, NATE for HVAC) ensures national portability but requires ongoing curriculum updates

Workforce Equity and Access

Educational attainment disparities persist across racial and ethnic groups. Interventions to expand workforce access and support underrepresented populations in high-wage technical fields include:

- **K-12 Pipeline Development:** Expand awareness of technical careers; support STEM enrichment in underserved schools; provide internship opportunities
- **Apprenticeship Programs:** Create registered apprenticeships linking classroom learning to paid employment; particularly effective for manufacturing, construction, and healthcare

- **Support Services:** Childcare assistance, transportation support, and mental health services improve persistence in training programs
- **Employer Partnerships:** Direct recruitment agreements between technical colleges and employers; incumbent worker training; tuition assistance programs
- **Community-Based Organizations:** Partner with minority chambers, nonprofits, faith institutions, and community groups for program awareness and support

Economic Development Goals and Strategies

The regional economic development strategy is organized around the following goals, which build on and refine the goals and objectives previously established in Plan 2040.

Goal 1 - Grow a Skilled and Inclusive Workforce

Ensure that Chatham County and the Savannah Metropolitan Statistical Area maintain an educated, skilled, and adaptable workforce that is aligned with current and emerging employer needs and that connects local residents, including youth, economically disadvantaged residents, justice-involved individuals, and individuals with behavioral health needs, to quality jobs and career pathways.

Objectives:

- Create a network of employers and training providers through incentives to align training programs with opportunities for jobs
- Increase the number of opportunities for job shadowing, apprenticeship programs, and internships to include “green” careers, particularly targeted to youth and young adults
- Increase capacity and opportunities for individuals to receive skills that lead to employment
- Develop apprenticeship and vocational programs based on the needs of Chatham County employers

Goal 2 - Strengthen the Business Climate for Existing and New Firms

Foster a competitive, predictable, and efficient business environment that streamlines permitting and licensing processes, supports the retention and expansion of existing local businesses, and attracts new employers whose job quality, skill requirements, and long-term sustainability are consistent with community goals and regional economic strengths.

Objectives:

- Streamline the business application process
- Collaborate with organizations like Creative Coast and SEDA to create entrepreneurship programs
- Prioritize growing local businesses as much as attracting new businesses
- Increase number of opportunities for youth and young adults to access job shadowing, apprenticeship programs, and internships to include “green” careers

Goal 3. Advance Economic Mobility and Equity

Increase economic mobility by reducing structural and practical barriers to participation in the regional economy and by expanding access to quality employment, entrepreneurship, and wealth-building opportunities for residents across all neighborhoods, with particular emphasis on communities and small businesses that have experienced historic disinvestment or disadvantage.

Objectives:

- Improve access to education and trades to help the working poor, ex-offenders, and those with mental illness by providing a community-based scholarship program or similar incentive to help those who cannot afford educational programs
- Increase case management capacity to provide employment, wrap-around, and supportive services for families; provide case management with education regarding best practices on the provision of services
- Increase awareness and use of tax incentives for employers serving and employing specific populations
- Explore funding mechanisms in order to provide more financial support to a more diverse economy and establish action steps that will promote regional innovation
- Increase efficiency of permitting and licensing policies for businesses through streamlining procedures, educating about the process, and potentially matching county and municipality requirements
- Expand capacity of formal and informal support systems to sustain and expand current, growing businesses throughout the county while considering the establishment of a program for existing businesses to mentor start-ups

Goal 4 - Support Entrepreneurship, Small Business, and Innovation

Promote a diverse and resilient local business ecosystem by expanding outreach, technical assistance, and access to capital for entrepreneurs and small businesses, including minority- and women-owned enterprises, and by encouraging innovation, collaboration, and the ability of local firms to start, grow, and scale within the region.

Objectives:

- Continue to facilitate the establishment of minority and women-owned businesses (M/WBE) as defined by the United States Small Business Administration Federal Contract Program
- Identify and remove obstacles to existing and proposed businesses in targeted redevelopment areas

Goal 5. Build a Resilient, Place-Based Regional Economy

Develop and sustain a diversified, resilient regional economy that leverages local assets—such as logistics, manufacturing, tourism, healthcare, education, and technology—while supporting economically vibrant and safe neighborhoods and commercial centers that offer a high quality of

life, and that can withstand, adapt to, and recover from economic, environmental, and technological disruptions.

Objectives:

- Promote mixed-use development where appropriate
- Propose a policy to prioritize active transportation infrastructure to facilitate walking, biking, and transit to commercial corridors
- Evaluate a policy to reduce regulatory barriers for new businesses by establishing "code-light" zones
- Evaluate flexible corridor-specific design standards to create attractive, functional, and harmonious buildings and public space

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