

**TENNESSEE'S UPPER CUMBERLAND  
COMPREHENSIVE ECONOMIC  
DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY  
2020 UPDATE**





# 2020 UPDATE

According to the Economic Development Administration, the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) contributes to effective economic development in America's communities and regions through a locally-based, regionally-driven economic development planning process. Economic development planning successfully serves as a means to engage community leaders, leverage the involvement of the private sector, and establish a strategic blueprint for regional collaboration. The Upper Cumberland Development District leads the development process for the Upper Cumberland Region and strives to engage all of these individuals through a variety of means. The CEDS committee meets annually to contribute to the development of the strategy. Additionally, a team of 15-20 state & regional stakeholders meet with representatives from each of the 14 counties to discuss their economic development successes, challenges, and goals. This annual update contains details gleaned from each of these sources as well as the planning efforts of the Development District staff.

The Upper Cumberland region is comprised of Cannon, Clay, Cumberland, DeKalb, Fentress, Jackson, Macon, Overton, Pickett, Putnam, Smith, Van Buren, Warren, and White counties and is home to approximately 364,500 residents. The Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy is developed with each of those 364,500 residents' best interest at the forefront. The 2017 -2022 plan goals include advocacy, industrial development, retail development, and transportation. The following document will provide an update on the progress of those regional goals.

## WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

### **1. Educated & Healthy Workforce Meeting All Employment Needs in the Region.**

- Objective 1: Connect employers to employees.
- Objective 2: Increase the number of citizens with postsecondary degrees and certificates.

## REGIONAL ADVOCACY

### **2. Legislative Members are Fully Educated on Most Prominent Needs and Concerns of the Region.**

- Objective 1: Local leadership identifies the most important legislative issue to the region.
- Objective 2: Increase legislator awareness of the region's stance on political subjects.



## INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT

### **3. Prepared Communities, Competitive in Industrial Recruitment and Expansion.**

- Objective 1: Increase inventory of industrial property across the region.
- Objective 2: Improve request for information responses (RFI) by participating in TVA RFI audit program, sharing responses across the region, and implementing regional marketing.
- Objective 3: Increase regional marketing efforts through industrial trade shows such as Select USA Investment Summit. Proactively share regional marketing material to develop awareness of the Upper Cumberland among business decision makers.
- Objective 4: Create local business retention & expansion programs in each county.

## RETAIL DEVELOPMENT

### **4. The Region Has Adequate, Thriving Retail Establishments Supporting the Quality of Place of the Upper Cumberland.**

- Objective 1: Grow the community by attracting new retail business.
- Objective 2: Retain and grow existing commercial businesses.

## TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE

### **5. The Region is Easily Accessible to Residents, Visitors and Businesses.**

- Objective 1: Improve transportation network.
- Objective 2: Educate state and federal partners on the identified needs

As the region changes, so do the goals and priorities of the communities within it. Each year the region reevaluates its current efforts to meet the core goals established in the 2017-2022 plan, as well as new goals and priorities. Throughout the process of developing the 2019 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy Update there were a number of additional goals that were identified including housing, homelessness/poverty rate, substance abuse, impacts of the 2020 census, telecommunication gaps and regional marketing. Regional data is beginning to reflect a greater income divide and an unacceptable level of poverty for many residents. The global pandemic led to additional goals for the 2020 CEDS update, including an increased focus on tourism, COVID response/recovery assistance and a renewed focus on entrepreneurship. Many of the region's goals are aimed towards moving people out of poverty. The five goals laid out in this plan are just a glimpse of the regionwide work that is underway to make the Upper Cumberland a more economically thriving area.

# Goal 1

## Educated & Healthy Workforce Meeting All Employment Needs in the Region



Career Academy- White County

COVID-19 has greatly disrupted the workplace, from mandated closures and reduced capacity limits to unemployment spikes and extreme changes in the education system. Despite the challenges faced in 2020, the Upper Cumberland region has continued to provide a quality education to both secondary education students through a mix of in person and virtual learning and post-secondary training programs. Expansion efforts at the Motlow campus in McMinnville have continued at full steam, as they've run out of physical space for their ground breaking mechatronics program and are working to secure funding to build a new building next to the Automation and Robotics facility. Fentress County is working with Roane State Community College to establish a larger satellite campus, as their current facility in Clarkrange is at capacity. Several school districts received GIVE grants from the state of TN to continue the growth and improvement efforts of our existing educational system.

Potential programs that are still under consideration are a mentorship program for high school students that are not planning to pursue post-secondary education as well as the development and implementation of a soft skills curriculum. Transitioning students and adults to the workforce involves a strong set of soft skills, which are often lacking in today's employees. The regional human resource agency is implementing its own "two-gen" program, mirroring that of the TN Department of Human Services, which is focused on breaking the cycle of poverty by serving two generations or more within a family. Providing resources to both parent and student to alter future outcomes one family at a time.

Additionally, the region has a new Substance Abuse Solutions program, focusing on rehabilitating those individuals who have struggled with substance abuse by removing barriers to employment, locating stable housing, and providing support across the entire spectrum of the rehabilitation process.

The region has seen a significant increase in the support of entrepreneurship. Specifically a consolidated resource, the Business Resource Collective, is a single entry point to the network of resources provided by the Biz Foundry, WCTE, Tennessee Tech's (TTU) Center for Rural Innovation and the Small Business Development Center now managed by the Upper Cumberland Development District in partnership with TTU. History shows that as unemployment increases, entrepreneurship increases. Individuals out of work will often create their own businesses to provide for themselves and their families. Despite the global pandemic we have continued to see an increase in new and expanding businesses and these resources play a vital role in ensuring the sustained success of our entrepreneurs.

# Goal 2

## Legislative Members are Fully Educated on Most Prominent Needs and Concerns of the Region



UC Mayors with Governor Bill Lee

Advocacy has not been immune to the effects of COVID-19 as the state of TN saw the state Capitol and Cordell Hull Legislative buildings closed for a period of time during the spring session. Reports are already being released that visits will be limited in 2021 and groups are being asked not to organize large Day on the Hill events. Nearly all legislative events in Washington DC were also cancelled due to the pandemic and will likely be postponed or canceled in 2021.

Given this disruption, the leadership of the Upper Cumberland is generating a new approach to ensure the needs of the region are understood by our senators and representatives both at the state and federal level. Legislative agendas will be developed and distributed electronically. More intimate meetings and small events may be scheduled in the region, rather than hosted in Nashville.

The region is grateful to have our local representatives and senators in positions of leadership including the Speaker of the House Representatives Cameron Sexton. Other regional legislators have attained subcommittee chair positions including Senator Mark Pody – Chair of the Judiciary and Government; Senator Janice Bowling – Vice-Chair of the Education, Health & General Welfare; Representative Kelly Keisling – Chair of the State Committee; and Representative Clark Boyd – Chair of Consumer and Human Resources Committee.

Current priorities for the region include, but are not limited to, assistance to distressed communities through sales tax rebates, substance abuse support, assistance in stepping individuals off welfare programs, small business support, transportation, and childcare.



# Goal 3

## Prepared Communities, Competitive in Industrial Recruitment and Expansion



Aphenia - Putnam County

In terms of industrial development 2020 has been a slower year due to the economic uncertainty felt among businesses due to COVID-19. Despite that fact, several expansion projects were announced. According to the TN Department of Economic and Community Development, there have been 899 new job commitments in 2020 and a capital investment of nearly \$90 million. One example is Aphenia Pharma, who announced a \$21 million expansion of its Solid Dose Division in Cookeville, TN. The company will be expanding into the previous Russel Stover's Chocolate factory, providing an additional 258,000 square feet and allowing the company's expansion into biologics, cold chain storage and third-party logistics distribution. Aphenia plans to install 24 high-speed bottling lines and eight thermoform blister packaging lines. The company is pursuing an innovative bottling and packaging process and is truly an industry-leader.

Hörmann, LLC. celebrated their grand opening in White County in October of this year after having announced their second US-based production facility in 2017 and breaking ground on Airport Road in 2018. Approximately 200 employees, earning quality wages, will produce residential garage doors in the state of the art 350,000 square foot facility.

The economic development professionals and leadership of the region understand that in order to be competitive in industrial recruitment, each must continue to identify, secure, and develop industrial product. The newest acquisition of industrial property was made by the Warren County Industrial Development Board who purchase a 218-acre parcel near the southern border of the county. The property is close to Morrison and near the existing Mountain View Industrial Park. The site has the potential to be rail-served in the future.

Existing industrial properties continue to pursue further development and work in partnership with the State of TN and the Tennessee Valley Authority at every opportunity. Both of these agencies have grant programs available for industrial property development, though the state Site Development Grant program is currently suspended due to a lack of funding from the state legislature because of COVID related cut-backs.

# Goal 4

## The Region has Adequate, Thriving Retail Establishments Supporting the Quality of Place in the Upper Cumberland

Shoppes at Eagle Point - Putnam County

In recent years, retail expansion across the Upper Cumberland has occurred naturally, the byproduct of a healthy economy. However, in the initial wake of the 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic, many local retailers suffered, as they were forced to scale back or shut down operations entirely. Although many were able to take advantage of state and federal programs to keep them afloat, and most are working back toward normal operation, the impact of this interruption will be felt well into 2021.

It has always been important in the Upper Cumberland that retail recruitment efforts be balanced with efforts to support local entrepreneurship. The uncertainty caused by COVID-19 has resulted in several new entrepreneurial ventures, as some who lost their jobs during the pandemic look for ways to create their own income stream and others find opportunity in adversity. We predict that consumer hesitancy to reenter large retail establishments will aid in the success and sustainability of new and existing small businesses.

The recent reorganization of the Small Business Development Center has supported the creation of the Business Resource Collective, a partnership between economic development organizations and entrepreneurs in the Upper Cumberland. The Collective brings together their innovative, entrepreneurial spirit, and expertise to form an integrated referral source and have made it their mission to provide a direct path between business owners and the resources they need to survive and thrive.

Not all retailers have taken a hit during the pandemic, those associated with the tourism industry saw huge gains as local residents spent the summer months recreating closer to home than we've seen in previous years. We expect this consumer trend to stay steady in the future and are refocusing our tourism efforts in the Upper Cumberland to ensure that we prepare retailers to keep up with the demand. This desire to shop and recreate closer to home will likely be evident by increased local sales tax revenue in the Upper Cumberland, an important part of providing the necessary resources for the region.

Our work towards a thriving retail economy in the Upper Cumberland is continuously evolving. Though virtual, several communities utilized grant funding to participate in training provided by Retail Academy and regional partners such as TVA Economic Development and Retail Academy continue to provide data necessary for retail recruitment.

# Goal 5

## The Region is Easily Accessible to Residents, Visitors and Businesses.

Hwy 111 - Pickett County

Stay-at-home orders, quarantine requirements, school shut-downs and other effects of COVID-19 have no doubt reduced the general flow of traffic on our road system. This is not a trend that is expected to continue, and the importance of improving our highway system is still a top priority in the Upper Cumberland region.

Many of the projects included in the initial 2017-2021 CEDS plan are still underway as road projects have a lengthy timeline. Road projects still topping the list of priority are the Hwy 52 truck route in Clay County, new and improved exits off of Interstate 40 in Smith, Putnam and Cumberland Counties, the widening of Hwy 56 between Baxter and Gainesboro, and the widening of Hwy 127 from Cumberland County through Fentress County.

These projects have made some progress such as the first section of Hwy 127 being set to let, be bid, for construction in December of 2020. There has also been progress made in the design phase of the Hwy 52 truck route in Celina. Though slow and very incremental, the region is enthused by the forward efforts in each of these areas.

Traffic flow creates concerns and necessitates attention throughout a community; near public buildings, at schools, around major interchanges. The majority of the Upper Cumberland region goals; however, focus on industrial development. The Upper Cumberland has always been a host of manufacturing and as business and industry push more and more for interstate connectivity, quality road structure is the region's only chance of remaining competitive. For example, Hwy 127 will largely improve access to the Clarkrange Regional Business Park; the Hwy 52 truck route will directly access the Mitchell Street Industrial park, the widening of Hwy 56 will open up the flattest and best industrial land in southern Jackson County.

Expanding the region's transportation infrastructure will continue to be a primary goal, both at the local and state level. Advocacy will play a key role in pursuing assistance with the region's state highway transportation needs and the goals of this priority will be actively pursued in the upcoming year.



# Impact of COVID in the UC

Since Mid-March of 2020, COVID-19 has left its mark on the Upper Cumberland as trends seen nationwide can be observed in the region. To gain a full understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on the region, aspects of the social, economic, and overall health need to be analyzed—each aspect has played a critical role in creating a “new normal” for citizens of the Upper Cumberland. While gathering comprehensive data for each of these aspects is a challenge that takes time and certainly hasn’t been accomplished as of yet, inferences on the status of the region in the wake of COVID can be made based on national trends and documentation of local activity.

On a social scale, the effects of COVID on the region are easy to identify and can be felt by many, if not all, of the citizens in the region. Aspects of social life in the region, including local cultural events, worship gatherings, live music and entertainment, fundraising events, and festivals have all come to a halt or been significantly altered with their return to normal indefinite still. Throughout the nation and globally, society has had to reckon with the challenges of social isolation. By dealing with disruption to activities that were perceived as a normal part of life and aspects of regional locale a mere few months ago, citizens of the Upper Cumberland Region have been able to plan, reschedule, modify, and remain optimistic for a return to social aspects of their lives that have proven to be an integral part of the Upper Cumberland’s regional identity.

Unemployment, business closures, and extra strain on the healthcare sector have caused an uptick in economic uncertainty throughout the Upper Cumberland. Despite the current unemployment rate being high and a recent nationwide spike in active cases, the overall trends toward economic resilience have been well-funded and consistent. Federal funding through the CARES Act, stimulus checks, unemployment, and SBA’s Economic Injury Disaster Loan and Paycheck Protection Program

loans has softened the blow of COVID-19 related plights experienced by businesses and individuals in the Upper Cumberland, and allowed for many local businesses to survive through the pandemic. While future economic trends remain uncertain and undeterminable, a positive shift in stability can be felt by businesses on a local, regional, and national level.

During the time of COVID, the overall health of states like Tennessee have gained national recognition while state and local leadership are continually learning and developing best practices for handling an unprecedented public health crisis such as the coronavirus. The effectiveness of mask wearing is a point being expressed by many healthcare professionals throughout the region, state, and nation. Discussion on political policies regarding the mandate of mask wearing has proven to be a hot button issue among the citizens of the Upper Cumberland, and as they work through this time together, citizens are continuing to consider and analyze trends in public health and case numbers and data provided by the CDC and local and state medical professionals alike. The Upper Cumberland Development District was a recipient of the EDA CARES Act grant. The two-year grant is intended to provide assistance and support to communities throughout the fourteen county, Upper Cumberland region as they respond to the economic shock sustained as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

With the hiring of two COVID-19 Coordinators, the Upper Cumberland Development District has taken a multi-faceted approach to identify and develop strategies that support economic resiliency. The Coordinators have been deployed in the fourteen-county region to serve as liaisons for the businesses, government, educational and nonprofit sectors. Recovery Coordinators will support, carry out and serve as project coordinators for the planning and implementation of economic and community development activities across the region.

# COVID-19 RESPONSE & RECOVERY GOALS

- Establish effective working relationships with local jurisdictions and state agencies for the purpose of identifying projects that enhance regional disaster recovery and economic resilience.
- Identify accurate, verifiable data and share regional updates, resources, and guidance to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 throughout the region.
- Preparation and administration of contracts, projects, progress reports and grant applications.
- Develop and implement economic and resilience plans with the goal of rebuilding resilient and sustainable communities throughout the region.
- Facilitate plans that focus on revitalizing distressed communities' environment.
- Support the region's efforts to attract industry, enhance tourism, encourage business retention, expansion, and recruitment.
- Develop marketing strategies specific to travel during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Conduct tourism audits to assess the inventory of assets, including tourism drivers, as well as secondary tourism support, such as restaurants and retail.
- Assess where counties need assistance in marketing efforts, including rebranding, brand positioning, website design, social media, and photography or video. Assist in connecting them with resources to fulfill those needs.
- Design, develop, and market curated day or weekend trips for each county by interest and season based on their strongest assets.
- Design, develop, and market curated week-long trips across the Upper Cumberland by interest and season.
- Produce videos featuring each county's strongest assets for marketing purposes to be included in the itineraries as well as independent marketing uses.
- Establish resiliency plans with objectives and possible resources to be evaluated annually.

With these two positions, UCDD is providing crucial support to the local governments and economic and community development agencies in each county. The informational support helps local leaders respond to the ever-changing needs during this time while the tourism support helps to bolster a vital revenue source for the region. In a time of unprecedented need for economic recovery efforts, these positions expand upon the offerings and further the mission of the Upper Cumberland Development District to provide solutions through regional cooperation.

# UPPER CUMBERLAND DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT

## **Providing Solutions Through Regional Cooperation**

The Upper Cumberland Development District (UCDD) was created by the Tennessee General Assembly to provide regional planning and assistance to the following counties: Cannon, Clay, Cumberland, DeKalb, Fentress, Jackson, Macon, Overton, Pickett, Putnam, Smith, Van Buren, Warren, and White. UCDD staff members are dedicated to providing quality services to the people of the Upper Cumberland region of Tennessee through the programs and services offered in each department: Area Agency on Aging and Disability, Economic and Community Development, and Housing and Family Services. It is UCDD's belief that the fourteen counties, along with the many municipalities contained within, are made stronger through regional cooperation and shared resources.

UCDD's Economic and Community Development staff members are well equipped to assist communities with a wide variety of services offered through our Economic and Community Development programs: Cumberland Area Investment Corporation, Economic Development, Geographical Information Systems, Grant Writing and Administration, Historic Preservation, Local Planning, Solid Waste Assistance, Statistical Information, Strategic Planning, Tennessee Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, THDA Home Rehabilitation Program, and Transportation Rural Planning Organization.

The areas of expertise and unique skill sets represented within the staff position the Upper Cumberland Development District to be a strong asset to communities and enable the agency to serve as a driving force in economic development throughout the region.