



FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

COLUMBUS-MUSCOGEE COUNTY

THANKS TO OUR SPONSORS





MESSAGE FROM GEORGIAFORWARD

GeorgiaForward has been bringing together statewide thought leaders to talk about the future of Georgia since 2010. From these conversations, the leadership-action program Young Gamechangers was born, and after ten successful programs across the state, the work of Young Gamechangers has had over a \$32 million impact on the state of Georgia. We are proud to work with companies, governments, nonprofits, institutes of higher learning, and other business and civic leaders to grapple with their community's most persistent challenges. Since early in 2023, 45 of Georgia's best and brightest have been working in Columbus/Muscogee County to develop big idea recommendations to some of this community's problems. These young professionals, between the ages of 25 and 40 from a variety of sectors across the state, were divided into groups to work on the four challenge questions crafted by the community steering committee. The group met in Columbus four times over the course of the eight-month program and worked for countless hours to learn, research, collaborate, and reflect on the "game changing" ideas they developed. The recommendations that follow are the result of next generation Georgia leaders thinking

outside of the box to creatively solve problems in Columbus/Muscogee County. This product would not be possible without the invitation to bring Young Gamechangers to Columbus/Muscogee County by community leadership, the guidance of the local steering committee, the enthusiasm of the class, the willingness of local leaders to be open and honest, the engagement of our Young Gamechanger alumni, and the support of our sponsors. Thank you to everyone who has played a part in making the 2023 Young Gamechangers program possible. GeorgiaForward and the Georgia Municipal Association is excited to see which recommendations most resonate with the community and which will be implemented first! We look forward to a continued partnership as these ideas come to life over the next several years.

Sadie Krawczyk
Managing Director
GeorgiaForward



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SECTION

1



COMMUNICATE. CONNECT. COLUMBUS.

CHALLENGE QUESTION

How can Columbus/Muscogee County help all residents feel like a valued part of the community where they know what's going on, can connect with others, and contribute to the decision-making process for our collective future?

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INTRODUCTION

Overall Goal: Working to make Columbus informed, engaged, and empowered.

In the changing world of government and community development, we envision that the City of Columbus, Georgia, could stand out as an example of how to do things in a new way by accepting programs that focus on high quality, inclusive communication. Anchored by three ideas— **Communicate Columbus: Strengthening the Communication and Community Affairs Department**, **Connect Columbus: Empowering the Columbus Community through Dynamic Engagement**, and **Experience Columbus 360: Revolutionizing Community Engagement**—this city is on a transformative path toward a more connected, engaged, and prosperous future.

Each idea represents a different part of building a community and emphasizes the importance of working together, communicating openly, and growing together. All of these things show how committed Columbus is to making the city a place where everyone's voice is heard, ideas prosper, and community bonds are stronger.

THE BIG THREE

This team has developed three initiatives that promote community engagement and collaboration in Columbus, Georgia to foster a more vibrant future.

Communicate Columbus: Strengthening the Communication and Community Affairs Department

To strengthen communication between the Columbus Consolidated Government (CCG), its citizens, and its employees, the newly-formed Communications and Community Affairs Department plays a crucial role. The effectiveness of the department depends on resource allocation, which is frequently constrained by local governance. Due to its proximity to Columbus State University, CCG is able to utilize the university's resources to close disparities. Collaborative strategies, such as customized coursework and apprenticeship pipelines, can help CCG achieve its goals by generating human capital and other resources. In addition, establishing a communication baseline through audits or evaluations is a crucial step toward effective progress.

Connect Columbus: Empowering the Columbus Community through Dynamic Engagement

A dynamic Communications and Community Affairs Department within the Columbus Consolidated Government emerges as a catalyst for enhancing the connections between the government and the Columbus-Muscookee community. The department concentrates on enhancing general well-being and quality of life by serving as a link between residents, businesses, and authorities. Its strategy centers on inclusive engagement, open communication, and active participation. By involving community members in decision-making processes, the department ensures that policies and programs meet the diverse requirements of its constituents. At the core of its

initiatives are collaboration with various stakeholders, utilization of innovative communication channels, and the promotion of a thriving local economy through private-public partnerships. The department's commitment to developing an inclusive community is highlighted by inclusive events, diversity training, and systemic equity efforts.

Experience Columbus 360: A Revolutionary Approach to Community Engagement

Experience Columbus 360 represents an innovative engagement strategy that highlights all aspects of living in Columbus, Georgia. This initiative promotes active citizenship and personal development by providing opportunities for experiential learning across multiple fields. Experience Columbus 360 offers immersive programs spanning education, politics, the arts, entrepreneurship, and more in collaboration with local entities. It fosters a culture of lifelong learning and ensures all residents' access. Participants acquire useful skills and insights, transforming into engaged members of the community. This initiative's innovative strategy utilizes culture to strengthen and unite the community, thereby nurturing its resilience and prosperity.

These three initiatives demonstrate Columbus' dedication to effective communication, inclusive engagement, and lifelong learning. By leveraging partnerships, embracing innovation, and prioritizing community needs, the city plots a course towards a prosperous and vibrant future.



BIG IDEA 1

COMMUNICATE COLUMBUS



DESCRIPTION

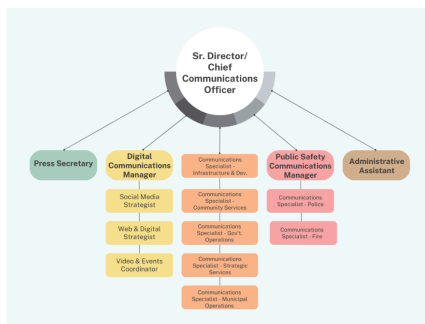
In 2022 the Columbus Consolidated Government (CCG) established the Office of Communications and Community Affairs. The mission of the office is to maintain lines of communication between CCG, its employees, and the citizens in the community. The success of the department is contingent on the tools and resources allocated to carrying out the established goals, and currently the department does not meet the size nor scope of resources of cities of similar size. Columbus is currently the second largest city in the state of Georgia with a population of just over 200,000 and employs over 3,000 municipal workers. As with any local government, resources are often inadequate to carry out the full scope of the intended service delivery. The Columbus Consolidated Government is fortunate to be in close proximity to a major university and, therefore, should leverage a strategic partnership with Columbus State University to fill in some of those resource gaps and create an internship pipeline for students to get real world experience in the CCG Communications and Community Affairs Department.

In order to realize the mission of the CCG Communications and Community Affairs Department, the department names as one of its goals, 'create a comprehensive communications plan and establish policies and procedures'. It is vital for the city to develop a communications strategy in order to know how to effectively move forward. This should be done through a communications needs assessment or an audit to establish a baseline. The scope can be scaled to the resources of the department. This service could be contracted out as a professional service, or could be done through a strategic partnership with CSU to target course work for future classes to produce meaningful resources for CCG.

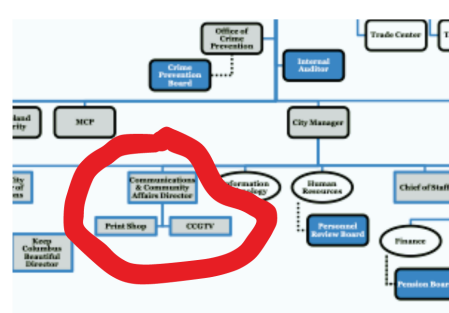
The CCG Communications Department is also charged with internal communication for almost 3000

employees. This is quite the undertaking, especially for a one person department. In order to set the tone for a spirit of cross-departmental collaboration and inform the communication priorities, it would be helpful for the government to hold an annual strategic retreat attended by Elected Officials and Department Heads. The first one would be an excellent opportunity to have those stakeholders participate in a SWOT analysis where each member contributes their thoughts on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the organization. It would also be a good time for the elected officials to voice their goals and visions for CCG both for the short and long term. This helps elected officials and department directors to all be on the same page and hearing this information all together, at the same time, can help ensure a cohesive vision.

Comparison of Communications Department Org Charts



City of Savannah, GA (pop. 147,088 (2021)) Marketing and Communications Dept.



City of Columbus, GA (pop. 206,922 (2020)) Communications & Community Affairs Dept.

SCOPE OF INITIATIVE

The purpose of this initiative is centered on developing a robust Communications and Community Affairs Department for the Columbus Consolidated Government in Columbus, Georgia. The department will serve as the primary point of contact for internal and external communications, ensuring that messages are delivered effectively and consistently across all channels. The initiative seeks to improve transparency, public participation, and information dissemination, thereby fostering a stronger relationship between the city administration and its residents.

The initiative has the following primary objectives, which align with the stated goals of the department¹:

1. Create an exhaustive communications plan:

Formulate a strategic framework outlining the city administration's objectives, target audiences, key topic or messages, communication channels, and protocols for managing crisis communications.

2. Improve internal communication: Establish efficient channels of communication within the city administration to facilitate the flow of information, encourage collaboration, and guarantee consistent messaging between departments.

3. Enhance external outbound communication: Engage residents, businesses, and other stakeholders by implementing effective communication practices, leveraging existing tools such as the department's newsletter which has a distribution list of +12k and social media platforms. Provide precise and timely information regarding city services, initiatives, programs, and policies.

4. Strengthen media relations: Establish and maintain relationships with local media entities, such as newspapers, radio stations, and television networks, to proactively respond to media inquiries, distribute press releases, and coordinate media coverage of city events.

¹Office of Communications and Community Affairs, <https://www.columbusga.gov/communityaffairs>

TIMELINE & ACTION STEPS

SHORT-TERM GOALS/ACTIONS (YEAR 1)

Goal: Identify the gaps in communication between CCG and citizens by documenting all the ways CCG currently disseminates information and finding out how citizens want to receive their information.

Action Items:

- > Hire a firm to conduct an external communications audit. This will document all the different channels that are used to communicate with citizens.
 - > Example: Press Releases, websites, Facebook, LinkedIn, 311, phone app, kiosk, etc. as well as all the different pages that exist on the website and social media.
 - > The cities of Decatur, GA and Independence, MO have good examples showing the breadth and scope of this type of audit or assessment, outlining existing strengths, gaps, and making recommendations for a communications strategy moving forward.^{2,3}
 - > Consider incorporating responses from a Community Survey/Needs Assessment outlined in following ideas to determine what citizens need to know to make informed/engaged decisions.
- > Hire an public relations agency/consultant with defined objectives through a competitive bid process based on Audit/Needs Assessment
 - > Objectives may include: create a CCG style guide; update the website; unify the existing methods of communication under one brand
 - > When hiring, consider public relations companies with expertise in website building, brand planning, and government communications. Take into account elements including the company's track record, knowledge of the business, originality, and cultural fit with Columbus.
 - Recommended PR Agencies to work with that are local include:
 - Yalla PR Firm- Katie Bishop <https://www.yallapr.com/>
 - Media, Marketing and More-Marquette McKnight <https://mediamarketingandmore.com/home/home/>

²Communications Audit Recommendations for the City of Decatur, https://www.decaturga.com/sites/default/files/fileattachments/community_development/page/17051/decaturn_communications_audit_recommendations.pdf

³Review of External Communications for Independence, MO, https://www.ci.independence.mo.us/UserDocs/MgmtAnalyst/Final_Review_of_External_Communications_Audit_16-03.pdf

MEDIUM-TERM GOALS/ACTION ITEMS (YEARS 2-3)

Goal: Align cross-departmental communication and strategy within CCG and build a mutually beneficial relationship between the Department of Communication at Columbus State University (CSU) and Office of Communications and Community Affairs CCG.

Action Items:

- > Hold a government retreat with elected officials and CCG department heads to facilitate a SWOT analysis and talk about goals and priorities.
 - > Set a time ahead of budget prep time to hold retreat
 - > Coordinate with UGA's Carl Vinson Institute, Georgia Municipal Association (GMA), or comparable organization to facilitate
 - > Hold the retreat in an outside jurisdiction, if possible, so as to limit distractions of being close to home.
- > Establish a partnership with Columbus State University to create a pipeline of interns and have students/faculty help develop a Communication Strategy for CCG - as part of course for students to work on all semester as major project
 - > Connect with Communication Department Faculty- (Chair of the Department - Dr. Danna Gibson) and the Communications Department Advisory Board, which encompasses faculty members and key leaders from the community. Initial talks with this group have shown the department to be open and willing to partner.
 - > Consider potential in including Business and Marketing Faculty as well
 - > See APPENDIX: Columbus State University Internship Outline for sample program goals and more detailed steps in developing this initiative.

LONG-TERM GOALS/ACTION ITEMS (YEARS 3+)

Goal: Leverage foundational work to roll out a cohesive communication strategy across the city of Columbus.

Action Items:

- > Maintain and flesh out the activities established in years 1-3.
 - > Establish and maintain relationships with local media entities, such as newspapers, radio stations, and television networks, to proactively respond to media inquiries, distribute press releases, and coordinate media coverage of city events following a cohesive Communication Strategy
 - > Increase personnel within the Office of Communications and Cultural Affairs to meet the increased role the department plays in CCG's strategic community development efforts.

BUDGET

Item	Cost	Frequency
Consultant fees (audit, needs assessment, web development)	\$100,000	One-time
Public Relations Firm	\$150,000	Annual (could be just 1-2 years as internal team is augmented)
Mayor/Council/Staff Retreat	\$10,000	Annual
Undergraduate Intern	\$10,000 (\$12/hr for x 20 hrs/wk)	Annual
Graduate Intern	\$12,000 (\$15/hr for x 20 hrs/wk)	Annual

POSSIBLE FUNDING SOURCES

- > Advancing Georgia Civic Affairs Foundation: Georgia County Internship Program⁴
- > CCG Operating Budget

EXPECTED IMPACT:

- > Increased trust in city communications
- > Increased capacity within communications department, increasing the frequency and reliability of its messaging
- > Inclusion of diverse voices from across the city
- > Increased theoretical and practical skills for CSU communication students through valuable experiential learning opportunities while assisting the CCG Communications and Community Affairs Department with extra resources and new viewpoints

MEASURES OF SUCCESS:

- > Engagement Metrics across all platforms, including quantitative and qualitative analysis of engagement by demographics and geographic distribution.
- > Issues identified in the audit and needs assessment addressed.
- > Internal CCG employee survey of strengths and growth opportunities for inter-departmental communication.
- > Positive relationships developed with local media entities

⁴Advancing Georgia Civic Affairs Foundation: Georgia County Internship Program https://www.accg.org/caf_gcip.php



BIG IDEA 2

CONNECT COLUMBUS



DESCRIPTION

While Idea #1 focused on the 'Communications' aspect of CCG's Communications and Community Affairs Department, it is the aim of Idea #2- Connect Columbus to focus on the 'Community Affairs' aspect. Connect Columbus is a plan to foster stronger connections amongst the residents of Columbus, and between the residents and their government. As a vital bridge between residents, businesses, and local authorities, the Communications and Community Affairs Department should play an important role in enhancing all community members' overall sense of connection. The primary focus of this initiative is to create meaningful opportunities for engagement, decision-making and feedback. By actively involving community members and neighborhoods in its efforts, the department will ensure that policies, programs, and initiatives reflect residents' diverse needs, aspirations, and concerns. Through open dialogues, consultations, and inclusive events, the department empowers individuals and community organizations to impact the issues that matter most to them directly.

The initiative takes a multifaceted approach to the work of community engagement, employing various strategies to reach a wide range of community members. It encourages the utilization of both traditional and innovative communication channels to foster a two-way dialogue and encourage active participation. Moreover, it gives the Communications and Community Affairs Department the capacity to proactively collaborate with local schools, nonprofits, and other stakeholders to ensure that everyone has a voice in shaping the community's future.

To achieve its objectives, the Communications and Community Affairs Department must collaborate closely with other departments and agencies within the local government, forging strong partnerships to deliver effective and coordinated services. They also need to liaise with community leaders, neighborhood associations, and advisory boards to ensure that community perspectives are incorporated into policy development and service delivery. Finally, it is vital that the department works closely with businesses and local organizations to build strong partnerships and promote economic growth. The department can contribute to creating a vibrant and sustainable

local economy that benefits all community members by facilitating meaningful connections between the public and private sectors.

Another essential aspect of the Connect Columbus initiative is to celebrate Columbus's diverse cultures, promote social equity, and foster an inclusive environment where everyone feels valued and represented. The department can actively work to break down barriers, address systemic inequities, and promote social cohesion through targeted outreach efforts, cultural events, and diversity training programs.

Overall, the establishment of the Communications and Community Affairs Department represents a significant step forward in Columbus Consolidated government's commitment to democratic governance, active citizen participation, and community empowerment. By building its capacity to meet its full potential and placing the voices and needs of all residents at the forefront, this department will create a thriving, inclusive, and resilient community that all can be proud to call home.

SCOPE OF INITIATIVE

This initiative aims to provide the foundation and a strategy for building up a thriving Communications and Community Affairs Department that can successfully help Columbus residents connect with each other physically and emotionally. Its scope includes the following primary objectives:

1. Ask the community

As with any inclusive community engagement plan, gathering the input of residents is key to identifying the needs, desires, and dreams of the people who are the intended participants/recipients of services. A resident survey should be designed and implemented across all neighborhoods of Columbus. The scope of this survey should be wide, incorporating as many diverse demographics (age, race, economic status, etc.) as possible. The objective of the survey should include (but is not limited to) identifying:

- > Preferred modes of communication to receive news & events, and check of awareness of any channels of communication back to the city
- > Local businesses/artists/resources/organizations to highlight in a neighborhood asset map
- > Elements that residents love about their community, engendering community pride and gathering information for community planning purposes
- > Types of neighborhood events that residents would like to see in their community.

- > Resources that they would find useful (to be incorporated into events)
- > Potential Implementation Partners/Advisors:
 - > The National Community Survey is an example of an implementation partner who would be able to support the development and collection of responses.
 - > Community Heart & Soul is a resident-driven process that engages the entire population of a town in identifying what they love most about their community, what future they want for it, and how to achieve it. While Columbus is too large to be a part of the Community Heart & Soul seed grant program, it is an excellent resource to use to shape the involvement of community members in informing the future of a city.⁵

The community survey and needs assessment will serve as a basis for mid- and long-term action items. While it will be the start of a conversation, it should not be a stand-alone effort. Rather, it should be followed by continued mechanisms for inviting and actively collecting input from residents. It will also actively inform the initiatives in both other ideas presented by this group.

⁵Community Heart & Soul website with downloadable guide to introduce the process.
<https://www.communityheartandsoul.org/>

2. Develop personnel capacity

The capacity of the city must be developed to meet and deliver on the learnings from the community survey. A new Manager of Community Engagement position should be created, in addition to strategic partnerships and collaboration with other CCG departments and organizations in Columbus, such as Columbus 2025 and the Community Foundation of the Chattahoochee Valley.

- > The Parks and Rec department is a natural partner as this department has a geographic presence across the city and already produces programming with an ear attuned to community needs. The Department of Family Engagement is another willing partner with an aligned mission.
- > Community partnerships will be key to expanding the capacity of the community engagement team while it is in its development phase. See the Potential Partners for a full list, but we would highlight the alignment of this initiative with Columbus 2025's Vibrant and Connected Places workgroup as a natural strategic partner.

3. Make Space

Illuminate opportunities for residents to come together. Building on the feedback of the community survey, this initiative covers the development and implementation of a community engagement strategy incorporating community events that would allow for residents to meet, connect, share, celebrate, discover, and enjoy elements in all parts of Columbus. These events may be produced by the city of Columbus and also could be produced by the neighborhoods themselves, with city support. Through event sponsorships or a pool of grant funds that citizen groups can apply for to cover event expenses for community-led and organized events, the department can help empower the community to create grass-roots opportunities for engagement. The strategy should

include outreach efforts, cultural events, and diversity training programs that address systemic inequities and promote social cohesion. Educational efforts to increase residents' capacity to engage, such as the Citizen's Academy in Idea 3 - Experience Columbus 360, are important spaces to hold as well, and will prime the pump for future local leadership.

Community engagement events leverage natural connectors, such as the arts, cultural events/holidays, and food, to increase the beneficial outcomes for participants and the city overall. The Community Engagement events would serve multiple purposes:

- > Promote an area's assets, supporting partnerships with small businesses and community-based organizations, as local residents may or may not be familiar with resources already in their community.
- > Provide needed resources in a community by including the Mobile Resource Unit Brigade with relevant social services that are not already represented within a community (currently operating through the collaboration of multiple organizations around the city, including Parks & Rec, Valley Health Mobile Dental Unit, Piedmont Columbus's Mobile Health Clinic, and more)
- > Support communication efforts by the city to distribute information to residents.
- > Engage with residents to gather feedback to the city (via surveys conducted during events relevant to the event itself or other initiatives). Creative ideas should be used to increase participation (ex. leverage event photographers to provide a photo of participants as an incentive for completing the survey, discount tickets for food vendors)
- > Themed events that arise from community surveys can be used to connect residents with common interests.

TIMELINE & ACTION STEPS

SHORT-TERM GOALS/ACTIONS (YEAR 1)

Goal: Identify the assets and gaps to lay the foundation for responsive, inclusive community engagement plans through a participatory process.

Action Items:

- > Identify the team that will be responsible for driving work forward.
 - > Steering committee of internal staff and local organizations with aligned missions (Dep. of Family Engagement, Dept. of Communications, Dept. of Parks and Recreation/Cultural Affairs, Columbus 2025's Vibrant and Connect Places workgroup)
 - > Build partnerships with regional, and national organizations (Community Heart & Soul, National Community Survey)
- > Hire a firm to conduct a community survey with residents, community associations, CCG department staff, and service providers; and provide a comprehensive report.
 - > Develop survey questions and a community conversation facilitation plan that is transparent in its efforts to reach a wide and deep representation from all of Columbus's neighborhoods, differentiating recruitment tactics by the community.
 - > Conduct outreach to neighborhood residents to inform them about the initiative and involve them in the effort. An important component of community engagement work is trust building. It will be important to identify community connectors who can help build trust and relationships with communities that have been historically disenfranchised.
 - Door-to-door conversations
 - Residential Infographics, direct mail communications, yard signs, neighborhood-centric banners
 - Social Media Posts
 - Partnership Marketing
 - Church announcements, service clubs, schools, probation officers
 - Public forum/ focus groups
- > Present the results in a variety of ways, including residents' stories, quantitative analysis of the responses, opportunities for growth, and suggestions for achieving a more connected Columbus.
- > Create a job description with clear objectives and mandate for the Manager of Community Engagement position. (While there may be qualified candidates within the city government, we would highly suggest a search that encourages applicants from outside the city government with expertise in community engagement and event production.)

MEDIUM-TERM GOALS/ACTIONS (YEARS 2-3)

Goal: Increase the Capacity of the City of Columbus Government to make meaningful connections and create momentum within the community.

Action Items:

- > Hire a full-time Manager of Community Engagement within the Columbus Consolidated Government
- > Develop a Community Engagement Strategic Plan based on results from community surveys.
- > Create pool of funds and process for community groups to apply for resources to produce engagement events
 - > Utilize partnerships with local businesses to build a sponsor base and vendor pool
 - > See how Boise, ID ensures events benefit the community through their sponsorship request form⁶
- > Build a comprehensive calendar of events produced by city, arts & culture institutions, and community groups
 - > Incorporate strategic marketing
 - > Consider access to events (physical, financial, cultural relevance) when programming.
 - > Include feedback mechanisms to learn and build off initial efforts.

LONG-TERM GOALS/ACTIONS (3+ YEARS)

Goal: Implement the vision outlined in the Community engagement plan and produce city-led events to fill any gaps between the events produced by community groups.

Action Steps:

- > Empower Communications and Community Affairs Department to consolidate efforts of foundational partnerships into a sustainable and specialized team.
- > Produce signature events that promote connections between neighborhoods
 - > Sample: City of Chamblee, GA, Community Engagement Department⁷

⁶City of Boise, ID <https://www.cityofboise.org/departments/community-engagement/sponsorship-request/>

⁷Chamblee, GA <https://www.chambleega.com/708/Community-Engagement>

BUDGET

Item	Cost	Frequency
Community Survey & Needs Assessment (Development & Implementation)	\$100,000	One-time
Manager of Community Engagement Salary (incl. Benefits and extra costs)	\$68,000	Annual
Seed Funding for Events Grant Pool	\$10,000	Annual
Additional Operating/Event Costs	\$100,000	Annual
Graduate Intern	\$12,000 (\$15/hr for x 20 hrs/wk)	Annual

POSSIBLE FUNDING SOURCES

- > City General Fund/ Hotel Motel Tax funding for signature events
- > Public/Private Partnerships and Local Businesses Sponsorships
- > Earned Revenue from community engagement events
 - > Vendor fees
 - > Entrance tickets

EXPECTED IMPACT:

SHORT-TERM IMPACT:

- > More comprehensive data with which to make strategic decisions in order to address the issues faced by the community.
- > New and expanded channels of communication between CCG and citizens

LONG-TERM IMPACT

- > Increased trust between the community and CCG
- > Community Engagement increases the visibility and understanding of issues and empowers communities to have their say over decisions that affect their lives, their towns, cities, and neighborhoods.
- > Increased community satisfaction with CCG's performance.

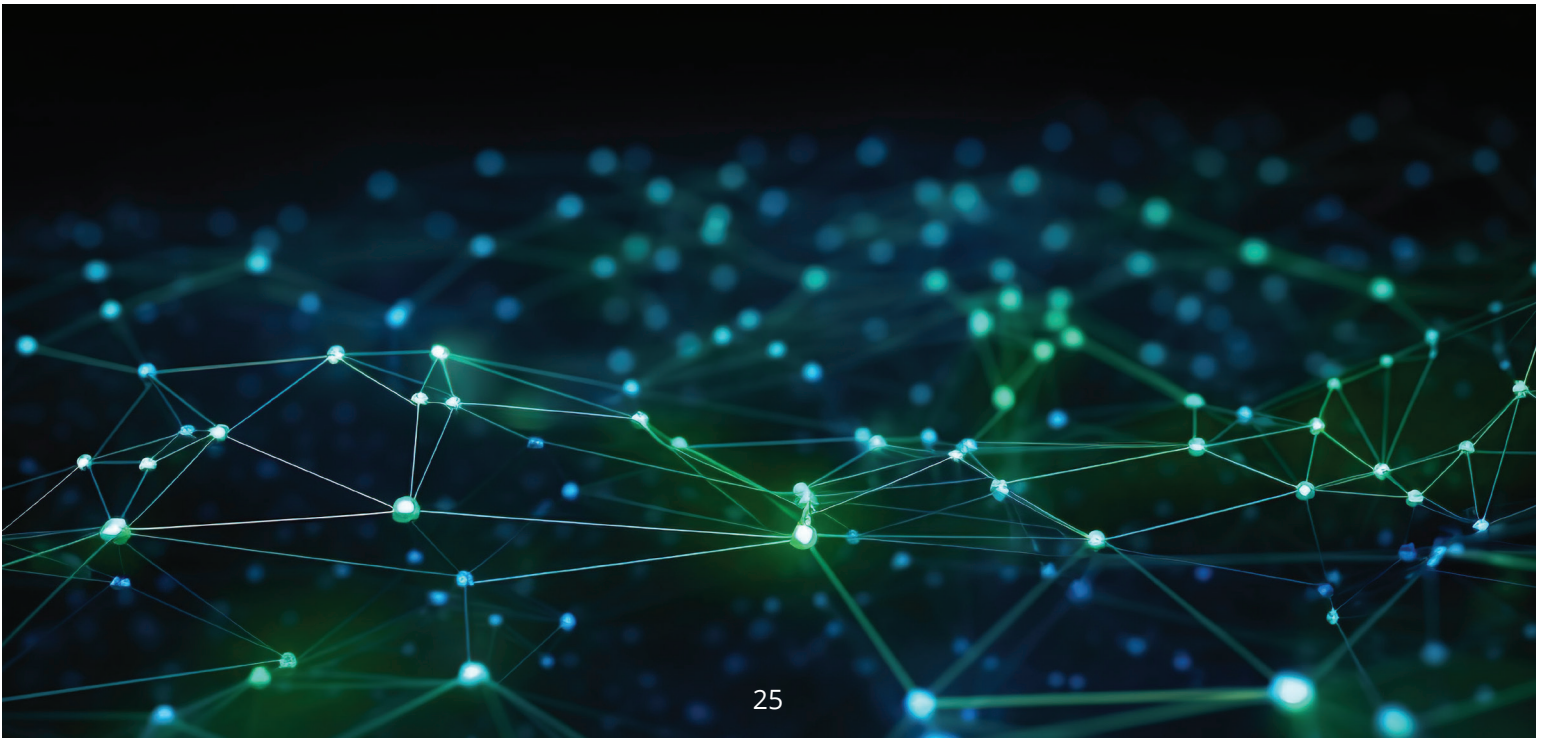
MEASURES OF SUCCESS:

- > The number of engagement steps in a planning project: Are residents engaged only in the public hearing stage or also before?
- > People involved in the design process: were only city government staff involved, or also residents and stakeholders?
- > Engagement metrics including the number of survey participants (target percentage of population from each district, across diverse demographics), attendance at event, interaction with communication forums (social media)
- > Analysis of direct feedback through surveys and event evaluations (Net Promoter Scores, event ratings/satisfaction scores, ratio of positive experience anecdotes compared to complaints)
- > Correlated decrease in numbers of complaints/ feedback in Council meetings, neighborhood watch meetings, etc.



BIG IDEA 3

EXPERIENCE COLUMBUS 360



DESCRIPTION

Experience Columbus 360 is an innovative approach designed to enhance citizen engagement and empower residents through a unique blend of experiential learning opportunities. Experience Columbus 360 takes a fresh and dynamic approach to community involvement, providing hands-on experiences and practical applications to residents of all ages. Experience Columbus 360 offers immersive programs across multiple fields, including education, politics, medicine, criminal justice, arts and culture, entrepreneurship, communications, and more, through strategic partnerships with local businesses, institutions, and community organizations.

This initiative will promote equal opportunity for all individuals to engage in their city by ensuring accessibility for all residents. Experience Columbus 360 fosters a mindset of lifelong learning, enabling participants to continually develop their skills, adapt to evolving industries, and contribute to the overall prosperity of Columbus, GA.

Through hands-on learning experiences and collaboration with local experts, Experience Columbus 360 catalyzes personal growth and community

leadership. Participants gain valuable insights, acquire practical skills, and expand their horizons, unlocking their full potential and becoming active contributors to the community. Experience Columbus 360 revolutionizes the professional and civic landscape by empowering and engaging the diverse residents of Columbus, GA, creating a thriving and inclusive environment for all. We are confident that this effort will use the power of culture to uplift, revitalize, and tie together the community.

SCOPE OF INITIATIVE

Experience Columbus 360 is an ambitious initiative to engage and empower residents of all ages in Columbus, GA, through professional and experiential learning opportunities. Implementing this comprehensive program involves several key components that will be executed through a series of action steps over a specified timeline.

1. Community Needs Assessment:

As with any inclusive community engagement, as previously outlined in Idea 2 - Connect Columbus, the first crucial step in engaging citizens is conducting an initial Community Needs Assessment to gain a thorough understanding of the specific needs and aspirations of the community. A well-designed survey and needs assessment will serve both initiatives, in addition to other CCG needs. This assessment should involve gathering feedback and input from residents, community organizations, and stakeholders to inform the development and direction of future initiatives.

2. Youth Advisory Council:

To ensure the voices of young residents are heard and considered, we recommend that the Youth Advisory Council be re-invigorated. The council was disbanded during the COVID-19 pandemic, but has not been re-started as the rest of life has returned to 'normal'. Prior to the pandemic, the council had an average of 75 members with leadership structure and elected caucus representatives for each grade (6th - 12th). Moving forward, this council should provide a platform for high school students to actively participate in shaping the initiative and providing valuable insights from their perspective.

Composed of a diverse group of motivated and passionate high school students, the Youth Advisory

Council (YAC) should play a vital role in shaping the direction and focus of initiatives for youth in the Columbus, GA, community. YAC members collaborate with community leaders, administrators, and professionals to provide valuable insights, offer innovative solutions, and advocate for the needs and interests of their peers.

YAC states a mission to broaden the scope of youth leadership in Columbus, Georgia through volunteerism, service and initiatives that are directed towards allowing youth input into policy issues, identifying youth issues, and participating in the development of positive solutions. Through regular meetings, workshops, and engagement with local experts, the YAC members gain valuable leadership and communication skills while deepening their understanding of various fields and industries. They serve as ambassadors for Experience Columbus 360, actively promoting the initiative and its opportunities within their schools and communities.

The Youth Advisory Council also acts as a bridge between high school students and the wider community by fostering relationships that enhance the learning experiences offered by Experience Columbus 360. By engaging with local businesses, organizations, and educational institutions, council members develop and implement programs that benefit their fellow students.

The Youth Advisory Council is a testament to the belief that young people have unique perspectives and untapped potential to drive positive change in their communities and become the young professionals that Columbus desperately needs to retain. Experience Columbus 360 values the

voices of high school students and recognizes the importance of including them as active participants in shaping the future of education and experiential learning in Columbus, GA.

3. Citizens Academy:

Implementing a Citizens Academy would allow residents aged 18 and older to better understand how city government works. This program will provide education on various aspects of the community, including public K-12 education, environmental health, public safety, citizen services, finance, Fort Moore, and city planning. It will differ from similar programs currently offered in the community by its overall mission and being more accessible to those wishing to participate. This program will be offered at no expense to participants and the schedule is intended to make attendance less burdensome.

Open to all residents eager to actively participate in shaping their city, the Citizens Academy will offer a unique opportunity to learn about the inner workings of local government. Through interactive workshops, informative sessions, and collaborative discussions, participants gain a comprehensive understanding of the decision-making processes, policies, and initiatives that shape their community and local governance. By fostering this open dialogue, the Citizens Academy offers transparency to citizens, which creates a strong foundation for collaboration and mutual understanding between citizens and their elected representatives.

In addition to its educational focus, the Citizens Academy would build camaraderie among participants and within the city. Through networking events, team-building activities, and community projects, residents forge meaningful connections with fellow participants and develop a shared sense of pride in their city. This camaraderie strengthens

community bonds and fosters a collaborative spirit beyond the Citizens Academy program.

The Citizens Academy empowers residents to become informed and engaged citizens, actively participating in the governance and growth of their city as future volunteers for various boards, commissions and authorities. By providing a platform for feedback, fostering learning opportunities about city government, and promoting camaraderie, the Citizens Academy is a catalyst for positive change, community building, and collective empowerment in Columbus, GA.

4. City Council On Tour:

To reach citizens where they are, the City Council should host meetings around the Columbus, GA, community. The goal of this program is to take the council doing the public's business in public one step further by having the City Council go out and conduct their standard business in the community. The City Council On Tour program aims to engage citizens who may not be able or willing to attend council meetings in the City Services Center.

We recommend that the City Council hold their regularly scheduled Council Meetings at various locations around the city of Columbus, GA, once per quarter. This approach will demonstrate the City Council's commitment to its citizens by meeting them where they are. The locations for these "On Tour" sites would include local recreation centers, high schools, and/or other public locations. These City Council meetings would be similar to current meetings as they would still be aired and recorded via CCG-TV. City Councilors could enhance the Tour by using the public transit system, METRA, to get to the various locations for the offsite Council Meetings.

For the meetings that are hosted at various high schools, it would be ideal for those meetings to

take place during the school day. These school-hosted meetings would provide a great opportunity to introduce the district's School Board member representing the district and to promote programs like the Mayor's Summer Youth Employment Program, Elections & Registration Office encouraging voter registration, etc. Each district has roughly one high school, resulting in every MCSD student experiencing this program at least once during their Junior or Senior year of High School. This program would also introduce basic municipal civics education to area high schoolers, in an accessible format, at no cost to the school district.

5. Neighborhood Navigators & Neighborhood Planning Units:

As of summer 2023, CCG is hiring for a Neighborhood Navigator position, with the mandate to "hold regular meetings within city council districts to present speakers from various agencies, explain programs and services available, and must be the support and conduit for connecting citizens with programs and services to improve the quality of life for families and children"⁸. This is an important first step in increasing connectivity between city government and communities around community needs and assets. This group recommends developing a team of Neighborhood Navigators - one for each city council district to ensure equitable representation in each.

With increased capacity from a team of Neighborhood Navigators, we recommend the establishment of a corresponding Neighborhood Planning Unit (NPU). NPUs have been used in communities of varying sizes to formalize a process for citizens to vote on and provide recommendations to the mayor's office and City Council on community

needs and desires including zoning, land use, alcohol licenses issued to local businesses, and other civic policy proposals. NPU recommendations are non-binding advice that give city leaders a sense of how the public feels about policy decisions they're tasked with making. NPUs may also be leveraged to host events for their district, bringing a sense of local energy and pride. Membership in an NPU is open to all residents and business owners in that district, with internal elections held to determine leadership positions within the NPU. Implementing a Neighborhood Planning Units system (volunteer-based) with the support of the Neighborhood Navigator (paid city position) establishes an organizational structure that has a good degree of sustainability and accountability.

The collective work of Neighborhood Navigators and NPUs promote transparency, collaboration, and shared responsibility between the city administration and its diverse neighborhoods through regular feedback, updates, and community events. This grassroots approach to local governance strengthens the community fabric and paves the way for a more inclusive and prosperous future for all residents of Columbus, GA.

By implementing these five key components over the defined timeline, we believe that Experience Columbus 360 could bring a transformative change in Columbus, GA. Experience Columbus 360 will educate and empower residents, foster community engagement, develop future community leaders, and address key areas such as education, public safety, entrepreneurship, and governance, ultimately leading to a more inclusive and prosperous city for all.

⁸Neighborhood Navigator Job Description, Accessed Aug. 6, 2023.

<https://www.governmentjobs.com/careers/columbusga/jobs/4084557/neighborhood-navigator>

TIMELINE & ACTION STEPS

SHORT-TERM GOALS/ACTIONS (YEAR 1)

Goal: Find out what information citizens need to know, how they would like to access information, and revitalize channels of communication and participation.

Action Items:

- > Leverage information collected through a Community Survey & Needs Assessment as outlined in the previous idea.
- > Revitalize the Youth Advisory Council - the Youth Advisory Council will both be a valuable source of information and a potential resource to support the implementation of the Community Survey & Needs Assessment.
 - > Following the previous structure, regular meeting times for the YAC will be held every 4th Monday of each month during the school year
 - > The meetings take place at the Citizens Service Center in Council Chambers from 6:00-8:00 PM.
 - > Notify schools and community organizations serving youth of the new council meetings and structure, and open application/nomination process.
 - > YAC will consist of 45-50 individuals representing all of the districts and high schools in the Columbus, GA community
 - > YAC would be the responsibility of the Deputy City Manager's office, ensuring that their perspectives and ideas are included in the decision-making process of city government.

MEDIUM-TERM GOALS/ACTIONS (YEARS 2-3)

Goal: Increase public knowledge and capacity by establishing several experiential education programs.

Action Items:

- > Implement a Citizens Academy;
 - > This program will sit within the CCG's Communications & Community Affairs Department, as it aligns with the expanded mission outlined in Idea 2 - Connect Columbus to make spaces for citizens to connect amongst themselves and increase transparency of local governance
 - > Suggested Guidelines for the Columbus Citizens Academy
 - Applicants must be at least 18 years old.
 - Participants must be Columbus/Muscogee County residents or business owners in Columbus/Muscogee County.
 - Class size of 20 participants.
 - > Most cities and counties offer this program at no cost to participants, and there is negligible cost for the city to execute the program.
 - Comparable programs schedule this one evening a week for 8-10 weeks or one evening a month for 8-10 months. Timing is traditionally 6-8 PM to accommodate a traditional work schedule for program participants, allow time for transit, and prevent incurring food/beverage expenses⁹.

⁹Milton Citizen Government Academy. <https://www.miltonga.gov/residents/citizens-government-academy>

- The expectation is that format, schedule, and groupings will change slightly over the first several iterations.
 - See Appendix C for suggested session outline
- > Grow team of Neighborhood Navigators
 - > Hire a Neighborhood Navigator for each district. The Neighborhood Navigator (and NPU initiative) would ideally sit within the Columbus Consolidated Government's Department of Family Connection, as the job description aligns with the department's vision and objectives.
 - > Take City Council out into the community
 - > Set meeting schedule for the year
 - > Develop supplementary material to share with teachers, program leaders in advance of meetings to prepare students or other potential audience for what to expect and how to understand the procedures of the meeting. Can be digital to keep costs low.
 - > Ensure that an A/V team is prepared to set up the proper recording equipment to meet the streaming/recording requirements

LONG-TERM GOALS/ACTIONS (YEARS 3+)

Goal: Find out what information citizens need to know, how they would like to access information, and revitalize channels of communication and participation.

Action Items:

- > Implement Neighborhood Planning Units
 - > Leverage the capacity and groundwork of Neighborhood Navigators, establish

Neighborhood Planning Units (NPU) that represent each of the City Council districts.

- > Use examples of structure, process, best practices¹⁰, and toolkits¹¹ from cities of Atlanta, GA¹² and Boise, ID to inform and right-size the initiative for Columbus. From these examples, develop a neighborhood association toolkit program where neighborhoods are provided with tools to activate and engage residents within the neighborhood.
- > Led by internally elected members dedicated neighborhood champions, each NPU plays a vital role in ensuring the voices of their respective districts are heard. We suggest that leadership roles serve a two-year term to maintain continuity and stability, and have completed the Citizens Academy or Leadership Columbus.
- > Establish channels of communication from NPU to City Council and Mayor's Office
 - > Neighborhood Navigators and leadership from NPU should serve as a voice at city council meetings and/or advise city officials for that specific neighborhood.
 - > Carve out time in Council meetings and meetings with the Mayor to allow for Neighborhood Navigator and NPU leadership to work with the city to identify and implement small community projects that increase neighborhood quality of life, including sidewalk connectivity, tree planting, park amenities, beautification grants, public art installations, etc.

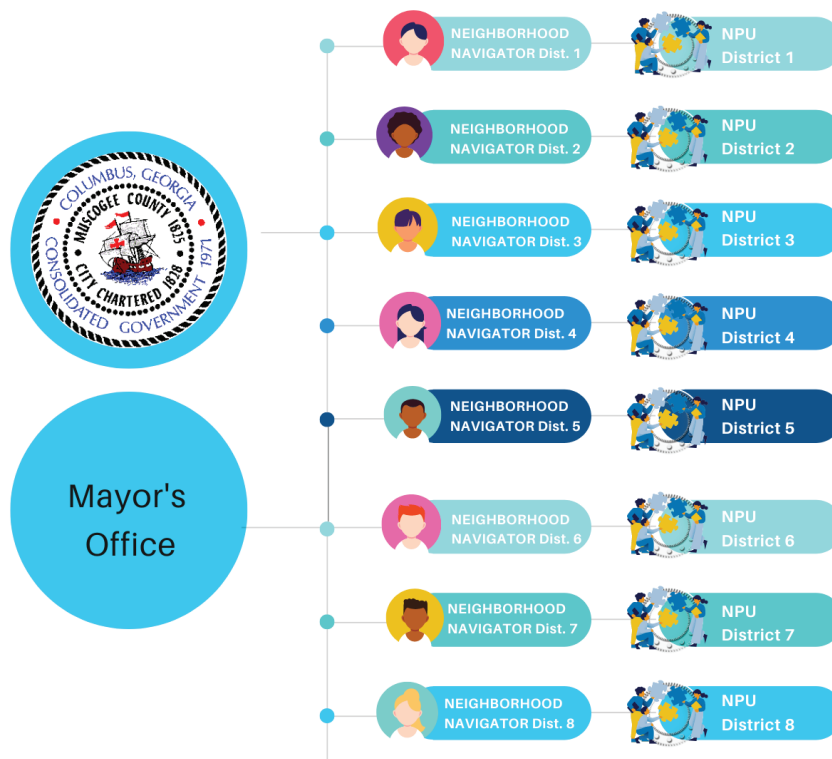
¹⁰ Best Practices for Neighborhood Planning Units

¹¹ City of Boise, Energize Initiative, Neighborhood Association Toolkit. <https://www.cityofboise.org/programs/energize/>

¹² A Guide to Atlanta's NPU System. <https://atlanta.capitalnews.org/atlanta-neighborhood-planning-unit/>

NEIGHBORHOOD PLANNING UNIT

Organizational Chart & Channels of Communication



- > Provide resources to facilitate Neighborhood Navigators and NPUs to host community events within their districts.
- > These events allow neighbors to come together, share ideas, and celebrate the unique characteristics of their communities. This is the

space where grassroots leadership can flourish. Additionally, they serve as platforms for raising awareness about local issues, promoting civic participation, and strengthening each district's sense of belonging and pride.

BUDGET

Item	Cost	Frequency
Youth Advisory Council (public transportation stipend, refreshments, etc)	\$5,000 (\$500/meeting)	Annual
Citizens Academy (food and beverage, shirts for participants, and graduation reception)	\$5,000 - \$7,000	Per Cohort
City Council on Tour (AV tech costs)	\$2,000 (\$500/event)	Annual
Neighborhood Navigator Salary (incl. Benefits and extra costs)	\$55,000/employee (8 total)	Annual
NPU resource budget	\$16,000 (\$2,000/district)	Annual

POSSIBLE FUNDING SOURCES

- > National League of Cities offers grant opportunities for innovative initiatives advancing equity and engagement. www.nlc.org
- > There are also numerous other opportunities throughout the year from Georgia Municipal Association¹³.
- > Targeted/aligned solicitation from community interest groups:
 - > Ex. In kind donations from local restaurants to provide light refreshments for the Citizens Academy
 - > Ex. Local Realtors Association sponsoring part of the Citizens Academy as an opportunity for new residents to actively plug into the community

EXPECTED IMPACT:

The expected impact of Experience Columbus 360 is to create comprehensive engagement opportunities for all residents, businesses, and members of the community. There is a disconnect between community need and government capacity, as well as a need for strengthened relationships and civic engagement within Columbus neighborhoods. The intent is to provide civic involvement opportunities across all age groups, socio-economic status, and backgrounds as well as bring city services into communities. By creating programming that is geared towards both outreach and volunteer involvement, a more proactive, two-way engagement is created. Establishing multiple channels for communication allows for greater civic engagement in local governance, fostering

an important sense of belonging. Programs that require involvement from residents will need to be heavily marketed and communicated. Making the Citizens Academy a prerequisite for a leadership role in the Neighborhood Champions/NPU program is not intended to be exclusionary, but rather ensure that those individuals are set up for success with greater context and working knowledge of city government operations. The NPUs would serve as platforms for residents to provide valuable feedback and updates to the Mayor and City Council about their specific areas. This structure facilitates a more direct and localized communication channel between the community and its elected representatives.

¹³ <https://gacities.com/Resources/Grants-and-Award-Opportunities.aspx>

MEASURES OF SUCCESS:

The success of this initiative could be measured by surveying the outcomes of citizen engagement in the suggested community-based programs. This survey should include a report the following metrics:

- > The number of participants involved in the community needs assessment
- > The amount of data collected by the community needs assessment
- > The number of Graduates of the Youth Advisory Council Program
- > The number of Youth Advisory Council Program Alumni that get involved in CCG as volunteers and employees
- > Number of Graduates of the Citizens Academy
- > The number of Citizens Academy Alumni that get involved with CCG as volunteers and employees
- > The number of citizens in attendance for City Council on tour events compared with City Council

meetings held at the Citizen Services Center

- > The amount of dialogue that takes place during City Council On Tour events compared with City Council meetings held at the Citizen Services Center
- > The number of districts with active Neighborhood Planning Units
- > The quality of life in districts with active Neighborhood Planning Units pre-and post-implementation of the existence of the NPU

Using data such as these to gauge community engagement via metrics associated with things like the involvement of individuals in community-based programs and the rates of newly engaged contributors to local governments indicates that citizens feel connected to the community and can contribute to the decision-making process.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Mayor Skip Henderson

Isaiah Hugley, City Manager, Columbus Consolidated Government

Lisa Goodwin, Deputy City Manager, Columbus Consolidated Government

Teasha Johnson, Director of Communications and Community Affairs, Columbus Consolidated Government

Zoe Hightower, Director of Family Engagement, Columbus Consolidated Government

Robert Scott, Director of Community Reinvestment and Real Estate, Columbus Consolidated Government

Holli Browder, Director of Parks and Recreation, Columbus Consolidated Government

Peter Bowden and Ashley Waitena, Visit Columbus

Lisa Thomas-Cutts, Keep Columbus Beautiful

CSU Communication Department

APPENDIX A:

RFP SELECTION AND IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

- > **Create a thorough RFP document that defines the project's goals, specifications, and assessment standards.**
 - > a. Provide explicit information about the functionality, brand identity, messaging, and design components you want for the website.
 - > b. Establish a timetable for the proposal evaluation process and specify clear submission deadlines.
- > **Review and analyze the submitted proposals in accordance with the predetermined criteria, which include experience, knowledge, approach, innovation, and cost.**
 - > a. Create a shortlist of the best candidates, and then interview or present them in-depth to gauge their comprehension of the project and their capacity to adhere to the city's needs.
 - > b. Take into account asking for case studies, client testimonials, and portfolios to further assess the company's prior work and client happiness.
- > **Contract Negotiation and Agreement:**
 - > Best Practice Contract Negotiation Steps:
 - a. After choosing a qualified company, begin contract discussions to specify the project's specifics, scope, deliverables, deadlines, payment terms, and any appropriate confidentiality agreements.
 - b. Ensure that all legal and administrative requirements are completed, including adherence to local laws and procurement rules.
 - c. Schedule a project launch meeting with the chosen public relations agency to introduce key players and go over the project's goals, objectives, and expectations.
 - d. Work together to create a project plan with milestones, due dates, and communication guidelines.
 - e. Establish the roles and duties of the project teams for the city and the public relations agency.
- > **Engage in a brand discovery process to comprehend how Columbus, Georgia is now perceived and to determine the ideal brand positioning and values.**
 - > a. Work together with the public relations company to create a thorough brand strategy that is in line with the city's vision, objectives, and target market.
- > **Website Development:**
 - > a. Collaborate closely with the public relations agency to design and create a new website for Columbus, Georgia Consolidated Government that reflects the brand strategy and includes a user-friendly layout, responsive design, and pertinent information.
 - > b. Ensure that the website has all necessary components, including interactive aspects to include the community, online services, information resources, and news updates.
- > **Image and Branding:**
 - > a. Work with the PR agency to develop a visual identity and branding principles that are true to Columbus, Georgia.
 - > b. Create a thorough toolset for your brand that includes logos, color schemes, fonts, a photography aesthetic, and other design components.
- > **Launch and Promotion:**
 - > a. Plan and carry out a strategic launch of the new website and brand, including press

releases, social media engagement, targeted advertising campaigns, and neighborhood outreach.

- > b. Keep an eye on the website's functionality and collect user feedback to make the necessary alterations and enhancements.
- > **Ongoing Support and Evaluation:**
 - > a. Set up a post-launch support mechanism with the PR agency to handle any changes or technical problems that arise with the website.
 - > b. Consistently assess the success of the new

website, brand, and overall communication initiatives using indicators including website traffic, user interaction, media attention, and public perception.

- > **Review and Continuous Improvement:**
 - > a. Conduct routine evaluations to determine the success of the public relations firm's efforts and pinpoint areas in need of development.
 - > b. Apply feedback and lessons learned to improve upcoming communication projects and strategies.

APPENDIX B: COLUMBUS STATE UNIVERSITY INTERNSHIP OUTLINE

PROGRAM GOALS FOR INTERNSHIP PROGRAM WITH COLUMBUS STATE UNIVERSITY:

1. Offer hands-on experience: Give CSU communication students real-world exposure to a government organization's professional communications environment.
2. Support the CCG Communications and Community Affairs Department by using skilled interns to help the division carry out its communication plans and projects.
3. Encourage cooperation: To improve the overall communications initiatives of the city, encourage cooperation and knowledge exchange between CSU academics, students, and CCG staff.

CREATING THE PARTNERSHIP WITH COLUMBUS STATE:

1. Identify the important parties: Discuss the relationship and establish roles and expectations with appropriate academics from the CSU Department of Communication and

representatives from the CCG Communications and Community Affairs Department.

2. Determine the areas within the CCG Communications and Community Affairs Department where interns can effectively participate, such as social media management, content development, media relations, internal communications, or graphic design. b. Identify internship possibilities.
3. Create internship roles by writing detailed job descriptions that outline duties, necessary abilities, and learning objectives for CSU communication students.
4. Establish the timetable: Decide on the length and timing of the internship program while taking the CSU academic calendar and the requirements of the CCG Communications and Community Affairs Department into consideration.

INTERN RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION:

1. Work with CSU's Department of Communication to promote internship opportunities and connect with qualified students. This could be filtered through the department's Non-Profit and Civic Engagement Center which exists to bridge the gap between the community and the department¹⁴. Engage with CSU faculty members and career services as well.
2. Make the internships known: Use departmental publications, university career websites, and social media to promote the internships and boost student applications.
3. Establish a proper application procedure that includes submitting resumes, cover letters, and any other necessary supporting documents. Conduct interviews to choose interns based on their credentials, abilities, and suitability for the department's requirements.

SAMPLE STRUCTURE OF THE INTERNSHIP PROGRAM TO UTILIZE:

1. Orientation and onboarding: Give interns a thorough orientation during which they are made aware of the objectives and current initiatives of the CCG Communications and Community Affairs Department. Introduce them to the procedures, equipment, and communication methods used by the department.
2. Choose mentors: Each intern should be paired with a designated mentor from the CCG Communications and Community Affairs Department who can help them learn, support them, and provide guidance. (Perhaps the

mentors could come from other departments within CCG due to their only being one person working in the communication department at this time)

3. Specific tasks and projects: Assign interns to ongoing tasks or projects that are in line with their abilities and interests. Deliverables and expectations should be made clear, and chances for skill improvement and advancement should be offered.
4. Opportunities for training and learning: Arrange workshops, seminars, or training sessions for interns to improve their knowledge and abilities in areas relating to public relations, digital marketing, government communications, and other relevant subjects.
5. Performance reviews should be conducted on a regular basis to gauge interns' advancement, offer helpful criticism, and acknowledge exceptional achievements. To make the most of their learning, encourage introspection and goal-setting.

COLLABORATION AND KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE:

1. Schedule regular check-ins and meetings with interns to discuss tasks, offer direction, and promote collaboration. Encourage open dialogue and information exchange.
2. Joint efforts and projects: Look for chances for interns and CCG professionals to work together on particular initiatives, campaigns, or events, allowing for the cross-pollination of ideas and knowledge.
3. Guest lectures and workshops: Arrange for CCG officials to provide guest lectures or

¹⁴ CSU Communication Department Website, which gives more insight to the NPACE Center and Faculty information. <https://www.columbusstate.edu/communication/npace/>

workshops to CSU communication students, giving them insights into civic participation, public administration, and government communications.

4. Participation in professional activities: Encourage interns to go to communication-related conferences or events to broaden their network and learn about best practices and current trends in the sector.

IN ORDER TO EVALUATE THE PERFORMANCE OF THE INTERNSHIP PROGRAM AND PINPOINT AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT, INPUT FROM INTERNS, CCG EMPLOYEES, AND CSU FACULTY

MEMBERS INVOLVED IN THE RELATIONSHIP SHOULD BE COLLECTED AND INITIAL CONVERSATIONS SHOW THAT THIS IS FEASIBLE.

1. Program modifications: Adjust internship positions, learning objectives, or program structure as appropriate in light of comments received and lessons learned.
2. Ongoing contact: Keep lines of communication open between the departments of communication at the CCG and the CSU in order to strengthen the partnership, handle issues, and look into new prospects for cooperation.

APPENDIX C: CITIZENS ACADEMY SUGGESTED SESSION OUTLINE

The suggestions below are derived from reviewing departments within the city and grouping them based on themes. Additionally, this curriculum supports the transparency and communication efforts of the city as mentioned in idea 1 - Communicate Columbus.

> Session 1: Orientation

- > The City Manager will act as the host of this session.
- > Orientation from the City Manager, an overview of roles and functions of departments.
- > City Clerk - FOIA- Open Records
- > Use IT to introduce GIS and help find participants' districts
- > Introduce citizens to their City Councilors, School Board Members, etc.

> Session 2: Education

- > The Muscogee County School District (MSCD) Superintendent will act as the host of this session.
- > This session would include a review of all local public K-12 schools, centers, and magnets; and discuss the unique relationship with The Columbus Museum & Chattahoochee Valley Libraries (CVL) - Seven physical branches, two bookmobiles, and two automated 24-hour library kiosks.

> Session 3: Environmental Health

- > Keep Columbus Beautiful and/or Public Works will act as the host of this session.
- > Public Works - Waste Collection, Recycling, Landfills, Rainwater Division
- > Columbus Water Works

-
- > **Session 4: Public Safety**
 - > Interim Police Chief, Sheriff, or Fire Chief could act as the host/hosts for this session.
 - > Fire/EMS/911/Police/Sheriff
 - > **Session 5: Citizens Services**
 - > 311 could act as the host of this session
 - > This session would include an overview of Elections and Registrations, WIA, Parks & Recs, Extension
 - > **Session 6: Finance The Deputy City Manager of Finance, Planning, and Development will act as the host of this session**
 - > Finance and Budget / Tax Commissioner / Tax Assessor / Internal Audit
 - > A review of the budgeting process & explain how financial health and economic prosperity are critical to an accountable and responsive government.
 - > **Session 7: Ft. Moore**
 - > Visit and/or Overview of the Relationship between Fort Moore and the city of Columbus, GA
 - > **Session 8: City Planning**
 - > The City Planning Department would act as host for this session
 - > Planning, Inspections and Code, Community Reinvestment, Engineering
 - > **Session 9: Public Safety**
 - > Animal Control/Division of Family & Children Services/Homeland Security
 - > **Session 10: Graduation**
 - > The Mayor's Office would act as the host of this session.
 - > This session would include:
 - > Recognition before City Council by City Manager.
 - > HR Representation - Employment
 - > All other Volunteer Opportunities (for Board Appointments, etc.)
- 

SECTION

2



SILICON RIVER

CHALLENGE QUESTION

How can Columbus/Muscogee County leverage our existing assets in order to develop innovative approaches that inspire local entrepreneurship and attract investment from diverse types of industry that fit our community?

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Founder and CEO, Bridgepath CFO Solutions, Columbus

Richard Taylor

Founder and Managing Partner, ARRC Capital Partners, Atlanta

DJ Waller

Governmental Relations Associate, Georgia Municipal Association, Atlanta

INTRODUCTION

Columbus, Georgia has a history of supporting big ideas: safely securing workers' money, financial protection when medical situations occur, a cure-all medicinal drink, damming the Chattahoochee to power mills and later blowing them up to encourage recreation. The region is now emerging as a tech destination with the U.S. Army Robotics Requirements Division at Fort Moore, a new focus on the intersection of business and technology at Columbus State University, two top 100 engineering schools within 100 miles and semiconductor manufacturing opportunities that could impact the region for generations.

These tech resources combined with entrepreneurs ready to invest in the next great idea is reminiscent of a community and business ecosystem, 2,500 miles to the west: Silicon Valley. This group's name – Silicon River – evokes that community and the asset that so defines the Columbus region: the Chattahoochee River.

Creating a business environment where Columbus can leverage these rich tech resources to be the home of the next world-changing idea is paramount to its future growth. As such, Silicon River proposes a strategic plan that updates the business recruitment model; ensures workers are educated and ready to work; and offers compelling opportunities for a new generation of entrepreneurs.

THE BIG THREE

Big Idea 1: River Valley Joint Development Authority

Enhance, restructure and rebrand the Columbus/Muscogee County approach to attracting prospective industry.

The Columbus region offers resources to be a desirable destination for large-scale developers including affordability, recreation and a ready workforce. Unoptimized organizational structures and underutilized regional support hamper the region in attracting the businesses that could impact Columbus/Muscogee County in a major way. Enhancing a cohesive map of business/development resources and assets along with hiring an Economic Development professional and staff will help alleviate current pressures from associated organizations. An improved redirection and rebranding of the Joint Development Authority incorporating the City of West Point, Talbot, Harris, Muscogee, Chattahoochee, Lee (AL), Russell (AL), and Marion Counties can attract new businesses and industries to the region.

Big Idea 2: Regional Workforce Coalition

Develop a collaborative, invigorated, and sustainable workforce / education ecosystem.

In order for the businesses attracted by the optimized JDA to succeed, Columbus must offer a well-trained workforce. The region offers multiple opportunities for education with higher education, technical colleges and military training, but the

institutions are not aligned in anticipating and offering the skills employers need. With a new regional education/workforce coalition, Columbus can identify current educational resources, as well as opportunities and needs across the region to create and retain living-wage jobs. Additional programs including guaranteed free educational opportunities for Muscogee county grads and access to affordable housing, make it easy for Columbus residents to follow through with education and training to be ready to get to work.

Big Idea 3: The Silicon River Fund

Support entrepreneurship through funding and resources for early success.

Just as large-scale employers create jobs, so do entrepreneurs – some 3.7 million new jobs were created through start-up businesses last year (Statista, 31 Jul. 2023). Strategic effort to attract tech talent and grow Columbus' profile as an innovation hub will attract new types of businesses to the region. The Silicon River Fund, a new venture-capital-driven residential start-up program will encourage tech founders to start their businesses and create a community in Columbus. As the tech community takes root in the Silicon River, investment in regional tech conferences and education will put the city on the map for the future of business.

Collectively, Columbus has the assets for a thriving business community. With updated strategic plans, it has the opportunity to attract investment that will make major change in the community.



BIG IDEA 1

RIVER VALLEY JOINT DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY



DESCRIPTION

Enhance, restructure and rebrand the Columbus/Muscogee County approach to attracting prospective industry.

The Columbus region is primed to attract large-scale employers that could offer hundreds or thousands of jobs. Unoptimized organizational structures and underutilized regional support hamper the region in attracting the businesses that could impact Columbus/Muscogee County in a major way.

The Georgia Department of Economic Development regularly receives requests from all over the world from prospective companies for megasites, something of which our state lacks. During these site searches, the West Central Georgia region does not come up because it does not have a megasite. Columbus/ Muscogee County on its own does not have the available land for such a site, but other counties like Harris do have land, but need infrastructure resources from Muscogee in order to attract the industry. With coordination, the region could create a viable megasite, but previous iterations of a regional partnership were unsuccessful.

In this context, we refer to the two distinct, but connected, structures of the Greater Columbus Georgia Chamber of Commerce and The Valley Partnership. Through discussions with local leadership and analysis of the organizational structures, we determined the Greater Columbus Georgia Chamber of Commerce is lacking the necessary staff dedicated to the specific scopes of work for the Chamber, the Development Authority, The Valley Partnership, and Columbus 2025. The Valley Partnership Joint Development Authority (JDA)

currently functions as a marketing JDA, as opposed to functioning as a proactive JDA having the participating counties invest in tangible goals. As it stands, The Valley Partnership's participating counties pay a per capita fee to contract out promotional economic development functions to the Greater Columbus Georgia Chamber of Commerce.

Maximizing the efficiency of current organizations that are supporting the existing and prospective business community is essential to bringing industry back into the Columbus region. Where current organizations lack specific manpower, it creates an uphill battle to leverage the existing assets due to increasingly limited staff capacity. The existing structure places a great burden on the Greater Columbus Georgia Chamber of Commerce team, which currently oversees the day-to-day operations of the Chamber of Commerce, Columbus 2025, is contracted to staff the Development Authority, and is contracted to be in charge of The Valley Partnership Joint Development Authority.

Existing assets (local and regional) must be leveraged to develop a multi-faceted approach that reimagines the current model used to attract diverse industry to the West Central Georgia region. Columbus/ Muscogee County must acknowledge and develop an approach that places optimized organizations in charge of business support, industrial recruitment, as well as regional collaboration.

SCOPE OF INITIATIVE

Strategic planning with a regional scope can be accomplished by creating a master plan that includes restructuring and renaming The Valley Partnership Joint Development Authority in a way that mimics the structure of other successful JDAs in Georgia. The JDAs that we have researched include South Georgia Regional Commission (Southern Georgia Regional Commission, n.d), The Savannah Harbor-I16 Joint Development Authority (Savannah Harbor-Interstate 16 Corridor Joint Development Authority, n.d), and the Interstate 20 Joint Development Authority (Interstate 20 Joint Development Authority n.d.). The counties in the South Georgia JDA have seen success in building a speculative building and rail spur. The latter two each created megasites that attracted regionally impactful employers. These existing JDAs are an amazing example of partnered investment in land or infrastructure that has a common goal for the partners with proportional returns to investment. For example, if Harris County has land for large industrial prospects, then partnering with the Columbus Water Works to supply water and sewer to the site could possibly bring new industry into the area. The counties with smaller parcels of land can focus on merging parcels to create pad ready sites for various prospective industries. Land is an existing asset that all counties can bring to the table. Not all land is equal, but collectively the counties can best utilize their land when being given suitably respective direction. A key element of this partnered investment is the development of a cohesive map of business/development resources/assets and their associated organizations.

Another example of a collaborative JDA is Thrive Regional Partnership (Thrive Regional Partnership, n.d) concentrated in the tri-state Chattanooga, Tennessee region. This JDA ensures that the region grows in industry, prosperity, and population,

while preserving community and natural character for generations to come. The Thrive Regional Partnership functions more like a marketing JDA, which is similar to the structure of the current Valley Partnership. This model may serve the Thrive Regional Partnership multistate region well, but for the West Central Georgia region, a model of being more proactive will lead to more tangible innovation and quicker results.

Unlike the functionality of the current JDA, The Valley Partnership, the proposed restructured JDA seeks to have the city of West Point and the counties of Muscogee, Harris, Talbot, Chattahoochee, Marion, Lee (Alabama), and Russell (Alabama) invest together in a multitude of possibilities. Today, three of these counties are either not involved or purposely exited the JDA over the years - each of which for various reasons. From our discussions with local leaders, we believe these counties would be interested in being involved, but only if there are concrete action steps that eventually lead to results.



Supporting the enhanced restructured and rebranded Columbus/Muscogee County approach to attracting prospective industry should be a new Economic Development director and staff to provide the appropriate support needed for the Chamber of Commerce, the Development Authority and the Joint Development Authority. Another important feature would have to be better communication and collaboration between parties as they develop investment opportunities including the important megasites plus spec buildings and improved transportation.

The name of the current JDA, again, The Valley Partnership, is something that will need to be rebranded. From conversations with people in the region, The Valley Partnership has developed a less-than-admirable reputation and has contributed to the exiting of several counties. While our recommendation does not want to create a new

JDA or cause redundancy, it is important that a rebranding of the name takes place so that there is a sense of newness to the matter. Many would say there is a psychological advantage to the effect of giving people the hope of “change from before”. This marketing strategy aids in bringing all parties back to the table. The new JDA name recommendation is The River Valley JDA.

Regional opportunities like semiconductor manufacturing (Congressional CHIPS Act of 2022 is designed to strengthen domestic semiconductor manufacturing, design, and research by providing \$280 billion in funding) only work with these substantial regional partners who are collaborating and working alongside one another. Long term interest, investment, and optimization of existing asset (whether land, money, infrastructure) usage will remain critical for the success of individual projects and the initiative as a whole.

UPDATED JDA STRUCTURE



RECOMMENDED ACTION STEPS

1. Develop a cohesive map of business development resources and assets

- > Expand/update the Choose Columbus GA website in order to keep the information current for potential site selectors
- > Expand availability of sites past Muscogee County
- > Identify associated organizations and their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats
- > Identify opportunities through parcel/site analyses for industrial, commercial, and residential development and retention

2. Hire an Economic Development director and staff for the Greater Columbus Georgia Chamber of Commerce to provide the required services spelled out in the contracts between the Chamber and the Development Authority, as well as the JDA. The new Economic Development team should be focused in the following areas:

- > Development Authority: Industrial Development, Recruitment & Development of Regional Partnerships/Coordination, Workforce Development. Advocate for public and private investments that further support large developments.
 - Market the region to the world by encouraging business investment
 - Workforce Training
 - Create a workforce development collaborative designed to spur potential and drive workforce growth in Columbus/Muscogee County (example Connect Newton serving Newton County (Connect Newton, n.d.)
 - Students - Offer Career Exploration

and create internships with existing business for students

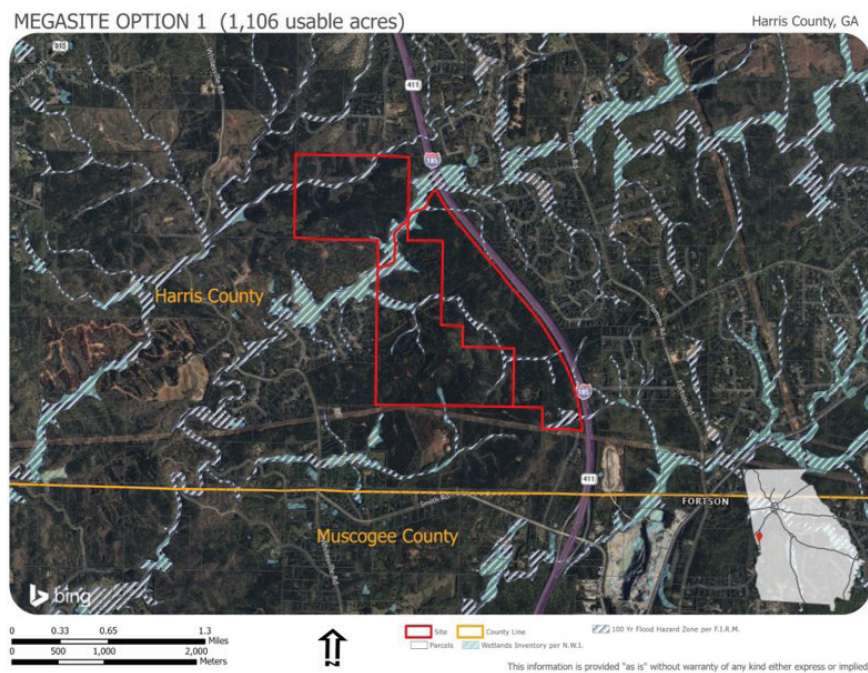
- Parents -College resources and career resources
 - Teachers - Offer training and teacher externships
 - Businesses - Bridge the gap between the current industry and talented individuals seeking careers through job fairs and roundtable events
- > Chamber: Business Support, Retention, & Expansion. Working relationship with start ups, incubators, downtown development authority, main street program, etc.
 - Entrepreneur Development
 - Develop programs for start-ups and small-business entrepreneurs not supported by Start-Up Columbus and other proposed programs
 - Help entrepreneurs understand what it takes to start a business and offer a guide for planning and operating a business in Columbus/Muscogee County.
 - > JDA: Regionally directed growth with returns equal to investment.
 - > Non-profits: Partner closely without duplicating services or overstepping on their optimal functions.

3. Reimagine the existing JDA to have targeted growth utilizing the assets that each respective partner brings to the table. The collective investment options are the following:

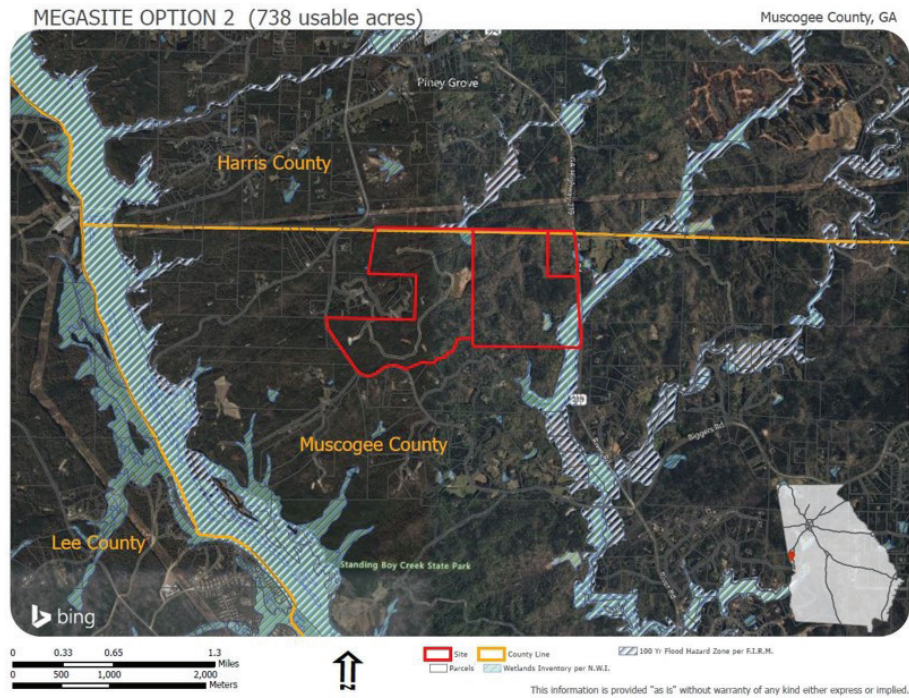
- > **A megasite (500+ acres)** – A megasite is the key piece in bringing in new industry. Collaboration is essential to the promotion of megasites.

- Collective counties to purchase a megasite comparable to other recent sites in Georgia. (Original Equipment Manufacturers (ex. Hyundai, KIA, Rivivan) will need around 1,000+ acres. Hyundai plant on the east coast of Georgia landed on a 3,000 acre site. Facebook Data Center only needed 416 acres for their 2020 purchase for a portion of the megasite in Stanton Springs.)
- Performing various site preparations and due diligence - stream/wetland delineation, earthwork leveling, stormwater placement, and water/sewer/gas being available on the site.
- > **A speculative building (300,000-1,000,000 SF)**
 - A new "spec building" can be very beneficial in drawing in diverse industries. (The region currently has roughly 10 industrial buildings (the latest being built around 2004) and 2 office buildings.)
 - Identify parcels of 40-70 acres
 - Contract developers within the region in order to keep all interests (and financial benefits therein) regional
- Design and build facilities to attract prospective companies looking for quick speed-to-market including high ceiling heights (30 feet and above), and updated building technology. The flexibility of a spec building can be whether it is for sale or lease and if it is targeted for a single tenant versus multi-tenant.
- > **Railroads** - Increasing rail increases an area's opportunities to bring in new businesses and industries. Both Marion County and Harris County, for instance, do not have any rail.
 - Explore opportunities with Norfolk Southern Rail Company to expand their footprint into partner counties
- > **Transportation issues** - Investing in transportation infrastructure positively affects the quality of life by increasing people's ability to travel throughout the area. Thus, making it easier to attract new talent and retain existing talent.
 - Explore opportunities for interstate improvements or access, mass transit, or other transportation-related issues

POTENTIAL MEGASITE LOCATION 1



POTENTIAL MEGASITE LOCATION 2



It should be pointed out that in the history of the Valley Partnership, neither of the above initiatives were sought after. Not having a tangible goal can

make it difficult for the participating partners to see progress. Reforming toward this model fixes that problem.

TIMELINE

SHORT TERM GOALS/ACTIONS:

- > Clearly identify organizations, stakeholders, and regional partners.
- > Create a database of business/development resources and SWOT analysis to identify gaps and reduce duplication of services.
- > Utilize community champions and visionary leaders as a precursor to the reformation of the JDA.

MEDIUM TERM GOALS/ACTIONS:

- > Hire an Economic Development director and staff for the Greater Columbus Georgia Chamber of Commerce. This staff will fulfill the contractual agreements between the Chamber and the

Development Authority as well as the Joint Development Authority. The additional staff members will not only provide needed assistance to the organization of the Chamber of Commerce, but it will allow additional targeted focus on the growth of the Development Authority and the JDA.

LONG TERM GOALS/ACTIONS:

- > Replace The Valley Partnership JDA with a JDA that follows a model similar to the JDA of Jasper, Morgan, Newton, and Walton counties.
- > Generate support on all levels in government to engage many stakeholders to take great interest in the long-term vision for the region.

BUDGET

FOR JOINT DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY EFFORTS:

Investment levels would vary greatly depending on the participating investors' available resources. For example: Columbus Water Works would invest in the installation of water and sewer for site development. Those investors lacking infrastructure or land could invest by assisting in acquiring properties in areas with desirable land. Any returns experienced would be paid back proportional to each organization's investment with a long-term strategic plan for further acquisition and infrastructure development.

Specifically, a 500-acre site could be created for \$30M. (500 acres x \$50,000/acre = \$25M + 20% to prepare the site to be pad ready (land cleared and the major infrastructure completed so companies can begin building as soon as possible). The prediction of a budget for an even larger site (a megasite) is more complicated since it depends largely on the topography of the site. Secondly, it depends on the current utility infrastructure and the environmental constraints. The budget for railroad and transportation improvements can be estimated by Norfolk Southern Rail and The Georgia Department of Transportation, respectively, depending on the exact location and scope of work.

POSSIBLE FUNDING SOURCES

- > OneGeorgia
- > SPLOST
- > Georgia Environmental Finance Authority
- > Regional Economic Business Assistance
- > Water Sewer Authorities
- > Existing sources with Columbus/Muscogee, County, the Chamber, & the Development Authority

POTENTIAL PARTNERSHIPS

- > The city of West Point and the counties of Talbot, Harris, Muscogee, Chattahoochee, Lee (AL), Russell (AL), and Marion.
- > Georgia Power
- > Columbus Water Works
- > Liberty Utilities

EXPECTED IMPACT:

Restructuring the JDA can create prosperity throughout the region by attracting bigger businesses through better coordination and collaboration. Over time, this increases the available workforce. In the long run, newer incoming businesses would be diversified into smaller entities as that increased workforce attracts them in.

Regional impacts include optimized land usage, increased workforce housing, and a regional identity as the #1 region in the #1 state to do business. Counties like Talbot, Marion, and Chattahoochee, that do not have development authorities, will gain from the other partnerships that do. Harris (Tier 4), Talbot (Tier 2) and Marion (Tier 2) counties benefit from the Tier 1 status of the other counties

for higher job tax credits from the state of Georgia for prospective businesses. While Lee and Russell would not benefit from that, being in Alabama, they would still benefit from a shared revenue agreement and increased transportation efficiency. When major prospects land, each county will benefit financially according to the preceded revenue sharing agreement.

Critical business recruitment organizations would no longer be overburdened with too much while increasing impact across all business sectors. The further development of these functions would in turn result in an increased likelihood of closing the deal with investors. The funding partners of the Chamber (WC Bradley, Synovus, Total Systems, and

AFLAC) will see their money grow as the JDA region itself prospers and allows for deeper relationships and opportunities with those other counties.

Ultimately, an increase in workforce opportunity, in combination with optimized workforce training, will

increase opportunity for upwards mobility in the West Central Georgia region, generating community pride and allowing for future entrepreneurs to launch into the next chapter.

MEASURES OF SUCCESS

- > Year over year Population Growth
- > Investment Dollar Growth
- > Jobs Created (10, 25, 50-mile radius)
- > YoY Housing Stock Growth
- > Poverty Rate Decrease
- > Median Household Income
- > Number of Ready-To-Develop Sites
- > Available Acreage for Industry
- > Available Acreage for Workforce Housing



BIG IDEA 2

REGIONAL WORKFORCE
COALITION AND THE RISING
RIVER VALLEY FUND



DESCRIPTION

Develop a collaborative, invigorated, and sustainable workforce / education ecosystem.

In order for the businesses attracted by the optimized JDA to succeed, Columbus must offer a well-trained workforce. The region offers high-quality opportunities for education through the Muscogee County School District, institutions of higher education including Columbus State University and the Mercer University College of Medicine, Columbus Technical College and Ft. Moore, but barriers and silos create challenges.

To support educational and workforce efficacy, Columbus needs a centralized body that is independent and not directly affiliated with any single institution. Its inception is predicated upon analysis, research, and assessment. This entity will help organizations, individuals, agencies and policy makers and essentially serve as the region's logic model for workforce and educational programs. This organization will provide strategic direction and oversee an active coalition focused on serving and connecting residents to the program, job, resource, etc. that is right for the individual. Initially, it will pool all current data and recent findings, offer listening sessions in every community in partnership with City Council and other community leaders, and invest in a comprehensive workforce study.

In addition to centralized connections, Columbus must demonstrate radical and rapid investment in its community to improve community confidence and create momentum. It can spur growth quickly by creating The Rising River Valley Fund and guaranteeing free education for qualified Muscogee county residents. This and other equitable advantages—sufficient housing, transportation, and security—incentivize Columbus residents to stay in the community and succeed, as well as attract new residents and business.

Thriving communities require a ready and reliable workforce that can compete in this rapidly changing, digital-first modern global market. Workforce development is critical for economic growth, individual prosperity, and social well-being. Businesses looking to relocate or incorporate in the Columbus area will select locations that have: prospective employees who are ready to get to work as soon as possible, clear evidence of educational resources to support future employees, a favorable business environment as well as adequate housing and desirable amenities in place to ensure quality of life.

SCOPE OF INITIATIVE

Education increases labor productivity, expands earning opportunities, and bolsters a community's human capital. An educated workforce is better equipped to embrace technological advancement and has the ability to increase the earning potential of families for generations, enhancing social mobility and quality of life. With "80% of jobs requiring some sort of post-secondary education", this type of investment yields great benefits today and beyond (Technical College System of Georgia, n.d.).

Enhancing the skills, knowledge, and capacities of the workforce will drive economic growth for this region. The availability of labor is among the most critical location factors for a business. Research shows that communities that have the ability to document and illustrate that area residents are willing to accept new or different employment opportunities, and identify their current and desired wage levels, work experience and level of education have a distinct competitive advantage over those that rely on anecdotal information, unemployment rates or outdated data/information.

A ready and reliable workforce is a key element for attracting business. By creating connections and pathways focused on making sure residents have the access to the education they need, Columbus can ensure its residents are ready to work. During community discussions, stakeholders in Columbus revealed an important area of concern: "We have resources. But Columbus has many residents who leave high school, their current jobs, or college without a plan...many residents are currently unemployed or underemployed, many have had some college but never finished their studies... anything we can do to identify opportunities for parts of the population not in school and in the working would be helpful".

Therefore, the creation of a regional education and workforce coalition to identify current educational resources, as well as opportunities and needs across our region to create and retain living-wage jobs, to spur potential and drive workforce growth in Columbus/Muscogee County. This independent entity will provide strategic direction and oversee an active coalition focused on serving and connecting residents to the program, job, resource, etc. that is right for the individual. Initially, it will pool all current data and recent findings, offer listening sessions in every community in partnership with City Council and other community leaders, and invest in a comprehensive workforce study.

This comprehensive labor shed study will help existing economic development efforts and coalitions understand the current labor market. Policy makers, job seekers, site selectors and others will benefit from a thorough report that identifies current educational and workforce resources, as well as opportunities and needs across the region to create and retain living-wage jobs. Strategic leadership and reliable data will inform the Columbus/Muscogee County community and provide documentation to support the efficacy of existing approaches or the advantages of new/ redesigned interventions.

Economic improvement is a long-term goal dependent upon ripples of impact: starting with small programmatic strategies, to changes in individual behaviors, to system-wide impact, to policy changes (ideally). However, "poverty extinguishes the flame of hope" and individuals need confidence and hope to believe in themselves (The Economist, 2012). Columbus must demonstrate radical and rapid investment in its community in addition to deep collaboration.

Equitable advantages—sufficient housing, transportation, childcare, and security—will incentivize Columbus residents to stay in the community and succeed, as well as attract new residents and business. Columbus can spur growth quickly by guaranteeing free education for qualified Muscogee county residents. In addition to federal and state financial aid, many cities offer tuition assistance for residents. Columbus should create its own model leveraging its many high-quality educational institutions and proven success establishing public-private partnerships.

Although community research suggests a plethora of resources available in this region, Columbus

lacks connectivity between its various providers and programs, as well as ongoing, independent assessment of their activities and intended effects (Schools – Amazing Columbus Georgia, n.d.). Resources are only effective if they are delivering the services and creating the outcomes that result in evidence-based change, and if people know about them (Community Tool Box, n.d.). Columbus needs strategic leadership to helm an in-depth analysis and assessment of its existing resources, to communicate the successes and the struggles, and to provide opportunities for shared problem solving and potential future directions.

RECOMMENDED ACTION STEPS

1. Create a Connected Coalition: A data-driven, strategically led regional education and workforce coalition will identify current educational resources, as well as opportunities and needs across our region to create and retain living-wage jobs, to spur potential and drive workforce growth in Columbus/Muscogee County.

- Create Connections to Create Growth
 - Create Prospective Employees by connecting them to: mentors, training, services, programs, networks, and employers.
 - Create Flourishing Employers by connecting them to: qualified employees, retention supports (education, community resources, etc.) for existing employees.
 - Create Effective, Impactful Institutions by connecting them to: research, data, process improvement recommendations, advisors, funding, and ways to highlight their impact.
 - Create a Thriving Community by Connecting these key areas, heightening awareness of barriers, and working together to create solutions.

2. Invest in Columbus' future by investing in residents now: Columbus can spur workforce development and educational attainment quickly by guaranteeing free education for qualified Muscogee county residents. In addition to federal and state financial aid, many cities offer tuition assistance for its residents. Columbus can create its own model leveraging its many high-quality educational institutions and proven success establishing public-private partnerships. By creating The Rising River Valley Fund, Columbus will demonstrate investment in its community in addition to deep collaboration.

- Examples of current programs are as follows:
 - The Kalamazoo Promise, Kalamazoo, MI (The Kalamazoo Promise, 2023)
 - Available to all residents who attend public school (Kalamazoo Public Schools-KPS)
 - Students must have been enrolled and graduated from KPS high schools. During their senior year they work with a Promise Pathway Coach and sign up to receive their Promise.
 - The Promise is a scholarship for any post-secondary education certificate, associate, or bachelor program of study at approved schools, with up to 145 credit hours and fees paid.
 - Students have 10 years to use Promise and can start and stop at any time
 - Funded anonymously by local citizens
 - Results:
 - For the first time in 40 years, 2 new schools were built
 - Between 2005 – 2016
 - Public school enrollment growth of 24%
 - College enrollment has grown from 60% to 69%
 - College completion rate has risen from 36% to 48%
 - Low-income students receiving degrees went from 10% to 16%
 - Area population growing – 1st time in decades
 - School enrollment has grown by 24%
 - See figure below for impact on poverty

- Tangelo Park Program (TPP), Tangelo Park neighborhood in South Orange County, FL (Rosen Gives Back, 2021)
 - Grassroots program formed through collaboration with Tangelo Park Civic Association, Tangelo Baptist Church, Tangelo Park Elementary School, and Tangelo Park YMCA
 - Main components:
 - Free preschool for every two-, three-, and four-year-old child living in Tangelo Park
 - Full college or vocational school scholarships, including tuition, room and board, and books, for every graduating high school senior from the Tangelo Park area
 - A Family Resource Center where parents can obtain counseling, and other resources to help them become positive role models
 - Results:
 - H.S. graduation rate: 1993, 45% vs. 2018, 98%
 - Graduation rate of scholarship recipients
 - College: 77%
 - Graduate: 83%
 - "Dramatic increase in PTSAA and SAC participation"
 - Crime down 63%
 - Students who left the community and moved away went from 52% to <1%
 - Housing prices increased
 - ROI at \$7 return to \$1 invested
- Free City, partnership between City College and the City & County of San Francisco, CA (*Free City College — SF Department of Children, Youth and Their Families, n.d.*)
 - MOU ratified by City of San Francisco and City College in 2017; 10-year MOU signed 2019
 - SF Dept of Children Youth and their Families oversees administration of the program
 - City College Financial Assistance Fund Oversight Committee reviews program
 - Residents can apply any time—the application is one page and embedded in registration system
 - Recipients receive \$46 tuition waiver for every credit hour
 - Those who demonstrate additional hardship also earn a cash grant of \$46 for each credit hour—50% after drop/add and 50% after midterm
 - Maintain eligibility by remaining a San Fran resident
 - Recipients attempt and earn more college credits than non-recipients
 - Struggle: Students lack awareness of the program at City College.

TIMELINE

IDENTIFY CURRENT EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES, OPPORTUNITIES AND NEEDS.

YEAR 1

- > Analyze: Pool all current data and recent findings, offer listening sessions in every community in partnership with City Council and other community leaders, and invest in a comprehensive workforce study.
 - > Engage: Form a steering committee. Develop a strategic plan at the end of the first 12 months. Research other community models.
 - > Example Connect Newton serving Newton County (Newton Connect, n.d.)
 - > Other resources and models throughout GA that may benefit Columbus:
 - > Communicate: Educate the public about the importance of education and its positive impact on the economy. Follow their progress. Establish channels for continuous feedback from employees, students, and partners. Use this feedback to refine and improve the ecosystem over time. Celebrate local success stories to inspire others.
 - > Define Clear Goals and Objectives: Identify the specific outcomes Columbus needs to achieve to support the workforce/education ecosystem.
 - > Cross-Disciplinary Interaction: Create opportunities for cross-disciplinary collaboration. Encourage individuals from different backgrounds to work together, foster creativity and a broader perspective.
 - > Assess Infrastructure and Connectivity: Ensure necessary infrastructure is in place, including transportation networks, utilities, broadband internet, and other facilities that support economic growth and educational achievement.
- > Stakeholder Engagement: Engage all relevant stakeholders, including employees, students, educators, industry partners, government bodies, and community organizations. Understand their needs, expectations, and challenges to design a comprehensive and inclusive ecosystem. Ideas include:
 - > K12/College/Adult Students - Offer Career Exploration and create internships with existing business for students
 - > Parents - College resources and career resources
 - > Teachers - Offer training and teacher externships
 - > Businesses - Bridge the gap between the current industry and talented individuals seeking careers through job fairs and roundtable events
 - > Entrepreneurs - Provide micro-lessons and referrals to more in-depth training.
 - > Leverage Resources: Identify funding sources, grants, and partnerships that can provide financial support for this regional coalition and the initiatives identified. IE, government grants, private sector investments, and philanthropic contributions. Start to form a sustainability plan.

YEARS 1-3-AFTER ESTABLISHING A DATA-BASED UNDERSTANDING OF REGIONAL CAPABILITIES:

- > Collaborative Curriculum Design: Collaborate with industry experts to design curricula that align with real-world needs. Incorporate practical skills, soft skills, and emerging technologies to ensure graduates are well-prepared for the job market.
- > Establish Industry Partnerships: Build relationships with local businesses and industries. Engage them in the coalition's activities by seeking their input on skill requirements, offering

internships, apprenticeships, and job placement opportunities.

- > **Create Pathways for Students:** Develop clear pathways for students that lead from education to the workforce. Offer programs that facilitate seamless transitions from school to higher education and then into the job market.
- > **Skills Development:** Offer continuous learning opportunities that cater to both hard and soft skills. Provide workshops, online courses, mentoring, and on-the-job training to empower individuals to upskill and reskill.
- > **Scale Technology Integration:** Leverage technology to facilitate learning and collaboration. Utilize online platforms, virtual classrooms, and interactive tools to engage learners and foster a culture of innovation.
- > **Advocate for 'quality of life' investment:** Enhance amenities such as schools, healthcare, recreational facilities, cultural attractions, and affordable housing.

YEARS 3-5:

- > **Ensure Continuous Evaluation:** Regularly assess regional efforts and recommend adjusted strategies based on feedback, results, and changing market trends.
 - > Engage 3rd party review of Columbus' economic indicators
 - > By now, education and workforce ecosystem data should be compiled, organized and accessible, with a strong system and process in place to sustain.
- > **Engage in Advocacy:** Use programmatic results and evidence of regional improvements to influence policies, regulations, and public opinion.
- > **Reevaluate and Adjust:** The coalition composition and Columbus' needs will have changed.

CREATE A CONNECTED COALITION

YEARS 1-2 – COALITION WILL OVERSEE THE RESEARCH AND PLANNING NECESSARY FOR IMPLEMENTING THE RIVER VALLEY RISE FUND:

- > **Analyze:** Understand the current education ecosystem, including tuition costs, enrollment rates, and financial aid availability.
- > **Develop a Comprehensive Plan:** Create a detailed plan outlining how the tuition-free initiative will work. Define eligibility criteria, program duration, covered expenses (tuition, books, fees), and the scope of education (e.g., two-year or four-year degrees).
- > **Create Application and Selection Process:** Develop a fair and transparent application process that considers factors beyond academic performance, such as community involvement and financial need.
- > **Identify Requirements:** Recipients could be required to stay in the county for a period of time or engage in extra training.
- > **Secure Funding:** Identify potential funding sources such as government grants, private donations, corporate partnerships, and local taxes. Explore ways to pool resources to cover tuition costs without compromising the quality of education. If resources are limited, launch the Fund with a smaller group of students and gradually expand as funding and support grow.
- > **Build Partnerships:** Collaborate with local businesses, industries, and nonprofit organizations to develop processes that will provide internships, job placements, and opportunities for students to gain real-world experience.
- > **Collaborate with Educational Institutions:** Partner with colleges, universities, and vocational schools

to implement the program. Establish agreements to ensure that academic standards are maintained and that students have access to a range of disciplines.

- > **Promote Financial Literacy:** Work with community partners and provide resources and workshops to educate students and their families about financial planning, scholarships, and other forms of aid. This can help them make informed decisions about their education.
- > **Raise Public Awareness:** Launch a public awareness campaign to inform the community about the initiative. Highlight its benefits, eligibility criteria, and how to apply.

IMPLEMENTATION GOAL: WITHIN THE FIRST 18-24 MONTHS.

YEARS 3-5:

- > **Celebrate Success Stories:** Showcase the achievements of Fund recipients to demonstrate impact for the community.

- > **Provide Support Services:** Scale up the Coalition & The Rising River Valley Fund to connect recipients to community partners. Partners will provide additional support services such as counseling, career guidance, and mentorship to help students succeed academically and transition into the workforce.
- > **Address Sustainability:** Plan for the long-term sustainability of the Fund to ensure ongoing funding and community support, even if the region changes.
- > **Advocate for Policy Changes:** Work with local, state, and federal policymakers to advocate for policy changes that support tuition-free education. Propose legislation or seek waivers for existing regulations.
- > **Monitor and Evaluate:** Implement a system to track the progress and outcomes of tuition-free students. Regularly assess the program's effectiveness and make adjustments based on feedback and data.

BUDGET

For The Rising River Valley Fund, the budget varies widely depending on tuition costs, enrollment rates and financial aid availability.

COST OF TUITION AT COLUMBUS STATE UNIVERSITY

	Residency	Freshmen	Sophomore	Junior	Senior	4 Years Total
Class of 2027 (Admission Fall 2023)	In-State	\$5,629	\$5,509	\$5,391	\$5,276	\$21,805
	Out-of-State	\$16,683	\$16,561	\$16,440	\$16,320	\$66,004
Class of 2028 (Admission Fall 2024)	In-State	\$5,509	\$5,391	\$5,276	\$5,164	\$21,340
	Out-of-State	\$16,561	\$16,440	\$16,320	\$16,201	\$65,523
Class of 2029 (Admission Fall 2025)	In-State	\$5,391	\$5,276	\$5,164	\$5,054	\$20,886
	Out-of-State	\$16,440	\$16,320	\$16,201	\$16,083	\$65,045
Class of 2030 (Admission Fall 2026)	In-State	\$5,276	\$5,164	\$5,054	\$4,946	\$20,441
	Out-of-State	\$16,320	\$16,201	\$16,083	\$15,966	\$64,571
Class of 2031 (Admission Fall 2027)	In-State	\$5,164	\$5,054	\$4,946	\$4,841	\$20,006
	Out-of-State	\$16,201	\$16,083	\$15,966	\$15,850	\$64,100

TOTAL COST OF ATTENDANCE AFTER FINANCIAL AID AT COLUMBUS STATE UNIVERSITY

	Residency	Freshmen	Sophomore	Junior	Senior	4 Years Total
Class of 2027 (Admission Fall 2023)	In-State	\$16,627	\$16,790	\$16,931	\$17,080	\$67,513
	Out-of-State	\$27,681	\$27,842	\$28,009	\$28,181	\$111,713
Class of 2028 (Admission Fall 2024)	In-State	\$16,790	\$16,960	\$17,108	\$17,263	\$68,209
	Out-of-State	\$27,842	\$28,009	\$28,181	\$28,359	\$112,391
Class of 2029 (Admission Fall 2025)	In-State	\$16,960	\$17,137	\$17,292	\$17,454	\$68,933
	Out-of-State	\$28,009	\$28,181	\$28,359	\$28,543	\$113,092
Class of 2030 (Admission Fall 2026)	In-State	\$17,137	\$17,322	\$17,484	\$17,652	\$69,686
	Out-of-State	\$28,181	\$28,359	\$28,543	\$28,733	\$113,816
Class of 2031 (Admission Fall 2027)	In-State	\$17,322	\$17,514	\$17,682	\$17,857	\$70,468
	Out-of-State	\$28,359	\$28,543	\$28,733	\$28,928	\$114,563

POSSIBLE FUNDING SOURCES

Government grants, private donations, corporate partnerships and local taxes always exist as potential funding sources. There are other resources that can be pooled to help fund these proposed educational connections. For instance, many of the large local companies already offer employee benefits such as tuition assistance,

college savings accounts, credentialing support and more; however, the programs may be underutilized or unknown. By creating connections, the coalition can support regional HR efforts such as recruitment, retention, training and development. In turn, businesses create the employees they need locally using resources already allocated for such efforts.

EXPECTED IMPACT

Currently, 20% of the Columbus population lives in poverty (~40,000 people). The expected impact is that a larger percentage of this population at the working age is employed and able to provide for themselves and their families. Also, the goal is to ensure that they have the skill sets and qualifications for their current jobs and have the capacity and resources for the jobs of tomorrow.

Second, the region will be able to compete for an array of companies and industries because of the skilled workforce that is already here, without relying on talent from other cities / commuters. Finally, when the jobs of tomorrow come, these people are not adversely impacted and can remain employed.

MEASURE OF SUCCESS

Increased proportion of skilled working age adults with college degrees, workforce certificates, industry

certifications and other high-quality credentials.
Decrease in citizens in poverty.



BIG IDEA 3

THE SILICON RIVER FUND



DESCRIPTION

Support entrepreneurship through funding and resources for early success.

The pandemic start-up boom is showing no signs of slowing down with some 5 million businesses created in the US in 2022. Leading business creation is the South with a 53% increase in new business applications over 2019. (Bloomberg, 2023)

Recent investment by Columbus 2025, the community's first collaborative plan to create a more competitive, prosperous region, has put Columbus on the path to attract some of these new businesses, but further investment is needed to diversify the founders getting started in Columbus. StartUP Columbus - the landmark business incubator and entrepreneur support organization - has support offerings primarily focused on lifestyle and small business.

To continue to encourage entrepreneurial growth, Columbus is ready for the creation of a new group to establish a venture capital fund that specifically supports entrepreneurs in the high-value tech space.

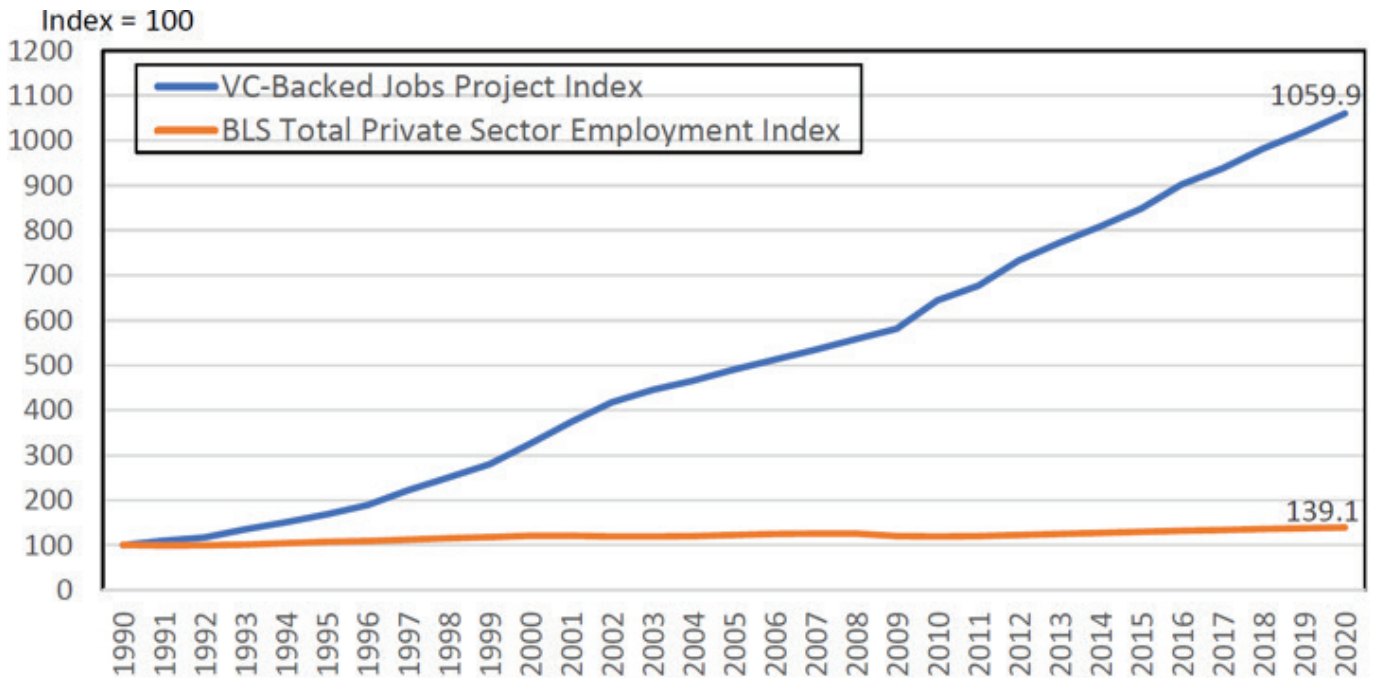
The US Chamber of Commerce recommends incubators as a way to grow (USChamber.com). Success in other US cities like Buffalo, New York (43 North, n.d) and Chattanooga, Tennessee (BrickYard, n.d.) indicates the efficacy of such programs. As such, we propose The Silicon River Fund, a venture-capital-backed residency program that will encourage tech start-ups to come to Columbus.

SCOPE OF INITIATIVE

The Silicon River Fund initiative aims to stimulate innovation, drive economic growth and position Columbus as an attractive and affordable home base for entrepreneurs in their early stages of fundraising and development. While its focus is

on the early stages of the entrepreneurial journey, ultimately the project seeks to create middle-income, Millennial- and Gen-Z-centric jobs through innovative tech organizations headquartered in Columbus.

JOB GROWTH INDEX VC BACKED JOBS VS. TOTAL PRIVATE SECTOR EMPLOYMENT



The major source of funding for the business-building elements of The Silicon River Fund is its venture capital investment fund. It begins by establishing the fund structure and securing financial resources including selecting the fund, principals and raising capital.

The key element of the Silicon River Fund is a residency program for pre-product/market fit (PMF) teams, offering workspaces, housing and amenities to support their entrepreneurial journey. The fund will invest in startups with an established proof of concept, with the requirement that they

relocate operations and the majority of staff to Columbus. The residency program element, where entrepreneurs relocate to a dedicated space to live and work on their projects, is vital to its success by allowing entrepreneurs to completely focus on their big idea while experiencing life in Columbus. The model is inspired by other residential start-up incubators like BrickYard in Chattanooga, Tennessee with a key difference: support from the city to encourage entrepreneurs to put down roots and grow their businesses in Columbus.

BRICKYARD IN CHATTANOOGA



As the Silicon River Fund matures and graduates begin to grow their businesses, Columbus has the potential to be a thriving tech start-up hub. It will need to continue to nurture this burgeoning reputation through a comprehensive marketing

campaign to promote Columbus as a vibrant startup ecosystem. Additionally, it should support continued investment in the local and regional entrepreneurial community through tech conferences and other programming.

RECOMMENDED ACTION STEPS

1. Establish fund structure, raise capital and build partnerships.

- > Under the umbrella of StartUP Columbus, create two distinct branches—one focused on investment and operations of startups and the other dedicated to local entrepreneurial initiatives. This division will allow for focused support and resources to be provided to both resident teams and local entrepreneurs.
- > Hire an executive director who can manage the program and be the face of Columbus to the tech industry and establish a board of directors with diverse industry expertise.
- > Form the legal entity for The Silicon River venture capital fund and define its investment thesis, objectives, and governance structure. Engage local securities attorneys to ensure compliance.
- > Identify and approach potential limited partners, including high-net-worth individuals and corporations, to participate as investors in the fund. Develop a comprehensive fundraising strategy, highlighting the fund's value proposition and potential returns.
- > Forge strategic partnerships with local organizations, educational institutions, and government entities to foster an entrepreneurial ecosystem in Columbus. Collaborate with accelerators, incubators, and business support organizations to create a network of resources and expertise for resident teams.

2. Create residency program and utilize underused retail spaces

- > Design and implement a residency program similar to the BrickYard model, providing workspace, housing, and amenities for

selected pre-PMF teams. Establish an application and selection process to identify promising startups and provide financial support, mentorship, and a collaborative community.

- > Explore partnerships with property owners and developers to utilize underused retail spaces in the Uptown region of Columbus as joint or individual workspaces for resident teams. Present the opportunity as an investment in the local startup ecosystem, benefiting both the developers and the startups.

3. Host annual conference and enhance startup ecosystem visibility.

- > Plan and organize a major annual conference, similar to TechCrunch Disrupt including recruiting speakers, securing meeting space and promoting to the Southeast region to draw attention to Columbus as an emerging hub for innovation and entrepreneurship. This step should be considered closer to Fund II, once successful investments have been made and the local ecosystem has begun to experience the trickle down effect.
- > Engage with national media and industry publications to market Columbus as a sponsor of entrepreneurial initiatives and a thriving startup ecosystem. Attend pitch competitions and establish a presence in established startup ecosystems to network and build relationships with key stakeholders.

TIMELINE

SHORT TERM GOALS/ACTIONS:

- > Hire executive director
- > Establish a Board of Directors with diverse industry backgrounds and expertise to provide strategic guidance, governance oversight, and support the overall direction of the fund
- > Select principals to guide the investment thesis, fundraising efforts, and overall strategic direction of the fund
- > Identify and target potential investors, both locally and regionally, to provide insights into the feasibility and potential success of the fundraising campaign
- > Engage attorneys specializing in securities law to begin preparing the necessary legal documents and ensure compliance with relevant regulations
- > Develop a marketing campaign leveraging media outlets, channels and familiarization visits/ scouting trips to tech and startup ecosystems to promote the fund and attract potential investors and startups.

MEDIUM TERM GOALS/ACTIONS (YEAR 5):

- > Securing sufficient capital to capitalize the fund
- > Recruit an investment team and support staff that can identify and evaluate investment opportunities, conduct due diligence and support portfolio companies
- > Host at least 10 teams in residency per year
- > Develop a program to support alumni who have stayed in Columbus with comprehensive continuing education programming and mentorship programs in collaboration with local, regional and national thought leaders

- > Lobby Columbus leaders on key issues in support of graduates of the incubator: streamlining the business incorporation process including tax incentives to retain businesses and supporting state-of-the-art economic development and quality of life enhancements
- > Expand PR/marketing efforts to include a targeted campaign focused on attracting entrepreneurs who are in the early stages of their entrepreneurial journey especially tier-two business and engineering collegiate programs, underrepresented founders, established professionals seeking career changes, and women and BIPOC founders.

LONG-TERM GOALS/ACTIONS (YEAR 10+)

- > The Silicon River Fund will drive significant economic impact in Columbus by supporting the growth of portfolio companies, creating jobs and generating positive economic activity within the local community
- > Host at least 25 teams in residency per year
- > Nurture the investment with a long-term financial strategy to ensure the continuity and growth the fund
- > Grow impact regionally and nationally, through recognition programs to raise awareness of Columbus as a thriving startup ecosystem
- > Create a tech-centric industry conference to attract industry leaders, investors, and startups solidifying the city's reputation as a tech hub and fostering valuable networking and collaboration opportunities.

BUDGET

\$500K - INITIAL SETUP + MARKETING.

- > Salary for executive director
- > Fees associated with setting up the fund
- > \$250,000 marketing spend
- > Engage PR agency to pitch story to tech media and regional business
- > Comprehensive travel for executive director to pitch events

\$2 - \$5 MILLION - INITIAL BUILDOUT

- > \$3 million Space buildout
- > \$2 million initial seed of \$200K per team

\$10 MILLION RAISED FROM LIMITED PARTNERS.

POSSIBLE FUNDING SOURCES

- > Corporate Investors
- > Local Investors
- > Institutional Investors
- > Government Agencies
- > University Endowment
- > Regional Venture Capital Firms
- > Other Funds Looking to Diversify
- > Local Companies
- > Knight Fund at the Community Foundation

EXPECTED IMPACT

Overall, the expected impact of The Silicon River fund encompasses economic growth, job creation, industry diversification, and the cultivation of a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem that benefits the entire community of Columbus.

To attract entrepreneurs, the Silicon River Fund will provide financial resources, mentorship, and a supportive environment for startups, enabling them to accelerate their growth and increase their chances of success. Additionally, it will play a crucial role in cultivating a vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystem in Columbus. It will create a culture

of entrepreneurship that goes beyond program participants, fostering a supportive environment and nurturing a community of innovative thinkers and doers.

For the greater Columbus business community, the establishment of a thriving venture capital fund will attract outside investments and put the city on the radar of investors and entrepreneurs from across the country. The presence of The Silicon River fund will put Columbus on the map as an emerging hub for entrepreneurship and innovation, elevating the city's visibility and

reputation in the national business landscape. The fund's support for startups across various sectors will contribute to the diversification of industries in Columbus and encourage the emergence of new sectors and technologies, positioning the city as a hub for innovation and attracting diverse

types of industry that align with the community. Additionally, the creation of a supportive ecosystem and opportunities for startups will help retain knowledge, talent, skills, and the workforce in Columbus.

POTENTIAL PARTNERSHIPS

Key partners are already interested, but due to confidentiality, they cannot be included. Ideal

investors include high-net worth individuals who are interested in venture capital opportunities.

MEASURES OF SUCCESS

- > Capital Development and Investment Returns
- > Portfolio Company Growth and Success Stories

- > Job Creation
- > Regional, State-wide, and National Recognition

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Director, City of West Point

Brian Sillitto, Vice President, Partnership &
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College

Cathy Williams, Executive Director of
NeighborWorks Columbus

SECTION

3



FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH

CHALLENGE QUESTION

How can Columbus engage and retain talent under the age of 40 so that they plant long-term roots in Columbus/Muscogee County?

OUR TEAM

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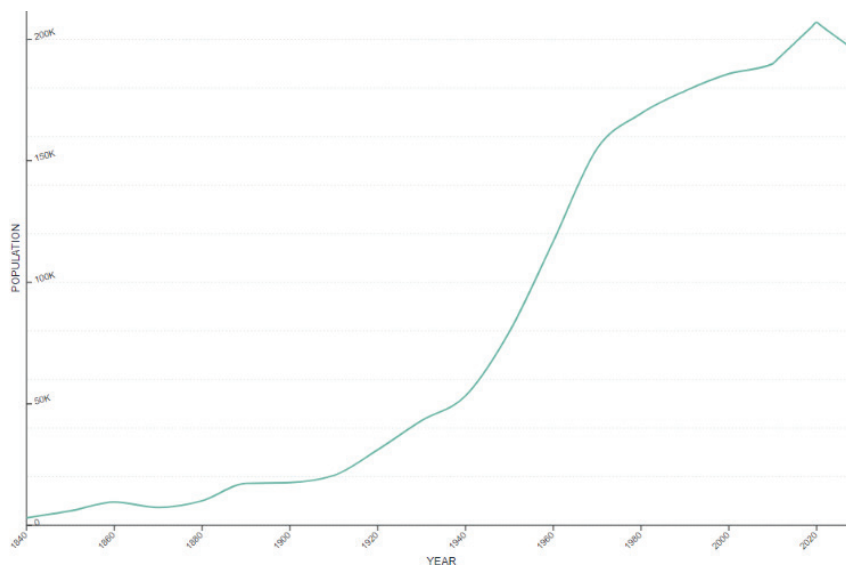
INTRODUCTION

Columbus, Georgia, also known by its residents as Fountain City due to the many fountains found throughout the area in its early years, has undergone many transformations since its establishment in 1828. Initially harnessing the Chattahoochee River to propel itself as a thriving manufacturing hub, the city transformed to being home to Fort Moore weaving the fabric together of the community. Today, it embraces its roots by returning to the river through the development of the Riverwalk and the longest urban whitewater trail.

Despite its innovative transformations, Columbus/Muscogee County now faces a new challenge - the engagement and retention of young talent under 40 to ensure that they plant long-term roots within the community. Much like the mythical fountain of youth, which was believed to bring eternal youth upon its drinkers, the Fountain of Youth group draws inspiration from the city's foundation along the Chattahoochee River and its Fountain City moniker to address the challenge of engaging young talent to create life-long residents.

The expected population growth and decline in Georgia's major cities described the metro Atlanta area's expected population growth by 2.9 million people by 2050, while the population of Columbus is expected to decline by 41,000 people (Wingfield, 2019). Columbus, and other mid-tier cities in Georgia are beginning to lose their population to the metro area, and it is imperative that key stakeholders in the Columbus area begin to understand why their under 40 population may be choosing to move to other areas.

COLUMBUS, GEORGIA POPULATION PROJECTION BY 2050



Like other communities, the challenges to retain young talent is a key factor contributing to population and economic growth. The growth and development of the Chattahoochee Valley region depends heavily on young talent which can result in innovation, new ideas, and attract employers seeking a skilled workforce. More specifically, young talent considers these top indicators when selecting a city: demographics, job opportunities, availability of activities outside of work and the cost of living. Without these considerations, the region will continue facing difficulties engaging young talent.

Engaging and retaining young professionals to the area is essential to long term growth and prosperity in Columbus. In recent years, one of the youngest generations in the workforce, Millennials, surpassed the size of the previous largest living generation, Baby Boomers with Generation Z closely trailing behind Millennials (Fry, 2020). As a result, all stakeholders, including businesses, educational institutions, and community organizations, must collaborate and consider how to meet the needs and wants of the now largest generations in order to retain them in the area. During interviews with young professionals, community members, top Columbus employers, business organizations, city officials, and multiple contacts at educational institutions, Fountain of Youth identified common factors contributing to the challenges facing young talent. Lack of recreation, slow job growth, leadership development, and sense of community were frequently referenced.

THE BIG THREE

Fountain of Youth recommends the following initiatives to the City of Columbus to engage and retain young talent.

Columbus Made

The Columbus Made program is a twelve week leadership bootcamp type program targeted towards young professionals of all work fields and backgrounds. The program will be available to those aged 25-35 that are not current leaders in their area in order to help them gain new leadership skills and experience.

Plant Your Roots

The City of Columbus is the second largest city in the state of Georgia, but it has a unique small-town feel with historical significance. We propose revitalizing a community district to make it a place for young professionals to live, work, and play while respecting the history of the area.

Connect Columbus

Connect Columbus involves revisiting a 2014 feasibility study and reintroducing the idea of constructing a high speed rail between Atlanta and Columbus as part of a larger state high speed rail project throughout the state of Georgia.

By implementing result-driven strategies, Columbus can effectively identify, attract, and retain their younger community members in order to build a sustainable community for years to come. Overall, we want to ensure that Columbus feels like home.





BIG IDEA 1

COLUMBUS MADE



DESCRIPTION

Leadership is a hot business topic, and through years of practice and research, there is no one clear definition. Kevin Kruse, a leadership author and CEO defined leadership as “a process of social influence, which maximizes the efforts of others, towards the achievement of a goal” (Kruse, 2013). Traditionally organized companies often view leadership interchangeable with high-ranking roles which is true to some extent. However, Fountain of Youth advocates for a shift in the idea of leadership that encompass diverse voices of young talent across all backgrounds and lifestyles across Columbus.

In the current landscape, Millennials and older Gen Z have a desire to engage with their communities - personally and professionally. They find fulfillment through purpose, and are often seeking out areas where they can work towards something greater than themselves (Post, 2023). The existence and success of the Georgia Young Gamechangers program proves that there are plenty of young professionals throughout this city and state that are eager to learn, grow, and volunteer their time and talents to help a city do the same. This surge of young talent creates the potential to reshape and invigorate Columbus, given the right strategies. If not, young talent may end up leaving because of the region’s slow job growth and perceptions that veteran leaders are slow to release authority to the up-and-coming generation.

Young professionals want the chance to learn how to lead, and the current leadership program, Leadership Columbus, is geared more towards professionals in positions of authority rather than those that want to learn key leadership skills earlier in their career. In order to bridge this gap, this team recommends COLUMBUS MADE, a 12 week leadership education program targeting individuals ages 22 through 35 to ensure young professionals can gain key leadership skills and knowledge of Columbus early in their career journey. This program will aid the next generation of young leaders in the classrooms to fuel retention efforts by providing educational and career opportunities.

COLUMBUS MADE is a leadership development and community education program targeted at promising young professionals in Columbus from various backgrounds that gives them a chance to learn valuable leadership skills, encourages them to be involved in the community, and gives them a pipeline to move into further leadership training, formal leadership roles, and potentially run for public office.

A similar program was implemented in Nashville in 2003 called Nashville Emerging Leaders with the goal of creating an organization that was dedicated to the ongoing development, advancement, and interaction of young leaders in the Nashville area. Each year a cohort of 30 diverse individuals is chosen to go through their 11 week leadership program. These individuals then attend weekly meetings and discuss topics including leading from personal values, creativity and innovation, and developing others. The program started small with just one part time coordinator and a group of volunteers, and it has grown into a program that consistently fills all slots and helps to develop young talent in their community (Leadership Development, n.d.). Nashville, like many cities, also has a Leadership Nashville class that is geared more towards those already in leadership positions, and both programs are well received and attended. Participants in Nashville Emerging Leaders often funnel into Leadership Nashville within a few years, as the emerging leaders program helps to prepare young talent to take on leadership roles in the community.

SCOPE OF INITIATIVE

Based on interviews, young professionals in Columbus want the chance to showcase their talents and be in positions where they can make a difference in their community. It is less about the money and the accolades, and more about the opportunity to do work that matters. We want our younger population to be able to learn and develop key leadership skills to be able to advocate for moving up within their company or gaining access to higher-level jobs.

In order to do this, we propose developing a young professional leadership program to bring up and coming leaders together called: COLUMBUS MADE. This program is made up of 22-35 year old participants that want to learn beneficial leadership skills, get connected with other like-minded individuals, and want to be more involved with their community, all in a condensed 12-week format. Current leadership programs, like Leadership Columbus, span over 9 months and have expectations of their participants to participate in multiple community events and volunteer opportunities as well as leadership classes one full day out of the nine month timeline. Leadership Columbus participants are also expected to serve as a volunteer in a community program for at least two years after they complete Leadership Columbus (*Leadership Columbus*, n.d.). While the current leadership program in Columbus is important and a vital part of community development, the COLUMBUS MADE program focuses more on targeted programming and really working to develop key soft skills necessary for future leaders of the community. The idea is that alumni of the COLUMBUS MADE program would continue working in the community and then feed into the Leadership Columbus program as participants continue to grow in their careers. The condensed format also gives incentive for members to be fully present during the

12-week period. Our goal with COLUMBUS MADE is to bring in applicants with different perspectives and industries. It should teach them how to work with others, develop an effective team, grow their business, and speak up about how City initiatives affect those like them. It will create a sense of community that not only keeps current talent in the city, but showcasing what young talent is building here for other markets that may want to move into the Columbus area.

COLUMBUS MADE LOGO



COLUMBUS MADE will be made up of a cohort of 30 individuals under the age of 35 each year, with the class being made up of a wide range of individuals who will attend weekly sessions for twelve weeks, with each week having themed curriculum with a presentation, a facilitated conversation, and an activity for program participants. A part-time facilitator will be hired to coordinate and run the program at first, with the idea that this can become a full-time coordinator position within two years of program implementation.

Diversity is what can bring different perspectives, and the selection committee should be thoughtful to have participants from:

- > Corporations that have been identified for future leadership tracks
- > Small business owners

- > Nonprofit sector employees
- > Government employees
- > Elected/appointed public servants
- > Trade professionals (plumbers, mechanics, electricians, welders, etc.)
- > Justice impacted individuals
- > Healthcare professionals

The above ideal candidates are just to name a few, but helps put an idea of out of the norm leadership candidates that could be elevated and introduced to new opportunities in Columbus.

This program will be made up of leadership modules developed by key community partners with a key theme of teaching participants to learn to lead from where they are. Examples of modules and partnerships could include:

- > Emotional Intelligence (CSU Leadership Institute)
- > History of Columbus (CSU History & Geography Department, City of Columbus)
- > Where We Are Now, & Future of Columbus (Columbus 2025)
- > Bridging North & South Columbus (Community Foundation)
- > Civic Engagement (Citizens Academy being created by Connect. Communicate. Columbus)
- > Leadership in the Making (Chamber of Commerce/ Start Up Columbus)
- > In the Community (Grassroots Nonprofit)
- > In-person graduation for community members to attend

The tuition, paid by program participants or their employers, would allow the program to employ one program coordinator to help plan and execute it.

We encourage marketing the program as a pathway to leadership in hopes that local businesses would pay for their employees to attend. After looking at programs like this in other areas, including the Nashville Emerging Leaders and the Georgia Forward YoungGamechangers, an average tuition for this type of program is between \$600-700. Through budget analysis we would like to charge \$650 for each participant. We would also like to offer the opportunity to have scholarships available to those that cannot financially cover fees through the generous support of organizations and supporting businesses, including businesses who do not have participants but would be willing to sponsor participants for the larger good of the community. Another way to finance this leadership program would be to establish sponsorship levels for the overall program and each individual module. This will help cover expenses such as program staff, module presenters, venues, marketing, and general operating expenses.

The program would need some community support during the first couple years, but eventually, it could evolve into an alumni-run program with the execution being done by an individual in a staff position. In the Nashville Emerging Leaders example, graduates from the previous year continue to participate as facilitators in the year following their program, and many weekly presenters are previous Nashville Emerging Leaders participants (*Leadership Development*, n.d.). We hope that alumni from the COLUMBUS MADE program will continue to participate in a similar way. As alumni numbers grow, they can also start hosting community activities outside of formally scheduled program dates. COLUMBUS MADE will create leaders that start new businesses, join leadership of established organizations, run for public service, and feed into the NEXT generation.

TIMELINE & ACTION STEPS

SHORT TERM

- > Gain the City and key community partner support for COLUMBUS MADE. The goal is to have City and two initial companies agree to support the program within a year of introduction.
- > Hire a Program Director for COLUMBUS MADE and begin developing leadership modules and the education summit. The program director should ideally be hired before the first round-table discussions on leadership.
- > Finalize the outline, tuition, and structure of COLUMBUS MADE by Fall of 2024

MEDIUM TERM

- > Market COLUMBUS MADE to young professionals and organizations across the city

- > Receive applications and select the first cohort. The first cohort could begin in 2025 as long as beginning action steps follow the proposed timeline
- > Graduate first cohort and analyze program for areas of improvement, ideally by Fall of 2025
- > Make any adjustments to the program and begin selection for second class

LONG TERM

- > Begin seeing opportunities for formal leadership positions for young professionals across government and public organizations
- > See positive outcomes of the COLUMBUS MADE program and City officials listening to the needs and wants of up and coming generations

BUDGET

ESTIMATED BUDGET FOR COLUMBUS MADE PROGRAM

Item	Amount	Quantity	Income	Expense	Additional Information
Tuition	\$650	25	\$16,250		25 paid plus one scholarship
Annual Title Sponsor	\$5,000	1	\$5,000		Two spots in program
Annual Supporting Sponsor	\$2,000	2	\$4,000		One spot each in program
Sponsor	\$100,000	Annual			
Weekly Session Sponsor	\$1,000	11	\$11,000		Used to cover meals and materials
Community Donations	\$1,750	1	\$1,750		Many small donors
Part Time Facilitator/ Communications	\$21,000	1		\$21,000	Housed in Columbus 2025
Food/Venue for Modules	\$1,000	12		\$12,000	Rotated around Columbus
Program Materials	\$3,000	1		\$3,000	Printed materials, nametags, etc.
Reserves	\$2,000	1		\$2,000	Reserves for additional operating

POSSIBLE FUNDING SOURCES

- > \$650 per participant, approximately \$16,250 annually as we are allocating one spot to be at no cost for a participant that can show financial aid is needed
- > Corporate and/or private sponsorships
- > Community donations to show support for the future leaders of Columbus

PARTNERSHIPS/RESOURCES

- > Columbus State University
- > Columbus 2025
- > City of Columbus
- > Chamber of Commerce

EXPECTED IMPACT

New and younger community members holding leadership positions means an influx of fresh ideas for the community. Through implementation of the COLUMBUS MADE program, we will be making leadership education accessible to all young professionals, no matter their background or industry, and give them the confidence to lead no matter where they are. Formal leadership positions are great because the title and authority allow leaders to gain more influence, but a great leader

is someone who influences and creates value no matter where they are within the company. This program should give all participants tools to lead from where they are and gain confidence to pursue leadership positions within their organization. It will also draw attention to community matters and give City government the opportunity to hear fresh ideas from the younger generations to better the city for years to come.

MEASURES OF SUCCESS

- > Growing numbers of participants and applicants (a full 30 member cohort should be reached no later than year 3)
- > After year 3 a large applicant pool to choose program participants from to show a growing popularity of the program. 40+ for a 30 seat program would be great.
- > More under-40 professionals in leadership positions across all career paths throughout Columbus



BIG IDEA 2

PLANT YOUR ROOTS



DESCRIPTION

What constitutes a high quality of life? As defined by the World Health Organization, it's the individual's perception of their life in relation to their goals, aspirations, and concerns (1995). This intricate concept hinges on factors such as background, career ambitions, economic standing, and more. Henderson (2000) outlines indicators like education, employment, energy, environment, health, human rights, infrastructure, public safety, recreation, and shelter. Regrettably, several of these indicators are lacking beyond specific pockets in Columbus. In discussions with community members under 40, a prevailing sentiment emerges: "Columbus offers limited activities," "living outside the city is financially better," or "I lack connections here." With unaffordable housing, scarce recreation beyond Downtown Columbus, lack of connections, and low median salaries, the sought-after quality of life for young professionals remains absent.

Establishing an environment that retains youthful talent below 40 in Columbus and Muscogee County requires the establishment of a standard of living that encompasses these factors specifically tailored for young talent. Recognizing these pivotal elements, the Fountain of Youth proposes the revitalization of once thriving districts to transform into a potential incubator community that embodies the core aspects of drawing young talent below 40. By breathing life into these once-thriving districts and neighborhoods, Fountain of Youth aims to tackle the challenge of a solitary Columbus locale by offering housing, recreation, and above all, a sense of community.

One piece of the community of Columbus that needs additional focus is the military families associated with Fort Moore. Fort Moore is a major asset to Columbus. Currently there are very few options for military families to remain in Columbus after their service. This focus would be to help cultivate those individuals

to become a vital part of our community. Columbus Technical College is working to bring The VECTR (Veterans Education Career Transition Resource) Workforce Development Center to be located right at the entrance to Fort Moore. This program is perfect for the annual population of over 2,500 existing military members to enhance their employable skills and credentials and for military spouses to earn transferable credentials while stationed in Columbus - and remain in Columbus as a part of the area's high demand skilled workforce. With the addition of this program, it is imperative that we find a way to help military families feel like they have a place in Columbus with the revitalization of a chosen district. Many needs of military families are the same as other young families or young singles, but the sense of community, which we are proposing in our revitalization effort, is one that will help our service men and women and their families feel like Columbus is a place where they can plant their roots.

SCOPE OF INITIATIVE

The aspiration for Columbus/Muscogee County is to become a top destination for Young Professionals to reside. To realize this, it is essential to enrich the quality of life for young talent. Columbus can embark on this journey by identifying a community with potential for community development, gain input from the community district, and develop a comprehensive redevelopment plan using the ideas of young professionals, thereby engaging and retaining talent under the age of 40. After assessing numerous districts within Columbus, the Fountain of Youth recommends various districts and neighborhoods:

ANDERSON VILLAGE

Anderson Village, bordered by 2nd Avenue, 42nd Street, River Road, and 38th Street, served as the solution to the returning World War II soldiers between 1940 to 1950. It comprises 169 small two and three bedroom brick cottages with many of the residents being employees of Bibb Mill or Anderson Mill. Today, Anderson Village remains with many of the original structures in place, and still retains the unique half wagon-wheel street structure surrounding Anderson Village Park. Historic Columbus reports that local housing developer, Neighborworks Columbus, has renovated some of the long vacant homes and helped place affordable mortgages on them for new owners (Historic Columbus, 2020). The shape of this neighborhood and current developer involvement could make it a great option to revitalize as a community for young community members.

MIDCITY YARDS

MidCity Yards also possess the potential to create a community ideal for young talent with its continued

development and ideal location near UpTown and MidTown. Due to revitalization of the industrial Columbus and the long-time industrial hub with new entertainment businesses such as Fetch Park Columbus and Scofflaw Brewing Columbus, this is already a neighborhood that young community members are frequenting. Increasing housing development near these businesses could invite young singles and families to live in this area. With proximity to Veterans Parkway, this would be a great spot for those who need to commute within Columbus.

LIBERTY HERITAGE DISTRICT

The Liberty Heritage District is another great choice due to its potential for public/private redevelopment, historical importance, and proximity to recreation hubs and major businesses such as UpTown, MidTown, and the prospective MidCity Yards. The Liberty Heritage District encompasses 3rd through 6th Avenues south of 8th Street and between 5th and 6th Avenues south of 11th Street. The highlight is The Liberty Theatre, the city's first Black theater, which hosted acts like Ma Rainey, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Lena Horne, and other noteworthy Black performers. The Liberty District, home to nationally registered historic sites like Ma Rainey's house and the First African Baptist Church, presents an ideal locale for a community focused on young talent below 40. Lansford Huff (2020a) reaffirmed the district's potential by envisioning a vibrant "Magic City" with multifaceted spaces for work, leisure, greenery, residences, and entertainment. With nurturing, the Liberty District can rise anew and flourish akin to Uptown Columbus.

HISTORICAL PHOTO OF LIBERTY HERITAGE DISTRICT NEIGHBORHOOD (LANSFORD HUFF, 2020B)



An example of a similar successful project is Sioux Falls’ Cathedral District. They were able to achieve success by transforming into a community centered on involvement, heritage celebration, and neighborly engagement. Harnessing the intimacy of a small town, the district orchestrated events to unite neighbors socially. The team strongly believes capitalizing the significance of historic and culturally significant neighborhoods will benefit not only the young residents, but the community as a whole.

Columbus can achieve this same success by gathering information from current 25-40 year olds in the area and working with a developer or a group of developers, and neighborhood stakeholders, like the historical society, to plan the revitalization effort in a way that respects the current neighborhood and breathes new life into

the district. The first step in the reimagining of these neighborhoods is to convene Town Hall meetings involving major stakeholders, current residents, business organizations, churches, and city officials and representatives. This is a large initiative, and we recommend that at least a part-time Project Manager be hired to support neighborhood revitalization. Once key wants and needs are identified, the Project Manager needs to meet with key stakeholders in each proposed district to identify current happenings and the wants and needs of the current community. The revitalized district should be one that welcomes revitalization efforts. Once a district is chosen, the Project Manager will need to research specific zoning laws and work with the City to rezone any areas if needed to allow a developer to begin their project with as few barriers as possible.



TIMELINE & ACTION STEPS

SHORT TERM

- > Hire a Project Manager. This needs to be at least a part-time position, but initial work could benefit from a full-time candidate to get the project started. The position should be advertised and a candidate hired in 2024, preferably before mid-year.
- > Revisit the Columbus Georgia Consolidated Government Liberty District Master Plan (2003) and the 2038 Comprehensive Plan.
- > Establish a steering committee composed of young professionals in various sectors - for profit, nonprofit organizations, real estate, arts, residents of neighborhoods, and etc. This should be one of the first tasks of the Project Manager, and this team should be put together 3 months after the PM hire date.
- > Develop a community survey and begin distributing it to citizens of Columbus, especially those in the under 40 population. This can be done through social media marketing, traditional print materials, on college campuses, and through community meetings.
- > Collect survey responses with citizens who are representative of our YP population, beginning in the fall of 2024 with data being analyzed and quantified through 2026 to determine the wants of the district
- > Review survey results and use those to identify an ideal neighborhood and district

MEDIUM TERM

- > Choose a neighborhood district and begin creating an overall master plan that shows the vision of the revitalization efforts by 2027

- > Revisit zoning laws to determine districts and neighborhoods as an entertainment district to attract young talent
- > Focus economic development efforts on adaptive re-use of existing buildings and in-fill with an emphasis on small business growth like shops and restaurants that are essential in creating a vibrant nightlife
- > Increase market rate residential critical mass; residential uses in downtown should be focused on attracting market rate investors and buyers/renters to diversify those neighborhoods.
- > Present the master plan to neighborhood stakeholders in a way similar to the town hall meetings for information gathering between 2027 and 2028

LONG TERM

- > Receive bids from neighborhood developers to carry out the ideal master plan for the desired neighborhood
- > Accept bids for appropriate projects, and begin breaking ground on key neighborhood pieces by 2030. Construction can be long term, but should ideally have projects that will be completed within 1-5 years in order to see community progress
- > Work with the City to provide incentives for developers to build or update properties in a way that will decrease blight and increase community activity

BUDGET

ESTIMATED BUDGET OF PROPOSED "PLANT YOUR ROOTS" PLAN

Item	Amount	QTY.	Income	Expense	Additional Information
Project Manager	\$40,000	1		\$40,000	Salary for research and planning
Town Hall Meetings	\$1,000	3		3,000	Town hall meetings include food and drinks for attendees.
City-wide surveys (advertising)	\$2,000	1		\$2,000	Budget amount for promoting the survey to gather what young professionals want in a community
Commission Urban Planner to Redesign	\$15,000	1		\$15,000	Based on the surveys of identified wants and needs the district, redesign with range in expenses
City Match for Investment for Preservation of Liberty Theater or Other Historical Site	\$100,000	1		\$100,000	Match needed in order to gain support for redevelopment grants
Various Developer Incentives	\$750,000	1		\$750,000	To revitalize and remodel different parts of neighborhoods
Choice Neighborhood Grant	\$500,000	1	\$500,000		Maximum amount; must be used for public or HUD-assisted housing
Georgia Heritage Grant		1	\$100,000		State-funded grant for preservation of Liberty Theater or other historical site. Requires match.
Community Fundraising Effort for Key Community Center	\$160,000	1	\$160,000		Used to develop central hub in community (e.g., Liberty Theater)
Community Development Block Grant Allocation development	\$150,000	1	\$150,000		Allocation of CDBG program funds given to Columbus/Muscogee County for community

POSSIBLE FUNDING SOURCES

- > U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development
 - > Choice Neighborhood Grant - The Choice Neighborhoods program leverages significant public and private dollars to support locally driven strategies that address struggling neighborhoods with distressed public or HUD-assisted housing through a comprehensive approach to neighborhood transformation. Maximum award \$500,000 (Choice Neighborhoods, n.d.).
 - > Community Development Block Grant Program - The CDBG program is a federally funded block grant to states that focus on benefiting low to moderate income people by providing resources for livable neighborhoods, economic empowerment, and decent housing (CDBG, n.d.). The Consolidated Government of Columbus/ Muscogee county is a recipient of these funds each year and received about \$1.3 million in 2017. According to the comprehensive plan, this amount was expected to be similar through 2023 (Columbus Muscogee Consolidated, 2018). A portion of these funds could be used to revitalize the chosen neighborhood district.
- > Georgia Heritage Grant
 - > State-funded grant that will match a city's contribution to preserving a historical site through development activities (roof, foundation, and window repair) or pre-development activities (construction documents, feasibility studies, and preservation plans) (Georgia Heritage Grant, n.d.). This could be used to make necessary repairs to the Liberty Theater, and preserve its historical status in the community by allowing it to reopen to the public.
- > Columbus Consolidated Government
- > The Development Authority of Columbus, Georgia
- > Columbus 2025
- > Local Community Support

EXPECTED IMPACT

The expected impact of a reimagined district is the growth of Columbus' population, leading to cultural and economic growth and more recreation options for young talent. Revitalizing a district will decrease blight and unoccupied commercial and residential buildings in the chosen district. Creating

a visually appealing community that truly serves as a community for the younger population of Columbus is key in giving those people a way to connect to their neighbors and city and encourage them to plant their roots in Columbus.

MEASURES OF SUCCESS

- > 80% participation rate in community surveys of those aged 18-40 to gain information on what is most important to the young population in Columbus
- > Creation of a full neighborhood development plan within five years of beginning the information gathering process
- > Create a community that young community members will be proud of and that they will want to help maintain for generations to come



BIG IDEA 3

CONNECT COLUMBUS



DESCRIPTION

Job markets, housing, and the general attitudes of the Millennial and Gen Z generations have made “adulting” look quite different than it did for previous generations.

According to The Deloitte Global 2022 GenZ & Millennial Survey, young professionals are concerned about the state of our world, and they are fighting to reconcile their desire to do something meaningful with the everyday struggles and financial stressors that we are seeing in today's economy (Deloitte, 2022). However, many companies have found that in post-COVID world, their employees can do their jobs effectively with a combination of remote and in-office work. This allows young professionals more freedom when they are looking for the community that studies say they crave. Millennials are the current target generation for under 40, and the most important things millennials consider when moving to a community are:

- > Career opportunities
- > Convenience and the presence of a thriving, walkable, downtown area
- > Delivery service availability
- > Pet-friendly housing and amenities
- > Community events
- > The ability to know their neighbors (Johnson, n.d.)

Specific areas of Columbus already meet many of these criteria. The Uptown district serves as a vibrant downtown with entertainment, retail, and restaurant options, all within a few blocks. New developments, such as Fetch Park and Scofflaw Brewery serve as pet-friendly entertainment, and many of our conversations with members of the community describe Columbus as having a “small-town” feel where residents can make friends and

build community. An area that is lacking, however, is career development and access to high-paying jobs. A unique way to provide new job opportunities to those living in Columbus is to work with the state and other cities to create faster and more convenient transportation opportunities for commuters.

The *Fountain of Youth* suggests that that the proposal for a high speed rail from Atlanta to Columbus, with a stop in Newnan, be reconsidered by City and State officials. This transportation method would allow young professionals to easily commute to work in Atlanta, where they would have a greater job variety and the potential to earn money that more closely aligns with Columbus's cost of living, while settling down in Columbus where they can build a sense of community. The City of Columbus conducted a feasibility study in 2014 with funds from the Georgia Department of Transportation grants and private donations. This study found that a high-speed passenger rail was feasible. However, the plan seems to have largely been tabled since then. We suggest that the City government and local stakeholders renew interest in this rail and begin lobbying efforts to get the Columbus leg of the already proposed high speed rail system through Georgia back on the map. Atlanta is expected to grow at levels that the current infrastructure cannot sustain (Wingfield, 2019), so the commuter rail connecting Georgia's first and second largest cities would benefit both communities and its citizens.

Columbus has a lower cost of living and lower housing prices relative to Atlanta, but Columbus' average income is much lower, and it has not kept up with

its own housing prices, one of the core categories in rating cost of living for a community. During our community interviews, we saw that many people in Columbus are having to take on second jobs just to be able to pay rent and necessary bills. The average price paid for a home in the Columbus/Muscogee County area in June, 2023 was \$247,700 (Realtor.com, 2023) while the average household income for those aged 25-44 was \$51,737 (Columbus Demographics, 2023). With mortgage lenders advising that a buyer should look at homes within 3 to 5 times their annual income, young professionals making an average salary in Columbus can afford homes in the \$155,000 to \$258,000 range, and should only be towards the top of that range if they have no other debt (Fidelity, 2023). With many Millennials and now Gen Z emerging from college with student debt, the idea of homeownership is slowly getting further and further away, at least under the traditional lifestyle model where you live, work, and play in the same community.

Additionally, the Millennial and the Gen Z generations are more concerned with environmental impact than previous generations (Deloitte, 2022), and the high

speed rail, once finished, would provide a more eco-friendly transportation method than the traditional single driver in one car that we see so often.

This high speed passenger rail is a long-term goal for Columbus, but it will take many years to be planned and implemented. While this idea is in the planning and development phase, Columbus has the important task of making itself the kind of community in which everyone wants to belong. Columbus is a creative and interesting city located in a beautiful region of our country, and the city needs to do a better job of promoting that. Other ideas proposed by this group and others give excellent suggestions on how Columbus can improve its community, City government, and economic foundations. The successful future of Columbus depends on making it a community in which young professionals want to live and play, even if they work in a larger city or remotely. If the goal is for people to call Columbus home, it must first feel like home.

SCOPE OF INITIATIVE

High speed passenger rails are prevalent throughout Europe and Asia with great success, as they are safer and faster than driving and are much more environmentally friendly. The feasibility study conducted by HNTB Corporation in 2014 estimated that the rail line could be built by 2030. Obviously, that timeframe will have shifted. However, the study predicted that by 2030, the line could expect to provide 1,100,000 rides. Since 2014, we believe that the general public, and, specifically, young professionals, have become more interested in environmental consequences of long commutes, car prices have increased, and the cost of gas has risen. It will be important for updated numbers and estimates to be provided to make sure that the rail is still feasible. Our group does not foresee any reason why the rail would not be, in fact, more practical in 2023 than it was in before.

In February of 2014, the Mayor's Commission on Passenger Rail presented a feasibility study conducted by HNTB Corporation. The study was funded by discretionary funds from GDOT, the

Columbus Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), local businesses, and civic groups. By analyzing data collection, forecasting, planning and integration, qualitative economic and financial analysis, and stakeholder involvement, the study found that an express or a regional high-speed rail from Columbus to Atlanta with one stop in Newnan was, in fact, feasible. An express high-speed rail provides frequent, quick service between major population centers with few intermediate stops and uses electric locomotives with top speeds of 150-220 mph, but must be constructed on all new tracks. A regional high-speed rail also connects major areas with infrequent stops, but can be constructed using highway corridors and are powered by diesel locomotives with top speeds of 110-150 mph (HNTB Corporation, 2014).

The Federal Railroad Administration considers an operating ratio greater than 1 to be feasible, and both the regional and the express option are greater than the 1 threshold based on the 2014 feasibility study (HNTB Corporation, 2014).

ESTIMATED OPERATING RATIOS FROM 2030-2050 OF PROPOSED PASSENGER RAIL (HNTB CORPORATION, 2014)

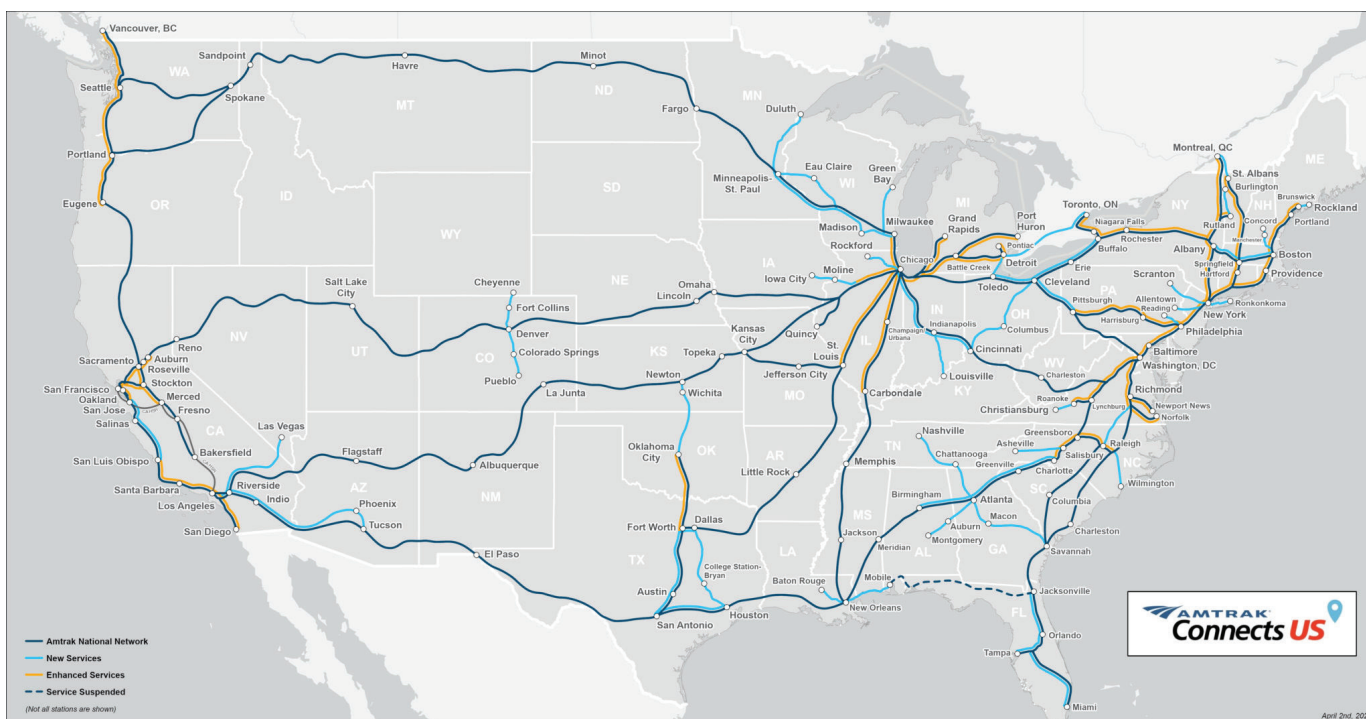
Operating Ratios	2030	2040	2050
Emerging	0.83	0.88	0.95
Regional	1.15	1.24	1.36
Express	1.21	1.34	1.50

As we can see, both the regional and express high-speed rail options meet the feasibility test by dividing operating revenue by operating expenses. Both options should be considered within Georgia as a way to connect Columbus to Atlanta.

Currently there is no passenger rail option at all between Columbus and the rest of the country. Amtrak's current rail system and expected future expansion. The current stop closest to Columbus right now is in Atlanta, and even under the proposed

rail expansion the closest would be in Auburn or Montgomery, AL (Amtrak Connects Us, 2021). The planned rail system links Atlanta, Augusta, Macon, and Savannah, but doesn't include Columbus. By ensuring that Columbus becomes a stop on the proposed track development designs, City stakeholders will open the doors for increased tourism, decreased migration of the young population from Columbus, and additional industry to relocate to the Columbus/Chattahoochee Valley region.

AMTRAK (2021) CONNECTS US MAP



The Chattahoochee River plays a large part in the tourism sector of Columbus, and the proposed high speed rail system from Atlanta would help better connect Columbus to the rest of the state. Outdoor enthusiasts could hop on a train in Atlanta, and be in Columbus within an hour, much faster than the two hour drive if you are lucky with traffic. Allowing tourists to commute into town in this manner takes some of the stress off of their trip and gives them more time to spend in Columbus, even if they are just coming for the day. Decreasing travel time from Atlanta would give these people an extra two hours or more to spend in the City, where they can browse shops, participate in more activities, and dine in Columbus' best restaurants. Having a commuter train stop in town will also encourage additional overnight stays by providing a place for layovers between trips and an appealing destination that can be accessed without driving.

It is a fact as old as money itself that people will move and settle where they can find jobs that pay them a livable wage. For a lot of young professionals,

that place has been Atlanta. However, living in the metro Atlanta area comes with its own challenges and pitfalls, including a higher cost of living and high traffic levels. Connecting Columbus to Atlanta by rail could give young professionals in Columbus the benefits of living in a smaller, more affordable community while also giving them access to big-city perks like higher salaries. Offering this group of people the opportunity to commute to the "big city" by high speed rail gives them the chance to stay in Columbus and help it continue to grow.

Additionally, with high-speed access to Atlanta and other cities, we could see the migration of industry from higher tax-base areas, or areas with a high cost of doing business, to the more affordable and still accessible smaller cities, like Columbus. The Silicon River group has explored ways to encourage business and industry growth in Columbus, and the high speed rail could be a unique way to attract companies from larger metro areas to this region.

TIMELINE & ACTION STEPS

SHORT TERM

- > Designate someone within the City government and a board of citizens to keep up to date with high speed rail developments on the state and federal levels. We need a designated grant writer to apply for funds to complete environmental studies. These positions should be designated and/or filled by the end of 2024 in order to begin work on the feasibility study.
- > Reconnect with HNTB to see if we would need a new feasibility study or if the one they conducted in 2014 is still applicable, ideally by 2025.
- > Stay on the radar and part of the conversation about high speed rail and transportation on a state level.
- > Begin to enact other GameChangers suggestions to strengthen the fiber and involvement of this community. Some strategies can begin immediately, and others will take a few months to a few years to begin to implement.

MEDIUM TERM

- > Continue to make Columbus an appealing place to live for young professionals.
- > Engage a state level lobbying firm between 2025 and 2030, depending on the results from the conversation about the feasibility study

- > Identify funding for the necessary studies and begin applying for grants and/or federal and state assistance by 2030
- > Ensure that the majority of the right-of-way along I-185 (Figure 5) and I-85 remains state owned.

LONG TERM

- > Work with the State of Georgia, the City of Atlanta, other cities with rail stops, and Amtrak or other railroad developers to come up with a comprehensive plan for Georgia's high speed rail. Much research will need to take place, including environmental, traffic, and community impact studies. Research would ideally be complete between 2030 and 2035 depending on the timeline of previous action points.
- > Determine who would operate the rail. Will it be a State program, a combined City program, or run separately through Amtrak as a commuter rail company?
- > Build a high speed rail connecting the two most populated cities in Georgia. Site preparation and construction will take a while. The 2014 feasibility study estimated that the rail could be constructed by 2030, giving it a lead time of a little over 15 years. If everything started at the beginning of 2024, by the same timeline, the rail could be completed around 2040.



BUDGET

The following table depicts the financial results of the 2014 Columbus to Atlanta High Speed Rail Feasibility Study. These numbers are expected to still be similar

to the 2014 results, though they will need to be adjusted for current inflation.

FINANCIAL RESULTS OF 2014 "COLUMBUS TO ATLANTA HIGH SPEED RAIL FEASIBILITY STUDY" (HTNB CORPORATION & COLUMBUS CONSOLIDATED GOVERNMENT, 2016)

Year	Annual Operating Ratio			
		2030	2040	2050
Emerging	Total Revenue	\$13.8 million	\$15.1 million	\$16.7 million
	Total Cost	\$16.6 million	\$17.1 million	\$17.5 million
	Operating Ratio	0.83	0.88	0.95
Regional	Total Revenue	\$20.5 million	\$22.3 million	\$24.6 million
	Total Cost	\$17.8 million	\$18.1 million	\$18.1 million
	Operating Ratio	1.15	1.24	1.36
Express	Total Revenue	\$23.6 million	\$25.8 million	\$28.4 million
	Total Cost	\$19.5 million	\$19.3 million	\$18.9 million
	Operating Ratio	1.21	1.34	1.50

** Notes: FRA seeks Operation Ratio > 1.0
Revenue surplus can be used to help pay capital bonds*

BUDGET

ESTIMATED BUDGET OF PROPOSED PASSENGER RAIL IN COLUMBUS

Line Item	Amount	QTY.	Income	Expense	Additional Information
Revisit feasibility study and update for current conditions	\$250,000	1		\$250,000	Cost of similar study commissioned by NCDOT in 2022 (Guner, 2022)
Hire lobbyist/activists to make case for Columbus rail line to state government	\$25,000	1		\$25,000	
Supplement Columbus Grant Coordinator to fully research and apply for state and federal grants relating to rail	\$10,000	3		\$30,000	Estimated three-year expense
Community education and outreach efforts planning and materials	\$10,000	1		\$10,000	Educational meetings, promotional material, etc. over 3-5 year
Site designation	\$500,000	1		\$500,000	Amount to purchase or repurpose land for community station rail right-of-way
Columbus train station design and construction	\$1.5M	1		\$1.5M	Estimated community/ government costs for station construction
DOT Community Planning Grant match	\$42,000	1		\$42,000	Match for Federal Grant for feasibility study
DOT Regional Partnership Challenge Grants	\$100,000	1		\$100,000	Columbus' share of match for Federal Grant
DOT Community Planning Grants	\$208,000	1	\$208,000		80% funding for feasibility study and community outreach materials

BUDGET

ESTIMATED BUDGET OF PROPOSED PASSENGER RAIL IN COLUMBUS

Line Item	Amount	QTY.	Income	Expense	Additional Information
DOT Regional Partnership Challenge Grants	\$1.6 M	1	1.6 M		80% funding for construction of train station/terminals
Atlanta Regional Partnership Challenge Grant Match	\$200,000	1	\$200,000		
Newnan Regional Partnership Challenge Grant Match	\$100,000	1	\$100,000		

POSSIBLE FUNDING SOURCES

- > Federal grants
 - > Regional Partnership Challenge Grants - Awards Neighborhood Access and Equity (NAE) funds to two or more applicants to address a regional challenge related to equitable access and mobility. Requires 20% local match (Department of Transportation, 2023).
 - > Community Planning Grants - Reconnecting Communities Pilot (RCP) funds can be used to fund public engagement activities and feasibility studies specific to community access to transportation. Requires 20% local match (Department of Transportation, 2023).
- > Atlanta Regional Commission (the Atlanta Region's Plan allocates \$173 billion in federal, state, and local funds over the next 30 years to improve regional mobility)
- > Airport Commission
- > Development Authority
- > AMTRAK
- > Environmental Advocacy Groups

PARTNERSHIPS/RESOURCES

- > Newnan, Georgia
- > Atlanta, Georgia
- > City of Columbus Consolidated Government
- > Georgia Department of Transportation
- > U.S. Department of Transportation
- > Federal Railroad Administration
- > AMTRAK

EXPECTED IMPACT

- > Will jumpstart the revitalization of Columbus (U.S. High Speed Rail Association)
- > Will foster economic development along the train route (U.S. High Speed Rail Association)
- > Will broaden labor markets and offer a wider network of employers (U.S. High Speed Rail Association)
- > Will expand visitor markets and generate additional spending. (Economic Development Research Group - U.S. Conference of Mayors)
- > Will support the growth of technology clusters (Economic Development Research Group - U.S. Conference of Mayors)

MEASURES OF SUCCESS

- > Updated feasibility study with numbers reflecting that the project is still worth pursuing
- > Approval from Federal, State, and Local governments and a rail provider, like Amtrak, to begin work on this project
- > Community support for rail project to show an interest in ridership to support the initiative
- > Economic boom for the City of Columbus, Newnan, and Atlanta with more people living in Columbus while being able to work in Atlanta and evidence of higher day trips from the Atlanta area to Columbus, boosting tourism.

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SECTION

4



SOUTH COLUMBUS SOUL

CHALLENGE QUESTION

According to 2020 US Census data, 20% of people in Muscogee County live in poverty, and our most impoverished areas are centered in South Columbus. In light of this, how can we effectively address income disparity in South Columbus and increase economic mobility in our community?

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INTRODUCTION

Columbus, Georgia, a city renowned for its rich history and vibrant community, is confronted with the pressing issue of income disparity and high poverty rates. According to the 2020 US Census data, a staggering 20% of the population in Muscogee County, which encompasses Columbus, GA is living in poverty (US Census Bureau, 2020). Poverty, as defined here, means not earning enough money before taxes and without counting extras like increases in property value or help received in the form of housing, health care, or food from the government (US Census Bureau, 2023). The specific amount that determines the poverty line varies based on the size and makeup of a family (Income by Location for Columbus, GA).

These statistics emphasize the urgent need for comprehensive solutions to tackle the income disparity prevailing within the community.

INCOME BY LOCATION FOR COLUMBUS, GA (US CENSUS BUREAU, 2023)

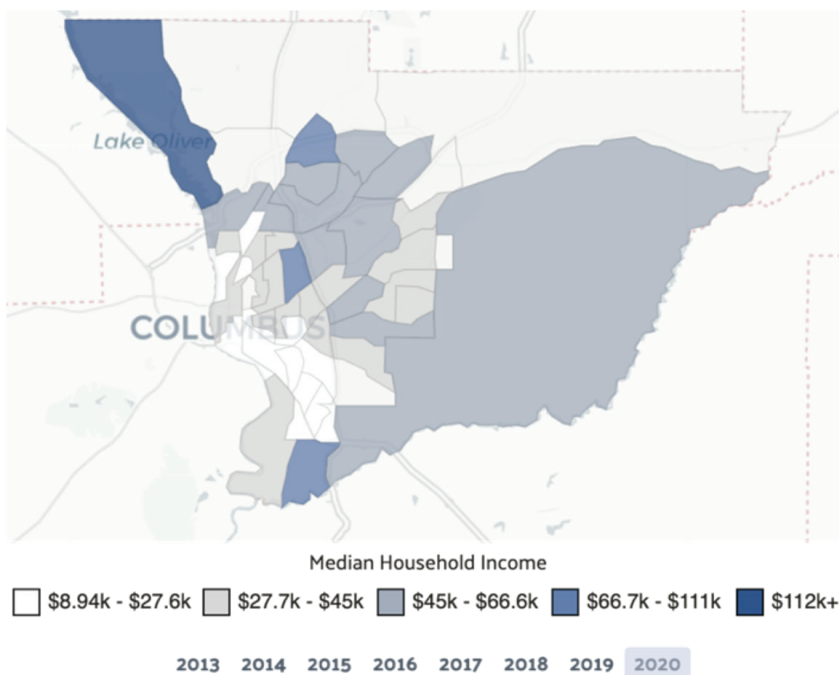
Size of Family Unit	Poverty Line (Average)
1 Person	\$13,788.00
2 People	\$17,529.00
3 People	\$21,559.00
4 People	\$27,740.00
5 People	\$32,865.00
6 People	\$37,161.00
7 People	\$42,156.00
8 People	\$47,093.00
9 People	\$56,325.00

Notably, South Columbus stands out as an area that faces significant economic challenges, with the highest concentration of poverty (Data USA, 2020)(Income by Location for South Columbus, GA). The disparity between North and South Columbus underscores the necessity for targeted interventions aimed at uplifting and empowering the residents in the most impoverished areas. It is crucial to develop strategies that not only alleviate immediate financial burdens but also create opportunities for sustainable economic mobility and growth.

During interviews with community members, several pressing needs and concerns were identified. Affordable housing, income support for individuals falling within the benefits gap, and barriers related to employment and education were commonly cited. These barriers include affordable childcare, access to technology and the internet, and reliable public transportation. Additionally, community members stressed the significance of neighborhood beautification, quality public spaces, and infrastructure improvements to attract business investments and create local employment opportunities for South Columbus residents.

The challenges faced by Columbus are further exacerbated by enduring racial disparities within the city. Historically, South Columbus has had a higher concentration of Black residents compared to other parts of the city. Furthermore, the poverty rate for predominantly Black neighborhoods stands at a staggering 33.8%, more than four times higher than the poverty rate in predominantly white neighborhoods, which is at 10% (US Census Bureau, 2020; Data USA, 2020). These stark differences highlight the immediate need to address poverty and income inequality, particularly in South Columbus, where the impact is most pronounced.

INCOME BY LOCATION FOR SOUTH COLUMBUS, GA (DATA USA, 2020)



THE BIG THREE

Considering these challenges, South Columbus Soul recommends the following soulful initiatives to address income disparity in South Columbus and increase economic mobility within the community:

Cyber Soul

The “Cyber Soul” initiative aims to establish South Columbus as a digital city of the future using the latest technology, broadband, and by expanding educational pathways, literacy, and accessibility. The initiative will also provide tech-focused workforce opportunities, enabling the community greater economic mobility and means to eliminate income disparity.

House of Soul

“House of Soul” recommends a neighborhood rejuvenation initiative that strives to increase

property values, reduce crime, mitigate blight, and demonstrate care and pride in the community.

Soul Support

“Soul Support” recommends a workforce development strategy, via direct cash assistance, that provides access to essential resources to low-income individuals and families to address common barriers to employment and create a livable income for the labor force in South Columbus.





BIG IDEA 1

CYBER SOUL



DESCRIPTION

In today's world, a reliable internet connection is crucial for achieving success. Broadband connectivity opens up a myriad of opportunities, allowing individuals to access education, socialize, find employment, and acquire essential life skills. The lack of such access presents significant challenges for K-12 students, making it difficult for them to complete assignments and conduct research.

Additionally, it impedes high school graduates from submitting college applications and exploring their future options. Furthermore, this lack of connectivity affects adults, rendering them unable to communicate effectively in today's digital society. Consequently, they are barred from accessing job opportunities, upskilling programs, and participating in various activities. These examples collectively create barriers that impede economic mobility and perpetuate income disparities. Keeping these challenges in mind, Cyber Soul proposes a comprehensive solution consisting of four components to address the broadband and internet challenges.

Our four components are as follows:

- 1. Make Columbus a Broadband Ready Community**
- 2. Create digital literacy and web safety education programs**
- 3. Increase awareness of the Affordable Connectivity Program**
- 4. Develop a Youth Tech Prep program**

SCOPE OF INITIATIVE

The South Columbus region should collaborate with community partners, leaders, and stakeholders to build a “cyber city” by taking several critical steps. The first crucial step is attaining the Broadband Ready designation through the Georgia Department of Community Affairs. The Broadband Ready designation signals to investors that Columbus is prepared for broadband infrastructure investment and reduces barriers to such investments. The current internet providers in Columbus include Windstream, AT&T, Spectrum, Earth Link, Viasat, Xstream by Mediacom, WOW!, and Hughes Net. Access to high-speed internet is associated with higher quality of life, productivity, and rural employment (Canfield et. al., 2023)(Edquist, 2022) (Isley & Low, 2022). By enhancing broadband access, South Columbus can be proactive and intentional in providing comprehensive online digital literacy training and web safety education to its students and young adults.

It is vital to equip these individuals with the necessary skills to access information safely and securely. To achieve this, the Muscogee County School System should incorporate a digital literacy and web safety program into its curriculum, going beyond the basic computer skills and extending into internet usage and online safety for students beyond K-5. The development of local partnerships would enable the creation of workshops, classes, and online resources catering to community members of all ages. Organizations that could join such a collaboration include Columbus Technical College, Goodwill, edX, and Girls Who Code. This collaborative effort would enhance individuals’ abilities to effectively navigate the online world. Furthermore, improved connectivity across the region would empower adults to engage in virtual job fairs and utilize online job boards, granting them broader access to better employment

opportunities. Thus, broader access in South Columbus would offer targeted training programs focused on work-from-home opportunities that were previously out of reach for many.

South Columbus should leverage access to affordable internet through the Affordable Connectivity Program, a Federal Communications Commission benefit program that helps ensure households can afford the broadband they need for work, school, healthcare, and more. The benefit provides a discount of up to \$30 per month toward internet service for eligible households. Eligible households can also receive a one-time discount of up to \$100 to purchase a laptop, desktop computer, or tablet from participating providers if they contribute more than \$10 and less than \$50 toward the purchase price.

The Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) offers one monthly service discount and one device discount per household. More than half (73.7%) of South Columbus households qualify for the Affordable Connectivity Program, as many fall within 200% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines (American Community Survey, 2021). Additionally, eligibility extends to households with members participating in programs such as Free and Reduced-Price School Lunch Program or School Breakfast Program, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, Federal Housing Assistance, Public Housing, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), among others.

While Columbus has made strides in offering access to hotspots through public spaces such as libraries and fire stations, Columbus should launch a campaign and work directly with the Muscogee County School District and other partners to

advertise both publicly available internet sites and the Affordable Connectivity Program. Maximizing the enrollment of eligible households to ACP can be done through models such as [LinkHealth's](#) which uses healthcare waiting rooms and traditional GOTV (Get Out the Vote) efforts to promote increased enrollment.

South Columbus should ensure that every parent and/or guardian of a student in a Title 1 school knows that they qualify for this benefit and launch creative ways to get sign ups such as a digital connection block party, direct text messaging outreach, and visibility at major school events such as open house and registration, first day of school, and sporting events. In addition, canvassing should be done in South Columbus neighborhoods, increasing sign ups on the spot. Participating companies like Mediacom and WOW! Internet should serve as partners for this initiative and provide promotional materials and funding for advertising these heavily free or reduced benefits.

Finally, to provide a comprehensive and inclusive approach, South Columbus should introduce a comprehensive Youth Tech Program that offers

online services akin to a college and career academy. This program can be modeled similarly to Girls Who Code. The program offers free coding clubs and summer immersion programs for girls in grades 3 to 12. Through hands-on projects, mentorship, and exposure to real-world tech careers, Girls Who Code aims to empower girls with the skills and confidence needed to pursue careers in technology and computer science. During the program, participants learn various programming languages, work on projects that address real-world issues, and have the opportunity to interact with professionals in the tech industry. The curriculum also emphasizes problem-solving, teamwork, and leadership skills to equip young girls with the tools they need to thrive in the digital world. While the program in South Columbus would cater to all genders, many of the tenants of the program would remain similar. This program would cater to the needs of the youth, providing them with valuable resources and guidance for their future endeavors. By implementing these measures, South Columbus can foster a thriving cyber city that empowers its residents and ensures their success in the digital age.

TIMELINE & ACTION STEPS

SHORT TERM

- > Receive Broadband Ready designation from the Georgia Department of Community Affairs
 - > Online Application: <https://broadband.georgia.gov/broadband-community-application-information>
 - > The Economic or Community Development Department to complete on behalf of the City of Columbus.
- > Create digital literacy/internet safety education.
 - > Extension of current Georgia Standards of Excellence Standards (GSE), set by the state of Georgia, these standards outline the targeted learning expectations and outcomes for students attending any K-12 public school in the state of Georgia to include continued information/learning of Digital Literacy and practice of internet safety for middle and high schools.
 - > Partnerships with local institutions (libraries, technical colleges, Boys & Girls Clubs of the Chattahoochee Valley) and service organizations to provide free information and courses to the community about digital literacy and internet safety.
- > Youth Tech Program Development
 - > Begin to develop targeted partnerships with schools & non-profit organizations (Muscogee County School District, United Way of the Chattahoochee Valley, and youth serving nonprofit organizations) that have access to youth and pilot small number of courses and increased engagement opportunities with advanced technology.

MEDIUM TERM GOALS

- > Create online job fairs and job posting boards for the South Columbus community.
 - > At least 2 virtual job fairs per year.
 - > Community partners, like Goodwill Industries of the Southern Rivers, to manage online job posting service.
- > Create Tech job training and work from home training
- > Youth Tech Certification
 - > Explore opportunities for certification opportunities for youth (Microsoft, Google, CompTIA (A+, CASP+, CYSA+, Cloud+), etc.) and provide opportunities at local schools, pop-up clinics, and easily accessible venues.
- > Affordable Internet
 - > Ensure Affordable Connectivity Program signage and sign up information is available at all public spaces (city halls, libraries, schools, fire stations).
 - > Include information about signing up on public hotspot splash pages.
 - > Targeted ads on social media paid for by the media companies to promote this benefit.

LONG TERM GOALS

- > Youth Tech Continuation
 - > Continue youth certification programs provided in the medium terms with an emphasis on providing certifications for adult and family members. Certifications provided via similar delivery methods.
- > Affordable Internet
 - > Automatic enrollment when a qualifying individual interacts with the city of Columbus on a qualifying eligibility event (such as applying for SNAP, driver's license, school enrollment).

BUDGET

SHORT-TERM

Line Item	Cost	Frequency
Contractor to support buildout of Tech Education Program and Community Broadband Application	\$10,000	One-Time
Affordable Internet Awareness Materials (multimedia)	\$2,000	One-Time
Grant to Educational Entity to “house” program	\$10,000	Annually
Sub-Total	\$22,000	

MEDIUM-TERM

Line Item	Cost	Frequency
CompTIA IT Fundamental + Certification	\$134 x 15 = \$2,010	Annually (per cohort)
CompTIA Network+ Certification	\$358 x 15 = \$5,370	Annually (per cohort)
Apple Certified Support Professional	\$250 x 5 = \$1,250	Annually (per cohort)
Cisco Certified Network Associate	\$300 x 5 = 1,500	Annually (per cohort)
Computers for Pop-Up Certification Courses	\$250 x 15 = \$3,750	Annually (per cohort)
Sub-Total	\$13,880	

LONG-TERM

Line Item	Cost	Frequency
Materials for Pop-Up Family Tech Camps	\$5,000	Annually (per cohort)
Another Round of Certifications for Additional Participants	\$10,130	Annually (per cohort)
Sub-Total	\$15,130	Annually (per cohort)
TOTAL PROJECT COST	\$51,010	



POSSIBLE FUNDING SOURCES

- > United Way of the Chattahoochee Valley
- > Federal Funding
 - > USDA Rural Development
 - > Southeast Crescent Regional Commission
- > Appropriations in partnership with the state legislator
- > Georgia Technology Authority
- > Grants
 - > Department of Energy: EECBG Grant
 - > Foundations specializing in Technology Infrastructure
- > Utility Companies i.e. Liberty Utilities and/or Georgia Power

POTENTIAL PARTNERSHIPS

- > Muscogee County School District
- > City of Columbus
- > Georgia Technology Authority (GTA)
- > Department of Community Affairs (DCA)
- > United Way of the Chattahoochee Valley
- > The Urban League of the River Valley, Inc.
- > Boys & Girls Clubs of Chattahoochee Valley (BGCCV)
- > YMCA
- > Girls, Inc.
- > Broadband Service Providers i.e. AT&T, Spectrum, Wow!, Verizon, TMobile, Starlink

EXPECTED IMPACT

- > Increase in technology-sector employment
- > Increased registrations for the Affordable Connectivity Program
- > Increased remote roles in South Columbus (as defined)
- > Increased digital literacy among 18-64 demographic
- > Decrease in workforce barriers (transportation, childcare, etc.)

MEASURES OF SUCCESS

- > 80% of youth with basic digital literacy skill set
- > Two annual tech-related job fairs that produce placements in jobs that place at or above the county average wage
- > 60% of participating youth with obtained certifications
- > 40% of participating youth leveraging certifications to obtain skill-based work



BIG IDEA 2

HOUSE OF SOUL



DESCRIPTION

A neighborhood rejuvenation project will prepare the community for economic growth by demonstrating care and pride in South Columbus while providing new opportunities for investors. Addressing the disinvestment in South Columbus has been a longstanding concern, with mention in the 2021 South Columbus Redevelopment Plan and the 2004 Revitalizing Columbus South Report.

Our approach will address existing challenges, such as blight and curb appeal, while proactively mitigating the recurrence of these issues.

Revitalizing the neighborhoods of South Columbus will provide a safer, more beautiful experience for community members. Projects such as the Commons in Detroit and the Block Challenge Grant Program in Des Moines demonstrate how effective community-led revitalization efforts can be. In the short term, clean-up services will create a more welcoming environment for new and existing residents. In the medium and long-term, educational and financial resources will assist residents in maintaining an attractive neighborhood. While aesthetic improvements will improve the quality of life for existing residents, they will also help destigmatize South Columbus and attract new homes and businesses.

One successful Neighborhood Rejuvenation project was implemented in Vienna, Georgia. In conjunction

with its community, the city developed the Gregory Street Neighborhood Revitalization Project, which focused on an area with high blight and deteriorated properties, similar to South Columbus. With funds from a Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) the project removed ten mobile homes, rehabilitated three homes and reconstructed two homes. This project successfully created safety and blight improvements in the community and its housing.

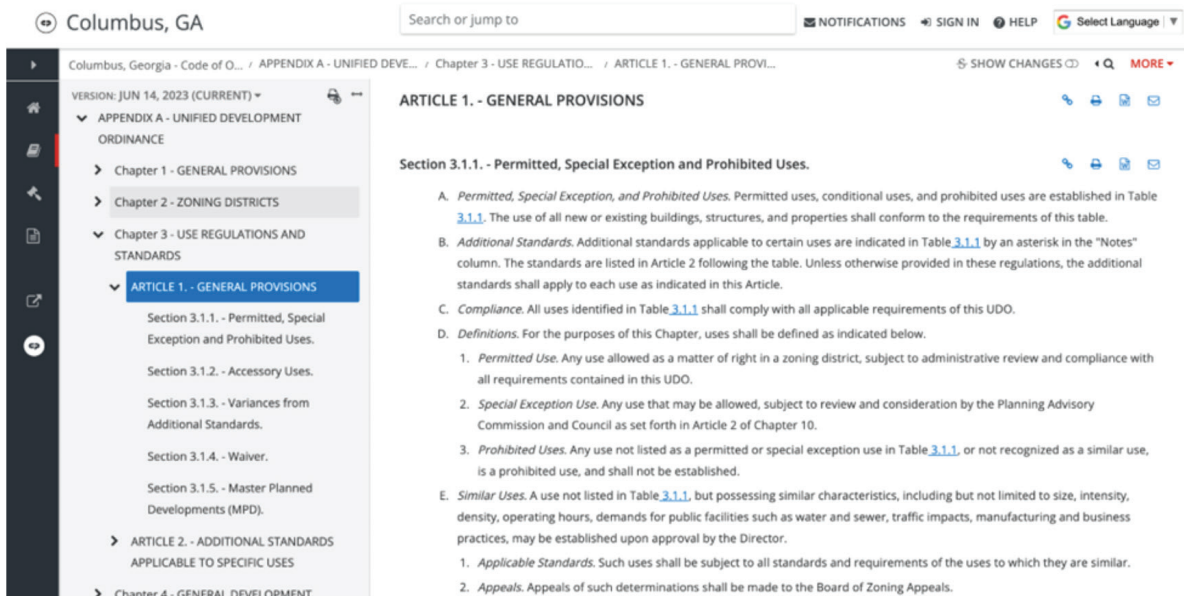
House of Soul intends to serve the existing residents in South Columbus by proactively addressing community disinvestment. Our approach will reduce blight, provide resources to homeowners for upkeep and maintenance, and create quality public spaces out of vacant land. Through legislative programs and collaboration between non-governmental organizations (NGOs), South Columbus can become a thriving place that encourages investment and growth.

SCOPE OF INITIATIVE

Our neighborhood rejuvenation strategy begins with redesigning the City's Building Inspections and Code Enforcement website. Inspections and Code administers and enforces the Unified Development Ordinance (UDO), a compilation of local regulations concerning the use and development of land and buildings, including zoning, subdivision, stormwater, and natural resource conservation. Currently, the City's UDO is posted as a link to Municode, a

digital database hosting local governments' legal documents, where residents need to scroll through all of the City's ordinances in order to access the standards for home maintenance. Navigating this complex site with codes written in legal jargon makes it challenging and time consuming for your average citizens to identify and digest the information they are seeking.

SCREENSHOT OF CITY OF COLUMBUS' UDO ON MUNICODE



The City should consider creating an accessible guide for citizens to understand what the most common citations are and how to avoid fines for residential and commercial structures. The City of Suwanee provides a prime example, where users

are directed to view the code enforcement brochure upon opening the City website. With easier access and clearer language, property owners will find it easier to comply.

CODE ENFORCEMENT GUIDE FROM SUWANEE, GA

SUWANEE'S PROPERTY MAINTENANCE REQUIREMENTS

This brochure highlights some of the major provisions of the City of Suwanee's property maintenance codes in order to enhance understanding and cooperation between the code enforcement division and Suwanee citizens and businesses. Please use this guide to ensure compliance with city codes and to help preserve property values in your neighborhood and throughout Suwanee.



INOPERABLE VEHICLES

All vehicles must be operable and currently licensed or kept in an enclosed garage. No vehicle may be stored outside in a state of disrepair.

VEHICLE PARKING

Vehicles may not be parked on any lawn/yard area. All vehicle parking areas and driveways shall be paved with concrete or asphalt.

TRASH AND DEBRIS

Any worn out, broken, or worthless item, garbage, waste, trash, or other similar debris may not be thrown, deposited, or allowed to accumulate on any property. Dead, broken, or fallen limbs must also be removed from property.

EXTERIOR MAINTENANCE

Exterior property areas must be weathertight and rodent-proof. They must be maintained free of rotted wood, holes, peeling paint, broken windows or doors, and be kept in safe and sanitary condition.

SIGNS

Signs are not allowed in or on any city right-of-way, utility pole, or traffic device. Signs placed on rights-of-way will be removed without warning or notice.

BUILDING PERMITS

Building permits are required for additions, sheds over 120 sq. ft., and most decks, as well as electrical, plumbing, structural, demolition and mechanical work.

Please check with the city's inspections department at 770-945-8996 before doing any work to see if a permit is required.

GRASS AND WEEDS

Overgrown weeds and grass provide breeding grounds for mosquitoes and rodents and negatively influence property values. In addition, noxious weeds such as poison ivy can cause health problems. Grass and weeds must be maintained at a height of 12" or less, and noxious weeds must be removed.

OUTSIDE STORAGE

Miscellaneous items stored outside must be fully screened from view from any adjacent property by a wall, fence, or landscaping. Screening must be constructed and maintained within applicable city codes. Exempt items include patio furniture, swing sets and similar equipment, as well as neatly stacked firewood.

POOLS OF WATER

Standing water is a breeding ground for mosquitoes. Ponds, swimming pools, gutters, buckets, or other receptacles must be maintained free of trash and debris, and must be kept free of standing water.

STORM WATER POLLUTION PREVENTION

No person shall discharge, leave deposit, or allow the accumulation of any substance into any drainage or storm water sewer system. Remember, if it's not rain, it shouldn't go in the storm drain.

For any questions, contact:

CODE ENFORCEMENT OFFICER

770-904-2126

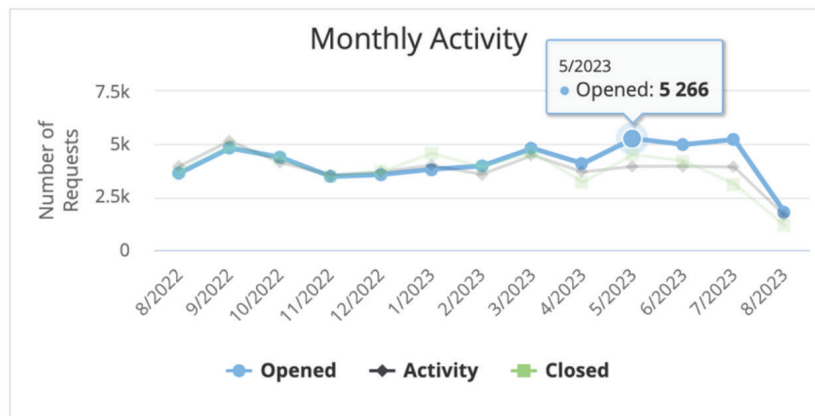
CodeEnforcement@suwanee.com

Additionally, the City should consider increasing the public's awareness of the 311 call center and app. Through 311, citizens can call or submit a digital work order requesting service, registering a complaint, submitting a suggestion, and accessing other government information. 311 is a highly effective tool for citizens to easily relay information directly to the City for quick responses resulting in improved city services, happier citizens, and an

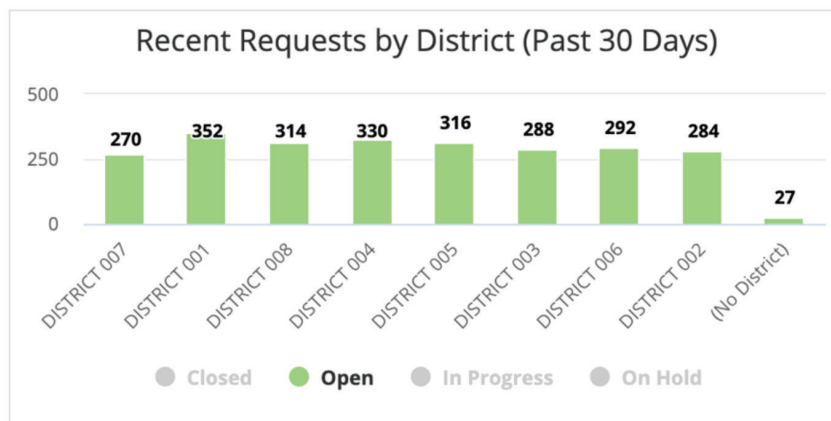
overall better community. The two graphs below are taken from 311's Monthly Statistics report. Code Enforcement Guide from Suwanee, GA shows the total monthly total of 311 tickets opened over the last year and Monthly Quantity of 311 Tickets Opened from August 2022 to August 2023 displays the 30-day rolling quantity of 311 tickets opened by district.

MONTHLY QUANTITY OF 311 TICKETS OPENED FROM AUGUST 2022 TO AUGUST 2023

311 Monthly Statistics



30-DAY ROLLING 311 MONTHLY REQUESTS, TAKEN ON AUGUST 11, 2023



Columbus has a population of 210,000 citizens and a monthly average of 4,337 opened tickets over the last year, resulting in a low volume of opened tickets per capita. This could indicate that there is a general lack of knowledge that a 311 service exists. The City should consider increasing the awareness of 311, primarily through a direct mail campaign targeting the 31903 area code, hosting onsite training/ education sessions at neighborhood meetings, and activating at high trafficked locations and events.

Columbus should expand on its educational resources for homebuyers beyond the initial purchase to include maintenance and upkeep schedules, budgeting, and basic repairs. The City's Inspections and Code department should proactively provide new and existing residents with physical and digital home maintenance guides. They should also provide quarterly seminars with reminders and tutorials for home maintenance duties that correspond to each season. This would require several new staff members in the Code Enforcement division to distribute the materials and lead the seminars. They would also issue "blight warnings" to residents with code violations so the issue may be addressed before a fine is administered. Additionally, the new staff would form a relationship with NeighborWorks to continue the support to new homeowners in South Columbus, as well as connect residents to NeighborWorks if and when they are ready to purchase their homes.

One common barrier to neighborhood improvements is cost. That's why our plan recommends a zero-interest revolving loan program for residents of South Columbus to make repairs on their properties, administered through NeighborWorks. We propose using CDBG Entitlement Funds for the RLF's initial funding. The new staffers in Inspections and Code would connect

residents with NeighborWorks and, if a project qualifies, NeighborWorks may loan residents the money needed to maintain their homes. Qualifying projects may include those which improve the overall appearance of the home and the neighborhood. Applications may include a project scope, timeline, and quotes from three contractors that provide a general estimate of the cost of the project. By incentivizing sustainable home ownership at the same time as increasing property values, we are encouraging economic mobility for residents of South Columbus.

In order to facilitate community involvement, the City of Columbus should create a neighborhood planning unit (NPU), modeled after the NPUs developed in Atlanta, Georgia and Boise, Idaho. An NPU is similar to a citizen board where South Columbus residents gather to discuss ideas and concerns pertaining to their community. Membership in an NPU is open to all residents and business owners of South Columbus; it is a volunteer role that can have internal elections to determine leadership positions. Those leaders will represent the NPU and work with city officials to implement ideas for the community. The creation of a NPU gives South Columbus residents the opportunity for involvement and a "seat at the table" to directly impact what occurs in their community.

The NPU will collaborate with the newly established Neighborhood Navigators to identify immediate issues within South Columbus districts, as well as take inventory of safety indicators, such as street lights. A Neighborhood Navigator is a role within the Columbus Consolidated Government (CCG) where one physically goes to homes to perform a review of needs in the community (Nolan, 2023). We aim to gauge how best to spread awareness and maximize participation in blight removal activities. By utilizing

community input, we will be able to reach more members of the community when beginning quarterly neighborhood clean-up services, including but not limited to junk removal, pressure washing, and lawn mowing services. The NPU will work with Neighborhood Navigators and service providers to coordinate clean-up days that are approachable and no-cost to residents.

The NPU may also contribute to a Blight Removal Task Force, which will provide another extension to the Inspections and Codes website by utilizing data tools to map vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated (VAD) properties in South Columbus. The City may contract with a third-party service provider, such as the Center for Community Progress (CCP), for assistance in developing city-wide blight reduction goals and an action plan to address VAD properties. The Blight Removal Task Force will map every parcel in South Columbus and identify the condition, occupancy, and use to paint a holistic picture of the blight in the area. The NPU, Neighborhood Navigators, and other community groups may assist in data collection, and the City may contract with Columbus State University and/or Columbus Technical College to create the database. Public users may view the database on the City's website to understand the state of the properties in South Columbus as well as read on the progress that the City and the Blight Removal Task Force has made.

The Georgia Constitution allows for municipalities to encourage property maintenance by establishing a "community redevelopment tax incentive program," also known as a blight tax. Columbus City Council should pass an ordinance that, in accordance with

the state Constitution, levies a higher millage rate on properties that are "blighted," as defined by the City. In order for owners of blighted properties to be truly incentivized to redevelop the properties, when a property is declared "blighted" by the City, they will be reassessed by the City Tax Assessor. Therefore, the property taxes will not only increase by "unfreezing," the value, but the higher millage rate will also apply. Revenues from the additional property tax should be designated for redevelopment purposes, such as our additional recommendations for neighborhood revitalization. Likewise, the ordinance should apply a lower millage rate for properties where the owner submits a plan for remedial action or redevelopment of the blighted property. We recommend that this program does not apply to owner-occupied units in order to prevent an additional burden on homeowners in South Columbus. Working alongside our educational campaign and blight removal task force, our strategy will not only address existing blight, but also mitigate future blight by incentivizing property maintenance and providing funds to rehabilitate more structures.

The final arm of our strategy focuses on people in South Columbus who are unhoused. A Homeless Navigation Center is an ideal option for the city to implement in South Columbus. This sprung structure, a high-performance tension fabric building, can be located on various foundations and implemented in a shorter time frame. The sprung structures in Fresno, California are models the City of Columbus could replicate for South Columbus per the below image (Sprung Structure).

IDEAL NAVIGATION CENTER LOCATED IN FRESNO, CA. DATA SOURCE: SPRUNG.COM



There is vacant land adjacent to Mount Pleasant Baptist Church (3601 Youmans St, Columbus, GA 31903) that is accessible to the South Columbus community and is an ideal location for the Navigation Center. The city can partner with the church to provide clothing and hygiene items for the

Center. Other potential partners can provide other services like medical and counseling. This gives individuals experiencing homelessness a central hub to access basic needs. The Homeless Navigation Center would provide a safe and clean shelter to those in need on a short or long-term basis.

**PROPOSED LOCATION FOR HOMELESS NAVIGATION CENTER.
YOMANS STREET BETWEEN FLETCHER AVENUE AND SHERIDAN AVENUE.**



TIMELINE & ACTION STEPS

House of Soul is a multifaceted approach to disinvestment in South Columbus. By implementing our short, medium, and long term goals, the community will raise property values and demonstrate South Columbus' opportunities to investors. We expect our short term initiatives to be completed in six months, our medium term initiatives to be completed in 12 months, and our long-term initiatives to be completed in 24 months.

SHORT TERM

- > Create a resource on Inspections & Code's website outlining compliance requirements for rental, commercial, residential, and dangerous buildings.
 - > [Example of Property Owner Guide](#)
 - > [Example of Fine Guide](#)
- > Increase awareness of the 311 app and educate citizens on how to utilize it to anonymously report concerns directly to the City. To accomplish this, deploy a direct mail campaign, provide onsite training at neighborhood meetings, and activate at high trafficked locations and events.
- > Create homeowner educational materials for residents (maintenance and upkeep schedules, budgeting, and basic repairs) and launch a multi-channel educational campaign in South Columbus utilizing billboards, tv, radio, direct mail, social media, etc.
- > Establish a Neighborhood Planning Unit (NPU) of volunteers that provide feedback on necessary services and inventories community needs, such as street lights, trash removal, etc.
 - > The NPU should regularly communicate with the Neighborhood Navigators program to bring neighborhood issues to the attention of the city government and address with city resources in a timely manner.

- > Host quarterly/bi-annually neighborhood clean up days at no cost to citizens. Partner with local businesses that can provide necessary supplies at little to no cost (provide dumpsters, lawn service, board up windows, pressure wash, haul trash and vehicles, etc.).
- > NPU and Neighborhood Navigators coordinate clean-up days (or KCB).

MEDIUM TERM

- > Develop Columbus Blight Removal Task Force
 - > Develop city-wide blight reduction goals and an implementation plan.
 - OPTION: Hire Center for Community Progress for technical assistance in creating an implementation plan to address vacant, abandoned, deteriorated (VAD) properties, and revitalize South Columbus.
 - Assess and quantify blight in South Columbus. Map every parcel in South Columbus and identify the condition, occupancy, and use, painting a holistic picture of the blight in South Columbus. Utilize Neighborhood Navigators, NPUs, community groups, and residents to collect data.
 - Students at CSU and Columbus Tech could create database.
 - > Create a low-interest revolving loan program for rehabilitation, similar to Historic Columbus' Rehabilitation Loan Program.
 - > Expand the City's Building Inspections and Code Enforcement staff.
 - > Hold quarterly seminars for residents to learn about maintenance and upkeep for their homes. At the seminars, connect residents to NeighborWorks loan program for neighborhood beautification projects.

BUDGET

Line Item	Cost	Frequency
Neighborhood Clean-Up Services	\$2,500	Quarterly
(3) New Fulltime Inspections & Code Staff Positions	\$214,500	Annually
Revolving Loan Fund Start-Up Costs at NeighborWorks	\$20,000	One-Time
Homeowner Education Marketing Campaign (direct mail, social media campaigns, billboards, etc.)	\$50,000	One-time
Homeowner Education Materials (production)	\$1,000	Quarterly
Blight Task Force <i>Consulting</i> - create an action plan to reduce blight.	Consultant: \$500,000	Consultant: One-Time
<i>Implementation</i> - execute strategies outlined in blight reduction plan.	Implementation: \$2,000,000	Implementation: Ongoing
Homeless Navigation Center <i>Capital Costs</i> - construction costs associated with buildout.	Capital: \$3,000,000	Capital: One-Time
<i>Operating Costs</i> - costs associated with keeping the program running on an annual basis	Operating: \$1,000,000	Operating: Annually
Blight Tax Legal Consulting Fees	\$50,000	One-Time
TOTAL PROJECT COST	\$6,838,000	

POSSIBLE FUNDING SOURCES

- > Blight Tax
- > [South Columbus TAD](#)
- > CDBG Entitlement Funds
- > Existing/Future Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST)
- > Community Development Financial Institutions Fund ([CDFIs](#))
- > American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA)
- > Private Donations
- > Foundations/Corporations (similar to Detroit, MI model)
 - > Aflac, Georgia Power, WC Bradley, Synovus, Global Payments, Community Foundation of the Chattahoochee Valley, Chick-Fil-A Foundation, Bank of America, Truist Bank, Arthur Blank Foundation, Home Depot Foundation

POTENTIAL PARTNERSHIPS

- > CCG: Community Reinvestment
- > CCG: Inspections & Code
- > CCG: 311
- > CCG: Keep Columbus Beautiful
- > CCG: IT Services
- > Columbus 2025
- > NeighborWorks
- > Columbus Housing Authority
- > Columbus State University
- > Columbus Technical College
- > Dragonfly Trails
- > Community Foundation of the Chattahoochee Valley
- > Georgia Department of Community Affairs
- > Turn Around Columbus
- > Faith-based entities
- > Media: Eco Courier Latino, WRBL, WTVM, Ledger Enquirer

EXPECTED IMPACT

- > Decrease in blight and an increase in beautification
- > Fewer code violation citations
- > Increase in property values
- > Increase in economic development
- > Increase in home ownership
- > Increases perceived safety
- > Improved economic mobility
- > Build community pride

MEASURES OF SUCCESS

- > 50% decrease in blighted properties
- > 20% fewer code violations
- > 5% increase in property values
- > 10% increase in building permit applications





BIG IDEA 3

SOUL SUPPORT



DESCRIPTION

The residents of South Columbus face numerous barriers that hinder their ability to secure employment, improve their quality of life, and achieve economic mobility. To address these challenges, we propose a bold and comprehensive pilot initiative called Soul Support. This multifaceted pilot program aims to tackle the basic needs of South Columbus residents, eliminating common obstacles to employment and creating a pathway to economic mobility.

Soul Support takes a multitiered approach to support the residents of South Columbus. Firstly, it includes direct cash assistance, providing much-needed financial support to individuals and families struggling to make ends meet. This assistance is designed to supplement, and not supplant existing support systems to ensure that families can focus on securing employment or advancing in their careers without the burden of financial instability.

Secondly, Soul Support prioritizes workforce development and entrepreneurial empowerment. Recognizing that arming residents with requisite skills and tools is pivotal for economic prosperity, we will ensure seamless linkage between direct cash beneficiaries and workforce development programs. This connection offers individuals access to training, education, and job placement opportunities, positioning them for sustainable, livable wage roles. Every direct cash assistance recipient will be integrated with the City of Columbus' Neighborhood Navigator program, connecting them to existing community workforce development avenues in alignment with each client's aspirations. Additionally, the program will establish collaborations with prominent business development organizations and entrepreneurial platforms. This alliance aims to inspire participants to explore entrepreneurial paths, equipping them with financial literacy, business expansion strategies, and incentives to initiate ventures within South Columbus. This blueprint

not only catalyzes economic expansion and job creation but also reinforces grassroots community cooperation.

Lastly, Soul Support recognizes the importance of removing practical barriers that hinder employment prospects. Access to affordable and quality childcare, reliable transportation, and affordable internet are essential for individuals to participate fully in the workforce. Therefore, the initiative will provide an additional subsidy to address common barriers that South Columbus residents encounter while pursuing education and employment opportunities. This SOUL Workforce Incentive is an additional subsidy which will be afforded to direct cash assistance program participants who are also co-enrolled in workforce development, entrepreneurship, or educational programs.

By implementing the Soul Support initiative, we can transform the lives of South Columbus residents and create a thriving community where everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed. Through direct cash assistance, workforce development, and enhanced access to essential resources, we will eliminate barriers to employment and foster economic stability. This bold and comprehensive approach will empower residents, drive economic growth, and build a stronger and more prosperous South Columbus for generations to come.

SCOPE OF INITIATIVE

South Columbus should pilot a guaranteed basic income program called S.O.U.L: Securing Our Universal Livelihood. The Guaranteed Income Pilot Dashboard defines guaranteed income as a cash payment provided on a regular basis to individuals or households, with no work requirements, and no strings attached. It is intended to create an income floor below which no one can fall and promote the dignity of all. Guaranteed income shares close ties with other unconditional cash programs like universal basic income and the negative income tax. Guaranteed income payments are often targeted to individuals with the greatest need in a community.

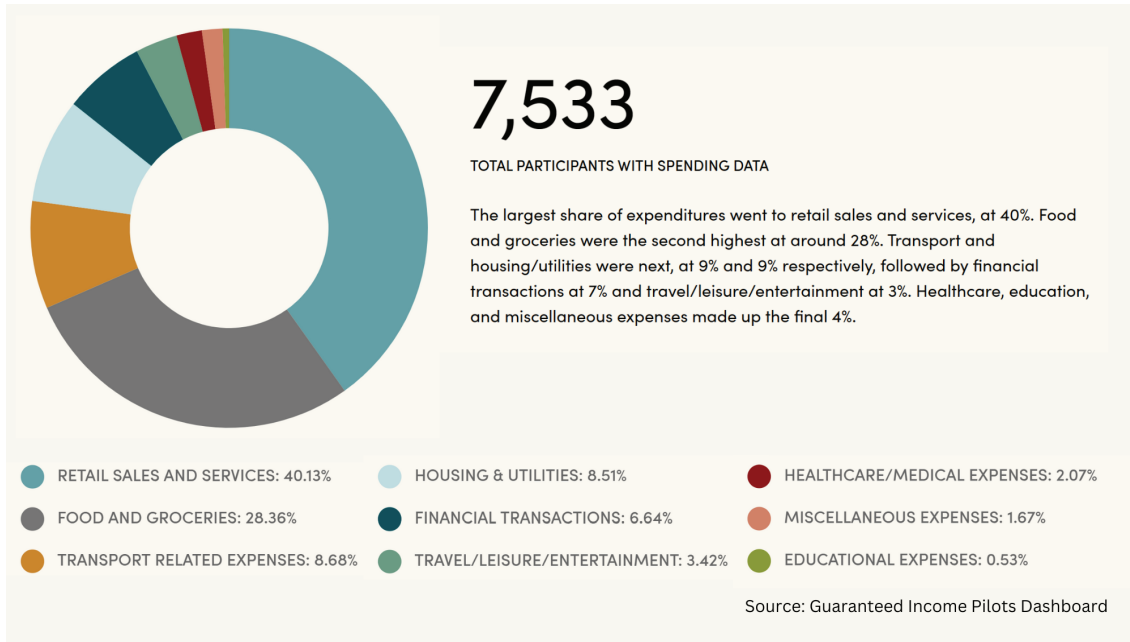


The S.O.U.L. program will provide a minimum monthly income of \$500 for a total of two years via pre-paid cards. The first phase will serve as a pilot program to provide the income to 50 families residing in specific zip codes in South Columbus. In Phase 2, this will increase to 100 families receiving \$500 per month. Eligibility will be based on annual

income, targeting families/individuals whose income is at or below 50% of the Area Median Income (AMI) for Columbus. Priority will be given to those facing additional hardships such as job loss, reduced work hours, higher healthcare expenses, or limited access to childcare, technology, or transportation. The program's impact will be measured to evaluate poverty reduction, particularly child poverty, and expansion will be considered based on its success.

Over 30 guaranteed basic income pilot programs conducted in the United States have shown favorable outcomes (Stanford Basic Income Lab, 2023). Preliminary results indicate that the largest share of expenditures is allocated to retail sales and services (41%), followed by food and groceries (28%) (Stanford Basic Income Lab, 2023). Retail sales and services may include expenses incurred in large and small chain stores, wholesale and discount clubs, single retail stores, subscription services, professional services, and maintenance and repair services. It also includes discount superstores, like Target and Walmart, where participants can purchase food, school supplies, medical products, etc. Transportation and housing/ utilities accounted for 9% and 8%, respectively, while financial transactions, travel/leisure/entertainment, healthcare, education, and miscellaneous expenses made up the remaining 13% (Stanford Basic Income Lab, 2023).

CHART OF SPENDING FROM GUARANTEED INCOME PILOTS DASHBOARD



Key findings from the Stockton Economic Empowerment Demonstration (SEED), the nation’s first mayor-led guaranteed income initiative, revealed several positive impacts. Guaranteed income reduced income volatility, enabled recipients to find full-time employment, improved health and well-being by reducing depression and anxiety, and alleviated financial scarcity, empowering individuals to make choices and pursue goals (West et al., 2021).

Two ongoing pilot programs in Georgia, namely In Her Hands and the Urban League of Greater Atlanta, further showcase the effectiveness of direct cash assistance. In Her Hands focuses on Black women in specific areas, providing \$850 per month for 24 months to 650 participants. Notably, financial literacy was not identified as a core challenge among the recipients. The expansion of the child tax credit nationwide has also demonstrated a significant reduction in child poverty rates by nearly

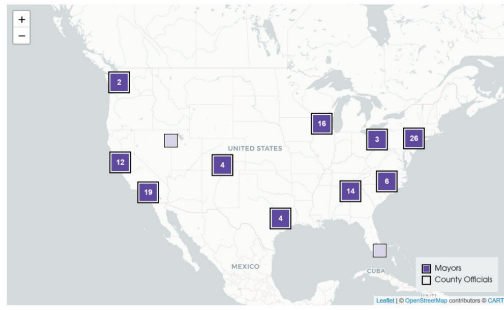
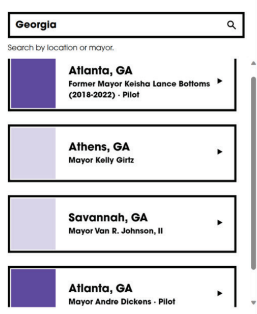
30%. Funds were predominantly used for essential expenses such as food, bills, clothing, housing, education, and debt. (Georgia Resilience and Opportunity Fund, 2023; Bisaha & Juhasz, 2022)

Participation in the S.O.U.L. pilot program would demonstrate the city of Columbus’ commitment to caring for vulnerable populations and testing evidence-based solutions for economic security. Joining the Mayors for a Guaranteed Income network would solidify the city’s public commitment to the program and contribute to the development of a roadmap for its successful launch. Atlanta, Athens, and Savannah are a few cities in Georgia that are already a part of the Mayors for Guaranteed Income initiative. To support this initiative, the City of Columbus should develop a program that is modeled after the construct of organizations like Circles Columbus, offering weekly check-ins, financial literacy workshops, webinars, and tools.

MAYORS FOR GUARANTEED INCOME LOGO AND GEORGIA PARTICIPANTS



MAYORS FOR A GUARANTEED INCOME



The accumulation of evidence from previous pilots and ongoing research highlights the positive effects of unconditional cash payments. While economic benefits are evident, such as improved health, income security, and employment outcomes, these programs also positively impact well-being, belonging, and self-worth. This wave of pilots across the United States builds a compelling case for guaranteed income at various levels of governance, informing policy discussions and providing insights into achieving economic security for all.

While the S.O.U.L. guaranteed basic income provides immediate financial relief, the addition of an optional workforce development arm for participants will ensure that recipients can uplift themselves long-term. Soul Support places paramount emphasis on workforce development and the empowerment of entrepreneurial pursuits. At the heart of this initiative lies the goal of equipping South Columbus residents with the skills and tools essential for sustained economic prosperity. To achieve this, there will be a

deliberate linkage between recipients of direct cash assistance and specialized workforce development programs. The benefits extend beyond financial aid, offering beneficiaries access to high-quality training, educational resources, and job placement services. A pivotal component of this strategy is the integration of all direct cash assistance beneficiaries with the City of Columbus's novel Navigator program. Integration of the City's Navigator program will serve as a vital bridge connecting underemployed clients to workforce opportunities.

In essence, the Navigators act as a specialized guidance system, identifying the specific skills, aspirations, and potential of each individual and matching them to job roles and industries that can benefit from and further develop their unique abilities. For those clients who often find themselves lost in the vast and complex realm of employment options, or who might lack the knowledge about the opportunities available to them, the Navigator program provides tailored assistance. It not only elevates their prospects for meaningful employment

but also strengthens the workforce by ensuring that talent is channeled effectively. The program ensures that no individual's potential goes unrecognized or underutilized, ensuring both personal growth for the clients and overall economic development for the community. Current workforce development providers such as Goodwill, Circles of Columbus, TechBridge's Technology Career Program, etc. could serve as community partners to provide specific cohorts for clients who are enrolled in the Soul Support initiative. Furthermore, to further bolster entrepreneurial ambitions, collaborations will be set in motion with leading business development entities and entrepreneurial forums i.e. StartUp Columbus, Columbus Technical College, etc., laying a clear path for financial education, business growth strategies, and startup incentives focused on the South Columbus region. Formal partnerships should be formed with all partners including joint fundraising efforts to ensure partners have capacity to serve S.O.U.L. program participants within their existing workforce development programming.

Lastly, a holistic approach to employment and economic growth acknowledges and addresses real-world barriers that individuals face daily. Soul Support takes this understanding seriously and dedicates resources to mitigating these obstacles. Recognizing that full participation in the workforce often hinges on factors like affordable childcare, consistent transportation, and reliable internet access, provisions have been made to tackle these challenges head-on. To this end, an additional subsidy of \$150.00 per month for 12 months will be introduced, for any direct cash assistance beneficiaries who also enroll in workforce development or educational programming. We estimate 50% of clients will dually enroll in the S.O.U.L. Program and workforce development. This support aims to incentivize recipients to participate in workforce development opportunities while also diminishing the barriers they encounter as they navigate their educational, entrepreneurial, and employment journeys, ensuring that every resident has an equal opportunity to thrive.

TIMELINE & ACTION STEPS

SHORT TERM

- > Identify community partners and a champion organization or agency to manage the S.O.U.L. program.
- > Identify and secure formal partnership agreements with workforce and business development community partners like Goodwill, Circles of Columbus, StartUp Columbus, and Columbus Technical College.
- > Form an exploratory committee with representatives from city leaders, South Columbus, and Guaranteed Basic Income (GBI) experts to champion a program in South Columbus.
- > Become the the next city in Georgia to join the Mayors for a Guaranteed Income network.
- > Identify a target population and recipients within South Columbus for S.O.U.L.
- > Launch the Neighborhood Navigator program and develop integration strategy for the S.O.U.L. guaranteed basic income recipients.

MEDIUM TERM GOALS

- > Develop case for support and detailed budget for program to solicit and secure funding for the S.O.U.L. Program (see potential funders below).
- > Develop an operational plan to lay the groundwork for providing subsidies and ensure seamless disbursement.
- > Finalize partnership model, execution strategy, and media plan.
- > Identify host nonprofit to implement the S.O.U.L. Program including spend tracking and subsidy disbursement and launch the 24-month S.O.U.L. Pilot Program.

- > Measure results by analyzing spending on the prepaid cards. Track metrics on participants to determine what barriers were reduced as well as any increase in upward mobility.
- > Initiate referral and enrollment in comprehensive training, education, and job placement services in partnership with community entities.
- > Ensure at least 50% of S.O.U.L. pilot recipients are actively engaged in the workforce development & entrepreneurship programs.

LONG TERM GOALS

- > Extend the Navigator program to increase participants served and integrate feedback for improvements.
- > Evaluate and expand the subsidy program based on uptake and effectiveness.
- > Launch phase 2 to scale program and fine-tune solutions for real-world barriers, ensuring a higher percentage of beneficiaries have access to essential services like transportation, childcare, and the internet.
- > Reduce the dependency on direct cash assistance as recipients gain sustainable employment or start their businesses.
- > Create a replicable model that can be adopted by other regions or cities, showcasing the success of the Soul Support initiative.

BUDGET

Line Item	Cost	Frequency
S.O.U.L. Pilot Funding	\$600,000 (50 people x \$500 per month x 24 months)	One-Time
Workforce Development Pilot	\$75,000 (\$3,000 x 25 people)	One-Time
Barrier Reduction Stipend Pilot	\$45,000 (25 people x \$150 per month x 12 months)	One-Time
S.O.U.L. Phase 2 Funding	\$1,200,000 (100 people x \$500 per month x 24 months)	Every Two Years
Workforce Development Phase 2	\$150,000 (\$3,000 x 50 people)	Every Two Years
Phase 2 Barrier Reduction Stipend	\$90,000 (50 people x \$150 per month x 12 months)	Every Two Years
Program Administrator (x1)	\$60,000	Annually
TOTAL PROJECT COST	\$2,220,000	

POSSIBLE FUNDING SOURCES

- > Community Foundation of the Chattahoochee Valley Community Impact Grant Program
- > American Rescue Plan
- > City of Columbus
- > Georgia Resilience and Opportunity Fund
- > Foundations, Corporate and Private Donors
 - > Community Foundation, BlackRock, Chick-fil-A, Arthur Blank Foundation

POTENTIAL PARTNERSHIPS

- > Community Foundation of the Chattahoochee Valley
- > United Way of Chattahoochee Valley
- > Urban League of the River Valley
- > Circles Columbus
- > Columbus 2025
- > Georgia Center for Opportunity
- > Columbus Tech
- > Goodwill
- > StartUp Columbus

EXPECTED IMPACT

- > Reduction of child poverty
- > Reduction of late bill payments
- > Increased income via employment
- > Upward mobility and increased employment
- > Increased spending on basic needs

MEASURES OF SUCCESS

- > 5% increase in the labor force participation rate
- > 10% decreased commuters out of the zip code for work
- > 5% increased full-time employment among residents of South Columbus
- > 20% reduction in poverty
- > 10% reduction of the Gini coefficient (a measure of income inequality)
- > 5% reduction in unemployment rate
- > 10% improvement in health indicators such as reduced hospitalization rates, lower stress levels, or improved mental health
- > 15% increase in enrollment rates for higher education or vocational training programs
- > 10% increase in the number of new businesses
- > 15% increase in the percentage of individuals moving up the socio-economic ladder over 2 years.
- > 60% of high level of public support, reflected in approval ratings of S.O.U.L. program

LONG TERM

- > Maintain safe, pleasant communities in South Columbus as a tool to attract new homeowners and businesses to spur economic activity. Mitigate blight and disinvestment by incentivizing neighborhood preservation.
 - > Blight tax passage and implementation for Financial Year 2025-2026.
- > Create a public facing blight database that identifies and prioritizes parcels in the rehabilitation/demolition lifecycle.
 - > Implementation of city-wide blight reduction strategic plan.
 - > Utilize vacant lot adjacent to Mount Pleasant Baptist church to develop Alternative Housing with a Homeless Navigation Center.
 - > The NPU should regularly communicate with the Neighborhood Navigators program to bring neighborhood issues to the attention of the city government and address with city resources in a timely manner.

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Michael Barden, Senior Director of Technology, Muscogee County Schools

Melonese Close, Community Outreach Manager, Piedmont Hospital

Pat Frey, Vice President, Home for Good, United Way of the Chattahoochee Valley

Tabetha Getz, Executive Director, Columbus 2025

Skip Henderson, Mayor, Columbus Consolidated Government

Isaiah Hugley, City Manager, Columbus Consolidated Government

Jamie Loyd, Vice President of Economic Development, Columbus Technical College

Connor Miller, Workforce Development Manager, Greater Columbus Chamber of Commerce

Barbara Moushon, Program Coordinator, Circles in Columbus

Dr. Trikella Nelson, Homeless Liaison, Muscogee County School District

Ryan Pruett, Director of Inspection and Code, Columbus Consolidated Government

Pam Romero, VP of Community Schools United, United Way of the Chattahoochee Valley

Brian Sillitto, Executive Vice President, Greater Columbus Georgia Chamber of Commerce

Lisa Thomas-Cutts, Executive Director, Keep Columbus Beautiful

Lisa Walters, CEO, Housing Authority



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