

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT:

**GEORGIA MOUNTAINS**

**2022-2026 CEDS ANNUAL REPORT**

October 1, 2022 through September 30, 2023

Submitted To:

**U.S. Department of Commerce**

Economic Development Administration

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## 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 Northeast Georgia. 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 four 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: To conserve, protect and promote the environmental, natural and cultural resources of the region.***

- Hall County and its municipal partners are continuing to make progress on the 35-mile Highlands to Islands Trail, a multi-use trail system connecting municipalities within Hall County with a paved path winding past businesses, scenic areas, college campuses, and retail shops. The newest portion of Highlands To Islands Trail at Tumbling Creek officially opened in July 2023 and extends the existing Tumbling Creek Trail an additional quarter mile from a pedestrian tunnel running beneath Atlanta Highway to a new pedestrian bridge near the University of North Georgia campus in Oakwood.
- The City of Lavonia opened a new splash pad and pavilion for local recreation users in June 2023. The pavilion includes Adirondack chairs and picnic tables.

- White County has made plans to enhance Yonah Preserve Park, a 40-acre tract of land with baseball, softball, football, and soccer fields and a playground. Plans are being made to add a splash pad and a restroom pavilion. The County also boasts Yonah Preserve Trails, a multi-use trail system located on 1,000 acres of property for mountain biking, hiking, trail running, and dog walking.
- The City of Young Harris is exploring the possibility of constructing a new park in the community with amenities to include a playground and picnic area, educational amphitheater, freshwater snorkeling, a creek walk trail, restrooms, and parking facilities.
- The Town of Gillsville is exploring the possibility of constructing a new park to include a playground area, picnic area, pavilion, restrooms, a trail, and parking facilities.
- Towns County approved a pickleball pavilion and splash pad to be constructed at the newly named Towns County Park at Lake Chatuge.
- The City of Hiawassee is constructing an 810-foot boardwalk to connect Mayor’s Park to Lloyd’s Landing. This boardwalk will also have two viewing and fishing platforms.



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

- Counties and municipalities within the region continue to show good recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, though employment issues remain. However, 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).
- Northeast Georgia Medical Center continues plans to move its facility in Lumpkin County from south Dahlonega to GA 400. The potential remains for the intersection of GA 400 and SR 52 to continue to evolve into a regional commercial node.
- The Northeast Georgia Inland Port received federal environmental approval in May 2023, which brings this project one step closer to construction. The planned 104-acre inland

port will provide a direct link to the Port of Savannah via Norfolk Southern. The rail terminal will open with 9,000 feet of working track, expanding to 18,000 feet a full build-out. With a top capacity of 150,000 container lifts per year, the facility will offset 600 roundtrip highway miles for every container moved by rail.



***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.***

- As part of this goal, it is the intent of this LDD and its CEDS Committee to also promote the electrification of the transportation network across the Georgia Mountains Region. This may be accomplished through access to funding sources from electric providers (e.g., Georgia Power, Tennessee Valley Authority, etc.), the U.S Department of Transportation (USDOT) Federal Highway Administration- National Electric Vehicle Infrastructure (NEVI) program, or from other current or future sources. This effort will pay dividends to the region's natural resources and will positively impact the region's transportation needs.
- As part of the Mitigation Strategies associated with this goal, this LDD will also address the increasing need for improved broadband capacity and access by promoting new transport-level interconnections between the Georgia Mountains Region and large Tier-1 internet service provider locations such as Atlanta, Charlotte, Jacksonville, Cincinnati, Nashville, etc. These interconnections are one of the most important factors contributing toward the lowering of broadband costs and improving reliability.
- Lumpkin County received over \$3.7 million in State of Georgia Fiscal Recovery Fund money and will collaborate with Windstream to deploy a "fiber-to the-premise" solution to provide broadband access to approximately 6,400 household and business locations in the County that are most lacking connectivity.

- Union County’s three water providers, City of Blairsville, Coosa Water Authority, and Notla Water Authority are working on intergovernmental agreements to provide enhanced water service delivery to their customers.
- Hart County and Franklin County are partnering to increase overall wastewater treatment capacity to serve Gateway Industrial Park.
- Hall County is building a lift station, sewer infrastructure, force main, and an access road to serve the new Gainesville 85 Business Park, which will begin operations in 2024.
- The City of Cleveland is working to secure funding to make significant wastewater treatment plant upgrades in both capacity and treatment process to meet new federal environmental standards. Capacity will increase from 0.75 MGD to 1.15 MGD. This project will create approximately 141 jobs and generate over \$127 million in private investment.
- Hart County Industrial Building Authority is investigating the possibility of building a 5,000 square-foot childcare facility to meet the short-term childcare needs of employees of businesses in the 150-acre Gateway Industrial Park.



***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.***

- To further this goal, communities will consider promoting buyer/supplier interconnections between regional industries through a buyer/supplier forum to be held in the region. These interconnections between local industries will help all parties involved and keep revenue generating in the Georgia Mountains Region resulting in increased multiplier effects (e.g., jobs and investment) and economic impact.
- King’s Hawaiian announced in November 2022 that it will invest \$85 million into bakery operations at its plant in Oakwood, GA and will create more than 160 new jobs. The new 150,000-square-foot bakery facility (with space for future expansion) will be located

across from its existing bread production plant in Oakwood South Industrial Park and is slated to open in Fall 2023.

- Kubota North America announced in June 2022 that it will invest \$140 million dollars to expand its Kubota Industrial Equipment operation by adding a new facility within its existing footprint along the Hall County corridor in Gainesville. The project is set to be fully operational in 2024 bringing with it more than 500 manufacturing jobs.
- Georgia Mountains Regional Commission is partnering 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. This study includes surveys about impressions on the future of AI in advanced manufacturing, the development of an AI strategic plan, and a pilot project specific to the region. 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.***

- Workforce Georgia Mountains and its partners developed new programs through its Workforce Sector Strategy Initiative to address skills gaps in Quality Control, Industrial Maintenance, and Supervisory Leadership.
- WorkSource Georgia Mountains funded the Be Pro, Be Proud Technical Skills Trailer to expose middle school and high school students to trade career opportunities. Area technical colleges and employers were also on-site through partnerships with Career Technical and Agricultural Education (CTAE) and chambers of commerce in select counties.
- WorkSource Georgia Mountains launched its Georgia Mountains Works website to promote advanced manufacturing and technology careers. The website serves as a hub

for students, parents, employers, and community stakeholders to find resources and how to get involved in opportunities, including jobs, apprenticeships, and internships.

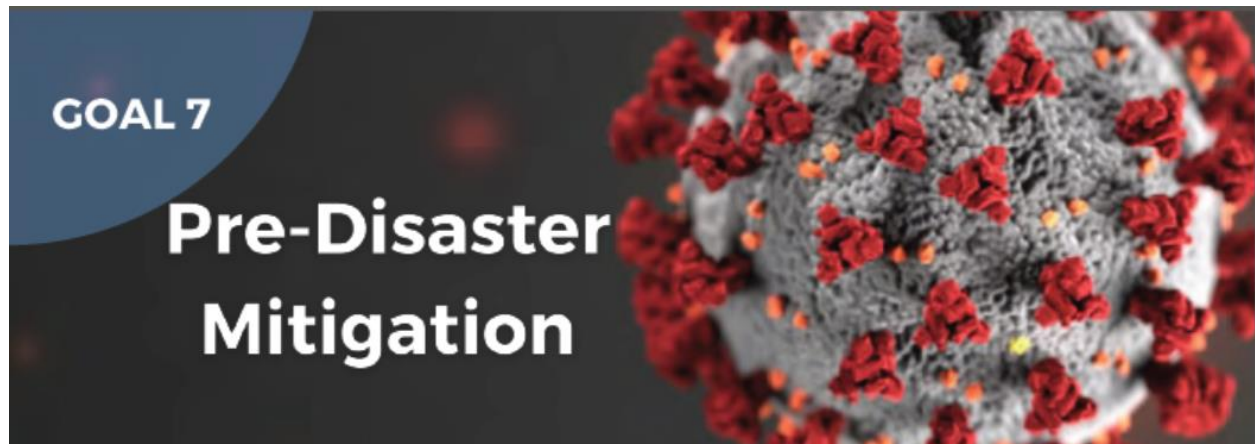
- 104 students throughout the region participated in short-term training boot camps. These boot camps included an employer-designed curriculum and an opportunity to interview with area employers immediately after training had been completed.
- WorkSource Georgia Mountains met with CTAE instructors from all 12 counties served by the region to provide resources and to promote career pathways in the region.
- A monthly Sector Strategy newsletter is sent out to all employers and stakeholders in the region with information on the latest activities and how to get involved with workforce development efforts.
- To further this goal, the LDD remains committed to promoting the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) opportunities among the region's high schools, college and career academies, and post-secondary institutions. The region's businesses and industries have a great need for prospective STEM-educated employees.



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

- Bankrate's Housing Heat Index named Gainesville, Georgia the number 1 housing market in the country. Bankrate analyzed 212 metro areas examining several factors, including appreciation of home values, homes listed for sale, and population trends. Homes in Gainesville appreciated 21.1%.
- The City of Hartwell received \$4 million in Congressionally Directed Spending through the office of United States Senator Raphael Warnock's office to perform neighborhood revitalization improvements (e.g., housing rehabilitation, historic preservation, etc.) for the City's Rome-Richardson Neighborhood, which is the historic African American center of the community. This project promotes equity as it provides support to a traditionally underserved population and will help to revitalize a very important part of the community.

- The OneGeorgia Authority has made grant and loan funds available to local governments, authorities, and private developers for infrastructure (grant) and construction financing (loan) to help meet ongoing workforce housing needs, offset difficulty satisfying workforce needs in communities or regions with low unemployment, or to assist a community or region with its commitment to expand and improve existing housing stock.



***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 applied for both EDA Disaster Supplemental and Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) funds to construct 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.