



TENNESSEE'S UPPER CUMBERLAND COMPREHENSIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

2024 Update

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND 03

REGIONAL GOALS 04

GOAL 1 : UTILITY INFRASTRUCTURE 06

GOAL 2 : TOURISM 08

GOAL 3 : WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT 10

GOAL 4 : INDUSTRIAL RECRUITMENT 12

**GOAL 5 : ENTREPRENEURIAL
DEVELOPMENT** 14

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 development 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



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 American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding has been a primary driver in the progress being made throughout the region to update and improve current infrastructure systems. Totalling over \$90 million dollars, the ARPA projects funded through the TN Department of Environment and Conservation will complete nearly 100 individual projects primarily in water and wastewater systems. The main focus remains increasing capacity, replacing lines, testing systems, and reducing inflow and infiltration.

TDEC encouraged the development of collaborative projects to broaden the intended use of funds. One example in the Upper Cumberland is a partnership between Putnam County and Jackson County who are working together to install new lines to an area of their communities that previously had no municipal water. Another example is the Baxter system which serves areas of DeKalb County using funding to provide rehabilitation to the DeKalb County customers.

The Community Development Block Grant program also continues to be a substantial resource to communities in this effort. Due to a variety of COVID-19 impacts the state was able to award an unprecedented amount of projects and 100 percent of projects in the Upper Cumberland. Many of these awards are providing leverage for the same projects addressed with ARPA funds to make a greater impact in the region.

Twelve Upper Cumberland Counties received Broadband Ready Community Grants to implement broadband adoption activities such as providing digital skills, training, education and workforce development, low-cost or free digital equipment, marketing and public outreach, public wi-fi projects, and more. This program is designed to help residents understand and adopt the quality broadband service available in our area.

CONNECTING THE REGION THROUGH AN IMPROVED INFRASTRUCTURE NETWORK

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 longterm 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



White County

GOAL 2

TOURISM

The Upper Cumberland area recently hosted its first regional short-term rental workshop, which saw the highest attendance of any session held across the state. The training was provided by the TN Department of Tourism Development in collaboration with the local Upper Cumberland Tourism Association and the Upper Cumberland Development District. The workshop aimed to connect new or prospective short-term rental owners with experienced hosts, offering insights on best practices, legal considerations, hosting tips, and information on property taxation and monitoring. Attendees provided excellent feedback and expressed a strong interest in future workshops.

A variety of unique short-term rentals are attracting a diverse group of visitors to the region. Notable examples include Folk Stays in Van Buren County, featuring several charming cottages nestled in the picturesque landscape, and the Hideout Hotel in Putnam County, where guests can enjoy the distinctive experience of staying in a luxury treehouse or cozy cottage. Additionally, the area offers a lofted dome among the trees, a historic country general store, farm stay experiences, tree tents, lakeside properties, an 1800s dogtrot-style cabin, downtown lofts, and even a home with a watermill. Supporting short-term rental owners to spur the creation of additional dwellings may increase the ability to capture additional guests, hotel/motel tax, and sales tax revenue they generate.

Forthcoming advancements to the recently developed Scott's Gulf Wilderness State Park in White County, TN, include enhanced hiking trails, improved visitor facilities, and increased promotional efforts to showcase the park's natural beauty and outdoor activities. The park will connect three significant state natural areas around Virgin Falls. Meanwhile, the State Archaeological Park at Cardwell Mountain in Warren County will soon be undergoing preservation work before being opened to the public providing better access to archaeological sites and attracting visitors interested in history and archaeology. Both sites are being positioned as key attractions to boost local tourism and community engagement.

There has also been a rise in music festivals across the region. Events like the Muddy Roots Music Festival, the Live in Livingston concert series, Mainstreet Live, and music venues like The Old Gray are popular attractions for those seeking musical entertainment.

Additionally, the Upper Cumberland Development District is currently producing the third season of the television series "Wish You Were Here," in collaboration with WCTE, the local PBS affiliate. Each episode features local correspondents exploring the places, events, activities, and adventures available to visitors in the Upper Cumberland.

Tourism revenue remains a key contributor to many of our smaller communities, and the region will keep investing in the amenities that attract visitors. The Upper Cumberland benefits from local and state leadership that emphasizes tourism development and is committed to further investment in this sector.

LEVERAGING THE REGION'S NATURAL BEAUTY TO BOLSTER ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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 is making significant strides in workforce development through substantial investments in technical and vocational training facilities, youth employment initiatives, and enhanced access to transportation. Recent funding allocations for Tennessee College of Applied Technology (TCAT) campuses in Crossville, Livingston, and McMinnville are transforming educational infrastructure and creating more opportunities for skills training.

In Crossville, TCAT has been awarded \$14,750,000 for a new academic building and a state-of-the-art truck driving facility, while TCAT Livingston has received \$17,000,000 for a new academic and administrative building. Additionally, TCAT McMinnville will benefit from a \$46 million investment for a replacement campus, further strengthening the region's capacity to prepare students for high-demand careers. Fentress County was awarded funding to build a combined TCAT and Roane State Community College in Jamestown, TN and the Motlow McMinnville Campus has expanded the Automation and Robotics Training Center for an electric vehicle technology program.

Complementing these advancements in technical education, the Tennessee Youth Employment Program has been a notable success in the Upper Cumberland. Over 900 young people expressed interest, with 303 selected

to participate across industries such as construction, healthcare, and park services. This initiative provided hands-on experience and fostered personal and professional growth, leading to 28 participants being hired full-time by the end of the program. The program's success demonstrates the region's commitment to creating a strong pipeline of skilled workers while providing lasting employment opportunities for its youth.

In addition to educational and employment programs, the Upper Cumberland has also prioritized transportation access to support workforce participation. The Transportation Jobs Access program has been launched to drive people to and from work for up to nine months, removing a significant barrier to employment. As part of this initiative, the region's Go Routes serving Crossville, Algood, McMinnville, and Cookeville have gone fare-free, ensuring that workers can reliably commute without the burden of transportation costs. This service expands access to jobs, improves connectivity between communities, and supports economic growth by helping more residents reach employment opportunities.

These coordinated efforts in workforce development, youth employment, and transportation access are positioning the Upper Cumberland as a leader in addressing regional workforce needs. By expanding educational opportunities, creating pathways for youth employment, and providing critical transportation solutions, the region is effectively preparing its workforce to meet the challenges of a rapidly evolving job market.

ALIGNING A SKILLED WORKFORCE WITH EMPLOYER NEEDS

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 postsecondary 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 justiceinvolved job trainings

Action Item 3: Increase availability of affordable childcare

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



GOAL 4

INDUSTRIAL RECRUITMENT

The Upper Cumberland region has experienced significant job growth, driven by recent announcements from key industries. McNeilus Steel, a family-owned metal products manufacturer, is establishing operations in Morrison, creating 75 new jobs and strengthening the local manufacturing base. In Jackson County, a transformer company has unveiled plans to set up a new facility, further diversifying the area's industrial landscape. This growth builds on the momentum generated by Unitech's location last year in Morrison, where the company invested \$2.6 million to create 20 new jobs, demonstrating continued confidence in the region's workforce and economic potential. These new developments highlight the Upper Cumberland's ongoing success in attracting business investments and supporting local expansions, positioning the area for sustained economic development.

Economic development efforts in the Upper Cumberland region have been steady through infrastructure enhancements and targeted property development initiatives. The widening of Highway 127 will greatly improve connectivity between the Clarkrange Regional Business Park and I-40, making it easier for businesses to access major transportation routes. Similarly, the construction of a truck route in Celina will not only enhance safety in the downtown area but also provide better access to the Mitchell Street Industrial Park, boosting the appeal of the park for potential industrial investments.

The Highlands Business Park has two new speculative buildings under construction which have generated strong interest in the central county of the region and the speculative building located in Morrison has also seen an increase in interest throughout the year.

Overton, DeKalb, and Warren counties participated in the Property Evaluation Program this year, with White County applying for the upcoming round. This program helps communities identify properties for industrial development. Additionally, three Site Development Grants were awarded in the region: a 100,000 square foot speculative building in Crossville, funding for powerline relocation in Macon County to open up more developable land, and a grant for due diligence work at the Linden property in Warren County. Further investigation in the Mtn. View Industrial Park and grading at the Clarkrange Regional Business Park are also being pursued through additional grant applications.

Industrial interest continues to grow across Tennessee, and the Upper Cumberland region is positioning itself to capitalize on this trend. Local, state, and regional partners are actively supporting efforts to develop and market industrial properties, ensuring that the region remains competitive for future investments. By expanding its infrastructure, securing strategic sites, and preparing properties for development, the Upper Cumberland is setting the stage for sustained economic growth and job creation.

RECRUITING AND RETAINING INDUSTRIES THAT ENHANCE QUALITY OF LIFE

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



GOAL 5

ENTREPRENEURIAL DEVELOPMENT

Small business development is a crucial driver of economic growth and community vitality, particularly in regions like the Upper Cumberland. Entrepreneurs and small businesses serve as the backbone of the local economy, creating jobs, fostering innovation, and contributing to the unique character of each community. To support these business owners, local agencies and organizations have come together to build a robust entrepreneurial ecosystem, providing a wide range of resources and collaborative efforts aimed at ensuring small business success.

One key initiative on the horizon is a small business conference, being coordinated for the spring of 2025. This event will bring together entrepreneurs, business leaders, and support agencies to share knowledge, network, and highlight the diverse resources available in the region. It will serve as a valuable platform for fostering connections, learning about funding opportunities, and discussing strategies for overcoming challenges unique to small businesses.

The Biz Foundry, the region's entrepreneurial center, has been a cornerstone of these development efforts, experiencing notable growth and expanding its services. As a leader in business incubation and startup support, The

Biz Foundry provides coworking spaces, mentorship, and educational workshops to help entrepreneurs turn their ideas into thriving businesses. Alongside The Biz Foundry, the Business Resource Collective—a collaboration among the Tennessee Small Business Development Center (TSBDC), Tennessee Tech University (TTU), and The Biz Foundry—is working to streamline support through shared client data systems and dashboards. This initiative will enable the partner organizations to better track client progress, identify areas of need, and coordinate services more effectively, ultimately providing a more seamless experience for small businesses seeking assistance.

The TSBDC has also strengthened its presence in the region with the addition of new staff members who are actively visiting local chambers of commerce and updating contact information to enhance engagement with the business community. By building stronger relationships with local stakeholders and providing up-to-date information, the TSBDC is ensuring that small business owners have easy access to the resources and support they need to thrive.

Together, these efforts demonstrate the region's commitment to nurturing entrepreneurship and small business development, creating a supportive environment where businesses of all sizes can succeed and contribute to the region's long-term economic prosperity.

FOSTERING AN ACCESSIBLE ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEM

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



PREPARED BY UPPER CUMBERLAND DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT
1104 ENGLAND DRIVE COOKEVILLE, TN 38501
P: (931) 432-4111 | www.ucdd.org
Cover photo by Chuck Sutherland