



# TENNESSEE'S UPPER CUMBERLAND COMPREHENSIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

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**2025 Update**

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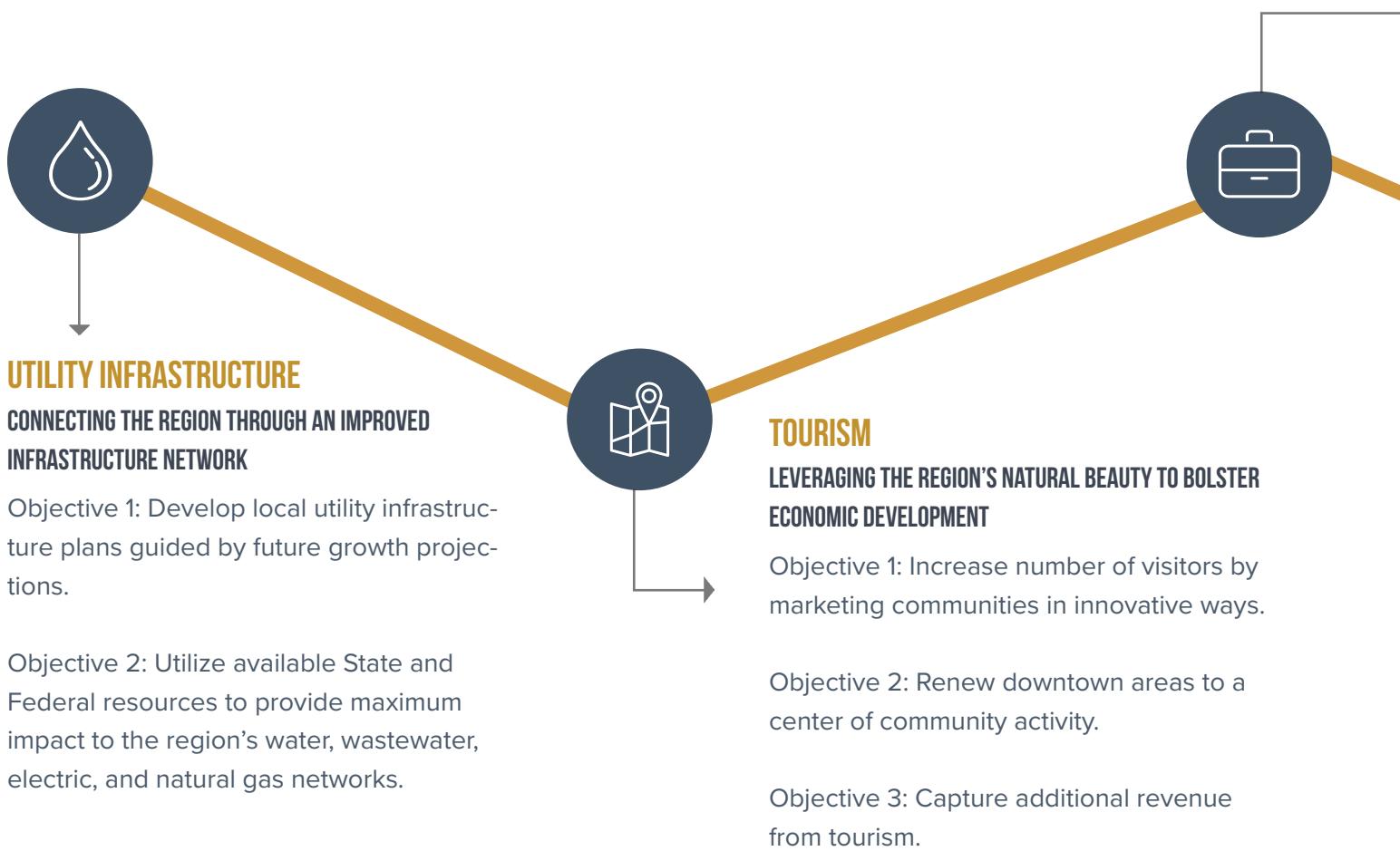
# INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

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 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

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## 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 investors.



# GOAL 1

## UTILITY INFRASTRUCTURE

The commitment to an improved infrastructure network is moving forward with significant investments secured through external funding sources, a foundational step for future industrial and residential growth. More than \$80 million in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds were directed toward nearly 100 projects aimed at increasing capacity, replacing lines, and reducing inflow and infiltration in water and wastewater systems across the region's counties.

These efforts are crucial as the region's utility infrastructure continues to age, a pervasive challenge noted in prior CEDS updates. Collaborations, such as the partnership between Putnam and Jackson counties to install new municipal water lines, exemplify the regional approach to these necessary upgrades. Additionally, other areas are making multi-million dollar advancements, such as the Water & Wastewater Improvements underway in Van Buren County by the Warren County Utility District (WCUD), which are anticipated to cost approximately \$14-15 million and be completed by December 2026.

The region is also hopeful to experience a positive effect from the Ridgeline Expansion Project, a new 122-mile natural gas pipeline constructed by Enbridge which is cutting across several Upper Cumberland counties. The line will supply the Tennessee Valley Authority's (TVA)

new natural gas-fired Kingston Energy Complex. This project aims to improve the reliability and efficiency of the regional natural gas supply, replacing a retiring coal plant and supporting growing energy demand.

While broadband accessibility is considered strong, acknowledging the decade-long regional focus on this utility, 16 Broadband Ready Community Grants, and seven Connected Community Facilities grants were awarded to focus on digital skills and adoption activities. Despite these successes, the lack of water access and aging sewer systems continue to be primary concerns raised by local leaders in the 2025 strategy sessions, with the Mayor of Macon County stating approximately \$40 million is needed for widespread water infrastructure expansion to cover areas currently lacking access. Mayor Adcock of DeKalb County noted that areas of the county are still operating on well systems and are interested in grants for water line extensions.

Furthermore, Tri-County Electric, which serves the Tennessee counties of Clay, Jackson, Macon, Overton, Smith, Sumner, and Trousdale, is undertaking substantial efforts to improve excess capacity and redundancy, a move expected to be a valuable asset for site differentiation and industrial competitiveness. Therefore, the continued aggressive pursuit of state and federal resources, such as CDBG and USDA grants, remains essential to accommodate future growth and prevent development halts.

## 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 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



## GOAL 2

## TOURISM

Leveraging the region's scenic assets to bolster economic development has shown measurable results, with tourism activity supporting \$570.8 million in visitor spending region-wide in 2024. The region continued innovative marketing efforts like the *Wish You Were Here* television series, which began its fourth season this year, highlighting the natural beauty and outdoor recreation opportunities across the Upper Cumberland.

Significant long-term investment is focused on the new Scott's Gulf Wilderness State Park in White County, which connects three state natural areas and has secured more than \$56 million for a visitor center, utilities, and infrastructure. In Jackson County, an immediate priority involves advancing the Cordell Hotel redevelopment and marketing Gainesboro as an outdoor recreation and food destination, leveraging assets like the unique restaurants located on the square. Success in downtown revitalization includes McMinnville (Warren County) advancing to Phase III planning; multiple communities—Alexandria (Dekalb County), Celina (Clay County), Crossville (Cumberland County), and Monterey (Putnam County)—securing valuable Downtown Improvement Grants; and Crossville also receiving its official TN Main Street designation.

In Overton County, the completion of the Central Park Stage and the “Live in Livingston” summer concert series have attracted more than 1,000 weekly visitors into downtown, significantly boosting the economy and strengthening its reputation as an expanding boating, shopping and live music destination.

To fully capture tourism revenue, objectives include the implementation or adjustment of a local occupancy tax on short-term rentals and hotels in all 14 Upper Cumberland counties to maximize appropriate collections from visitors, providing funding to expand tourism marketing. This strategy is particularly relevant in areas experiencing short-term rental growth.

Visitor growth in the region’s outdoor sector is increasing, driven directly by Visit Cookeville’s *Waterfalls for All* campaign. This collaboration with TN State Parks and the TN Department of Tourism highlights the region’s most accessible waterfalls ensuring they can be experienced by all, regardless of physical ability.

Other local efforts include a major destination rebrand in Van Buren County, which named Spencer the “Fall Creek Falls Recreational Corridor,” and the successful Chocolate Gravy Festival in Clay County, which provided an estimated \$1 million economic stimulus in 2025.

## 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 core challenge for workforce development lies in aligning a highly skilled, available workforce with employer needs by removing significant barriers to participation, a goal that aligns directly with the Empower Upper Cumberland program.

The region is actively developing the educational pipeline through substantial funding for Tennessee College of Applied Technology (TCAT) campuses, including \$14.75 million in Crossville for a new building and truck driving facility, a new facility in McMinnville, and \$17 million in improvements in Livingston.

Fentress County was awarded funding to build a combined TCAT and Roane State Community College in Jamestown, Tenn. Fentress County's York Institute is further showcasing educational improvements, including achieving a 99-percent federal college and career readiness rate and exploring a 2+2 program with Roane State and University of Tennessee, Knoxville to keep graduates local.

To increase workforce participation, the Empower UC initiative focuses on overcoming obstacles like housing and the lack of affordable childcare. Legislative advocacy directly resulted in the elimination of a burdensome 3,000

square foot rule and the allowed capacity increase from 24 to 49 children related to fire safety codes for smaller childcare facilities, a change that significantly reduced start-up delays and costs for providers in the region. Development District staff and the region's small business development center have worked closely with 10 providers over the past year to support the opening of new childcare centers creating or sustaining more than 550 slots in the Upper Cumberland, removing an additional barrier from the working population.

Additionally, the Empower UC effort has identified challenges employees and employers face when they transition off of TennCare without education and advance notice. A series of healthcare bootcamps have been developed to provide valuable training for the processing of stepping off government assistance in healthcare in as smooth a process as possible.

Continued work advocates for affordable housing near major employers, which remains a key need in almost every county. Workforce participation remains a concern in the region. For example, DeKalb County's rate is 46.2 percent, notably lower than Smith County's 61.3 percent. Addressing the shortage of affordable workforce housing remains a critical long-term priority for nearly every county, including Cumberland and DeKalb.

## 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 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

Efforts to recruit and retain industries that enhance the quality of life center on systematically developing the region's limited inventory of industrial property.

Recent successes include McNeilus Steel locating and Unitech's expansion in Morrison/Warren County, Endent Stave's location in Overton County, and a new transformer company in Jackson County. The utilization of the Select Tennessee suite of programs, including the Property Evaluation Program (PEP) and Site Development Grants (SDG), is crucial to site readiness, demonstrated by the award of an SDG for a new speculative building in Crossville and funding for powerline relocation in Macon County. Macon County is leveraging its high-quality industrial site and electric redundancy as a key differentiator to attract prospects.

Potential closures or reduction in workforce are always of immediate concern such as the potential closure of the Tenneco/Federal-Mogul plant in DeKalb County which prompted partners like TVA, TNECD, and the local workforce team to initiate contingency planning and explore the building's reuse for a new prospect. Beyond immediate closures,

Putnam County is continuing recruitment efforts for the Perdue site and advancing the truck stop recruitment at Exit 301 in Monterey to mitigate the impacts of the closure in March 2025 that impacted more than 430 employees. Communities are working proactively wherever they can such as Van Buren County's recent focus on formally re-establishing the Industrial Development Board (IDB) to work on local industrial concerns.

Many counties recognize the importance of entering the PEP program and the potential to seek SDG funding, which can be allocated to purchase property for industrial sites.

Furthermore, improving logistics, such as the widening of Highway 127 to improve connectivity to the Clarkrange Regional Business Park in Fentress County, is a critical component of site enhancement.

## 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



## GOAL 5

# ENTREPRENEURIAL DEVELOPMENT

The region is fostering an accessible entrepreneurial ecosystem by strengthening capital access and resource awareness, predominantly through the Business Resource Collective (BRC), a partnership among the Small Business Development Center (SBDC), The Biz Foundry, and Tennessee Tech's Center for Rural Innovation (TCRI). The focus includes the launch of a local Angel Investor Network and efforts to increase local bank participation in USDA/SBA guaranteed loan programs.

The Biz Foundry is expanding its reach by utilizing the former Cumberland Mountain Boys School campus in Cumberland County for workspaces and workshops, and actively collaborating with the SBDC and schools like the York Institute in Fentress County to provide training and entrepreneurship bootcamps to students. This focus on small business is particularly important for rural areas where economic success is highly dependent on entrepreneurship. Many entrepreneurs face significant barriers like access to capital.

The Upper Cumberland Development District's loan program, the pro business network of traditional financing institutions, and the Community Development Financial Institutions in the area provide a well rounded source of funding to navigate that challenge.

Partnerships like the BRC offer specialized consulting and technical support to increase the likelihood of entrepreneurial success. The Biz Foundry's next startup program is scheduled to open in January to provide focused support.

A key long-term action is the development of a succession planning strategy to address the increasing number of older, family-owned businesses at risk of closing without a successor. This includes both financial and logistical assistance to prevent the detrimental ripple effect of business failure across communities.

## 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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