



# TENNESSEE'S UPPER CUMBERLAND COMPREHENSIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

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2023 Update

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# INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

Boasting astonishing scenic beauty, deep history, and a wide array of human talent, the Upper Cumberland region of Tennessee continues to be a hub of economic activity. The regional collaboration of community leaders through-out both the public and private sectors has and will continue to strengthen local economies and ultimately improve the quality of life of Tennesseans calling the region home. Discussions bringing together vital economic develop-ment partners and local leaders were held in each of the region's fourteen counties. In addition, a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy committee, composed of various community leaders, was convened to regionally examine the state of the economy and identify primary goals for the next five years. As a result, the 2022-2027 comprehensive economic development strategy was designed as a blueprint for the continued creation of long-term success and resilience throughout the fourteen counties of Tennessee's Upper Cumberland.

The Upper Cumberland region contains Cannon, Clay, Cumberland, DeKalb, Fentress, Jackson, Macon, Overton, Pickett, Putnam, Smith, Van Buren, Warren, and White counties in the northeastern portion of central Tennessee. This document highlights what makes these communities thrive along with some of the challenges they face. The CEDS is not intended to be static, but instead a course of action easily adaptable to the ever-changing needs of the region. The following pages provide an update on the progress made in advancing the region toward these goals over the past year.

# REGIONAL GOALS

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## UTILITY INFRASTRUCTURE

CONNECTING THE REGION THROUGH AN IMPROVED INFRASTRUCTURE NETWORK

Objective 1: Develop local utility infrastructure plans guided by future growth projections

Objective 2: Utilize available State and Federal resources to provide maximum impact to the region's water, wastewater, electric and natural gas networks



## TOURISM

LEVERAGING THE REGION'S NATURAL BEAUTY TO BOLSTER ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Objective 1: Increase number of visitors by marketing communities in innovative ways

Objective 2: Renew downtown areas to a center of community activity

Objective 3: Capture additional revenue from tourism



## WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

### ALIGNING A SKILLED WORKFORCE WITH EMPLOYER NEEDS

Objective 1: Further develop a high-skilled educational pipeline for employers in the region

Objective 2: Increase workforce participation by removing barriers for region's eligible workforce

## INDUSTRIAL RECRUITMENT

### RECRUITING AND RETAINING INDUSTRIES THAT ENHANCE QUALITY OF LIFE

Objective 1: Increase inventory of industrial property to market to prospective and expanding businesses

Objective 2: Enhance marketing efforts of the region and existing properties

Objective 3: Strengthen support for industrial development in each county in the Upper Cumberland

## ENTREPRENEURIAL DEVELOPMENT

### FOSTERING AN ACCESSIBLE ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEM

Objective 1: Increase awareness of resources available to entrepreneurs and small business owners

Objective 2: Strengthening access to capital for regional entrepreneurs





## GOAL 1

### UTILITY INFRASTRUCTURE

The region's utility infrastructure is aging, and the communities continually make investments in these systems to meet the needs of their citizens. Through the American Rescue Plan Act the Department of Environment and Conservation awarded funds to all 14 counties, and the municipalities within, to upgrade and extend water and sewer systems. Additionally, many counties continue to seek financial support through the Community Development Block Grant program which had more funds available for utility infrastructure improvements than ever before. The primary focus is to increase capacity, replace lines, test systems, and reduce inflow and infiltration.

Broadband infrastructure has also been a heavy focus of the region for the past decade, and because of that the Upper Cumberland has some of the best broadband service available across the nation. Each community has developed a broadband ready plan and will be pursuing forthcoming funds to construct and improve digital access and increase broadband adoption rates by providing education across the region.

With the rise of interest in electric vehicles and manufacturing trends shifting toward extremely large electricity requirements, the region is actively monitoring state and federal resources that will provide support in improving the current infrastructure and establish the region as a leader in these economic advancements.

## CONNECTING THE REGION THROUGH AN IMPROVED INFRASTRUCTURE NETWORK

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### **Objective 1: Develop local utility infrastructure plans guided by future growth projection**

Action Item 1: Create local utility maps and inventory areas in which infrastructure is most needed

Action Item 2: Create a resilient, regional long-term plan to achieving infrastructure goals

### **Objective 2: Utilize available State and Federal resources to provide maximum impact to the region's water, wastewater, electric and natural gas networks.**

Action Item 1: Identify and understand needs to prioritize completion of projects

Action Item 2: Explore grant opportunities





Gainsboro, Jackson County

## GOAL 2

### TOURISM

The Upper Cumberland region of Tennessee is blessed with abundant natural resources that organically draw tourist to the area. In an effort to increase tourists' knowledge of the assets in the region, the Upper Cumberland Development District has received funding for a second season of a television series "Wish You Were Here" in which local correspondents explore the places, events, activities, and adventures guests can experience in the Upper Cumberland. Season one, produced by WCTE, included eight episodes and represented each of the fourteen counties in the region. Season two, funded by a grant with USDA, will air ten episodes. Stories of visitors traveling from across the country to visit these assets have already begun.



Many counties are working diligently to improve the amenities around these tourism attractions. Putnam County is building a new welcome center and fair grounds off the newest interstate interchange. Many counties have applied for grants to build new playgrounds, an amphitheater, and walking track. The Town of Livingston is working on a streetscaping project connecting their downtown to the city park by burying the power lines and reconstructing the sidewalks. McMinnville is working on phase three of their streetscaping project. Our local airports are expanding and making improvements to provide a more valuable resource to visitors who choose to visit the region by personal or smaller aircraft.

One of the biggest advancements of tourism assets in the region is the designation of the Scott's Gulf Wilderness State Park in White County. The new park will connect three significant state natural areas around Virgin Falls to allow for greater access to recreation on state-owned land. Over \$56 million was designated to build a visitors' center, maintenance shop, restrooms, utilities and parking infrastructure at the site.

Revenue generated from tourism is a primary driver in many of our smallest communities, and it is important to continue investing in the amenities that bring people into the region. The Upper Cumberland is blessed with local and state leadership that prioritize tourism development and will continue to invest in this area.

## LEVERAGING THE REGION'S NATURAL BEAUTY TO BOLSTER ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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### Objective 1: Increase number of visitors by marketing communities in innovative ways

Action Item 1: Develop promotional campaigns highlighting the natural beauty, state and local parks, and opportunities for outdoor recreation

Action Item 2: Institute a cohesive branding campaign for each county in the region

Action Item 3: Educate elected officials on the importance of a paid position devoted to tourism in each county typically staffed through the Chamber of Commerce

Action Item 4: Train local professionals on social media best practices for tourism

### Objective 2: Renew downtown areas to a center of community activity

Action Item 1: Plan and execute downtown revitalization projects involving streetscaping and façade improvements focused on community priorities

Action Item 2: Strategically and aesthetically update utilities around downtown squares

Action Item 3: Support clean-up and sustainability efforts of local natural resources

### Objective 3: Capture additional revenue from tourism

Action Item 1: Evaluate locally and regionally based scalable economic impact analysis of added tourism efforts

Action Item 2: Implement occupancy tax on short-term rentals, hotels, and Airbnbs in each of the 14 counties.



## GOAL 3

### WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

The Upper Cumberland region has taken large steps to meet the Workforce Development goal of aligning a skilled workforce with employer needs. The Upper Cumberland Human Resource Agency was awarded a large three-year grant to pilot a program reducing poverty, improving citizens' educational attainment, and connecting them with quality jobs that will sustain their families without the use of government assistance. There are many components of this effort entitled Empower UC and many core partners committed including the Cookeville Regional Medical Center Foundation, Highlands Economic Partnership, Tennessee Tech University, Upper Cumberland Development District, WCTE public television, and the Upper Cumberland Workforce Development Board.

To advance objective 1 and further develop a high-skilled educational pipeline for employers in the region; Tennessee Tech is building pathways so Empower families have a clear understanding of all the educational opportunities and the most efficient way to increase their skills. The Highlands has developed a training center and is walking individuals through a series of soft skills training.

The Upper Cumberland Development District has also created a plan to reduce the prime age employment gap in eight of the region's counties and submitted it to the Economic Development Administration for consideration in the new Recompete grant process. This plan lays out a pathway to alleviate persistent economic distress by creating childcare capacity, expanding access to employment through public transportation, establishing employer/employee connections by creating job pathways for potential Recompete participants, and building economic development capacity in eight of our most distressed counties.

Addressing objective 2, increase workforce participation by removing barriers for eligible workforce, UCDD is tasked with removing barriers to entering the workforce through the Empower initiative. This includes increasing childcare capacity, increasing access to affordable workforce housing, mapping the effects of the benefit cliff and ways to prepare for it, strengthening family units, and much more as our clients' needs evolve. Great gains have been made in navigating the cumbersome process of opening a childcare facility in the State of TN. Numerous providers have been directly assisted through the process and tangible changes to the rules and regulations are being made to improve the process. For example; a building being considered for childcare required a set of architectural drawings before the State Fire Marshal Office could look at the building and provide guidance on needed upgrades to meet the required childcare center codes if the building was over 3,000 square feet or the provider planned to have 24 children or more. Through direct work with legislators and state agencies the 3,000 square foot rule has been eliminated and the arbitrary 24 number is being raised once all parties sign off on the change. This may seem minor, but architectural drawings are very expensive and there are a limited number of firms that can do this work often causing an 8-12 month delay in the project.

## ALIGNING A SKILLED WORKFORCE WITH EMPLOYER NEEDS

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### **Objective 1: Further develop a high-skilled educational pipeline for employers in the region**

Action Item 1: Increase participation in high school apprenticeships and internships

Action Item 2: Promote funding for expansions of academic offerings at local Technical post-secondary institutions

Action Item 3: Elevate school systems in the region to STEM certified systems

### **Objective 2: Increase workforce participation by removing barriers for eligible workforce**

Action Item 1: Promote and support workforce programs within Empower UC

Action Item 2: Develop robust network of justice-involved job trainings

Action Item 3: Increase availability of affordable childcare

Action Item 4: Advocate for continued development of affordable housing near major employers





Bridgestone, Warren County

## GOAL 4

### INDUSTRIAL RECRUITMENT

There has been a slowdown in publicly securing land for industrial development over the past few years. Land suitable for industrial development is incredibly limited, and since COVID the real estate landscape has been quite challenging. Several Upper Cumberland counties control at least one piece of industrial property which leads to greater hesitancy from county commissions and city councils to spend money on additional properties. It is important that local leadership prioritize industrial development because manufacturing draws money into the community from the outside and makes a tremendously positive impact in the local economy.

Macon County and the City of Lafayette are the exception to the previous statement with their purchase of a 130 acre parcel of land that they have had under option for the past five years. They have worked consistently with regional partners to test and masterplan the site.

Clay County worked with the state of Tennessee to mass grade a portion of their industrial site on Mitchell Street. Fentress County completed a grading project at the Clarkrange Regional Business Park and secured additional funding to clear 60+ acres of land and update all due diligence studies. Warren County began studying the Elam Industrial Site. Pickett County participated in the state's Property Evaluation Program. Many communities are pursuing additional grants to improve their industrial product status through the Property Evaluation Program, the Site Development Grant, and the InvestPrep grant.

Many of the counties in the region have seen local industries expanding and industry recruitment announcements. Warren County has landed three new companies over the past year and seen tremendous expansion such as the Bridgestone Americas Tire Operations expansion of \$550 million and 380 jobs. Portobello which announced several years ago in Putnam County, has completed the construction of their facility with a \$150 million investment and the forthcoming creation of 220 jobs. Overton County recruited two new industries, HealthVerve Food Manufacturing USA, and Independent Stave.

Industrial interest continues across Tennessee and the region must continue to invest in the industrial properties under control and work towards identifying and securing additional land and buildings. There is strong support from local, state and regional partners to continue this work.

## RECRUITING AND RETAINING INDUSTRIES THAT ENHANCE QUALITY OF LIFE

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### **Objective 1: Increase inventory of industrial property to market to prospective projects**

Action Item 1: Further develop publicly controlled sites through environmental testing, utility expansion, site preparation, etc.

Action Item 2: Utilize the Select Tennessee suite of programs including Property Evaluation Program, site development grants, and certification

### **Objective 2: Enhance marketing efforts of the region and existing properties**

Action Item 1: Develop thorough marketing flyers and promotional videos for each available site in the Upper Cumberland

Action Item 2: Create generic marketing materials for each county in the region

Action Item 3: Proactively market industrial property through trade show attendance, regional promotional pieces, quarterly newsletters, and other external affairs efforts

### **Objective 3: Strengthen support for industrial development in each county in the Upper Cumberland**

Action Item 1: Foster growth and proper structuring to achieve active and informed industrial development boards

Action Item 2: Educate local leadership on the economic impact of industrial retention and recruitment





Downtown Sparta

## GOAL 5

# ENTREPRENEURIAL DEVELOPMENT

Entrepreneurial Development continues to grow in the Upper Cumberland region along with the resources available to those individuals. The State of Tennessee is beginning to roll out federal State Small Business Credit Initiative (SSBCI) funds through three areas of concentration: investment funds, loan funds, and technical assistance. The Upper Cumberland region now has a local angel investment fund organized by the BizFoundry, which is the region's local entrepreneurial center. The area Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) has received a lending allocation to serve this population and the Small Business Development Center will be increasing technical resources for small businesses.



One of those resources is access to the Small Business Development Center’s (SBDC) premier internship program. The innovative project-based model has gotten national recognition and been presented at numerous national conferences over the past two years. This approach has been tremendously successful in alleviating the typical challenges of hosting interns for an extended period of time and allowed both students and businesses to experience a high-value arrangement.

All of these entrepreneurial resources and others have begun joining together to hold events entitled “Find your Funding” so that entrepreneurs can learn about all the available financial resources at one time. The region is also partnering with the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) in their effort to create an Entrepreneurial Ecosystems program and develop the most efficient ecosystem building blocks for each state and region.

There has also been an assessment of the City of Cookeville and the region’s current state related to technology-based employment and entrepreneurship opportunities completed in partnership with the Center on Rural Innovation (CORI). The Biz Foundry coordinated the local effort amongst the Highlands Economic Partnership, Tennessee Tech University, and the Upper Cumberland Development District.

Entrepreneurship continues to change the economic landscape of the region and the organizations that support those individuals will continue to offer innovative and valuable resources.

## FOSTERING AN ACCESSIBLE ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEM

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**Objective 1: Increase awareness of resources available to entrepreneurs and small business owners**

Action Item 1: Continue to invest time and energy in the development of the Business Resource Collective, a partnership between the Small Business Development Center (SBDC), The Biz Foundry, and Tennessee Tech’s Center for Rural Innovation (TCRI)

**Objective 2: Strengthening access to capital for regional entrepreneurs**

Action Item 1: Develop robust Angel Investor network to expand funding opportunities

Action Item 2: Increase local bank participation in USDA/SBA guaranteed loan programs

Action Item 3: Perfect the regional microloan program to successfully identify the most promising startup businesses and adequately equip them to thrive with financial and technical support



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PREPARED BY  
UPPER CUMBERLAND DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT | 1104 ENGLAND DRIVE  
COOKEVILLE, TN 38501

P: (931) 432-4111 | [www.ucdd.org](http://www.ucdd.org)  
*Cover photo by Chuck Sutherland*