



Athens- Clarke County 2025

Final Recommendations

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▶▶ Message from Georgia Forward

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 eleven successful programs across the state, the work of Young Gamechangers has had over a \$35 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 2025, 48 of Georgia’s best and brightest have been working in Athens-Clarke County to develop big idea recommendations for community challenges. These young professionals, between the ages of 25 and 40 from a variety of sectors across the state, were divided into working groups to address four challenge questions crafted by the local steering committee. Over the course of the eight-month program, they 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 Georgia leaders thinking outside of the box to creatively solve problems for one community. This product would not be possible without the invitation

to bring Young Gamechangers to Athens-Clarke County by community leadership, the guidance of the local steering committee, the enthusiasm of the class, the willingness of local stakeholders to be open and honest, the engagement of our Young Gamechanger alumni, and the support of our sponsors.

Thank you to all who have played a part in making the 2025 Young Gamechangers program possible. GeorgiaForward and the Georgia Municipal Association are excited to see which recommendations most resonate with the community and which ones will be implemented first! We look forward to continuing partnership as these ideas come to life over the next several years.

SADIE KRAWCZYK
MANAGING DIRECTOR
GEORGIAFORWARD



 **48 of Georgia's best and brightest** have been working in Athens-Clarke County to develop big idea recommendations for community challenges



Athens-Clarke County 2025

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Section 1

Athens UNITED

Challenge Question:

The University of Georgia is a big part of Athens’ identity, yet the relationship between the university and the broader community is complex. How can we improve the town-and-gown relationship to foster stronger collaboration, communication, and shared initiatives to ensure the university and the community are working together towards common goals?

Athens-Clarke County 2025

Athens UNITED

Introduction

The University of Georgia (UGA) and Athens-Clarke County (ACC) have shaped each other for more than two centuries. Since Athens was incorporated in 1806, UGA has remained central to the community's growth. Yet despite shared geography and mutual interests, a persistent perception remains: the university and the town do not collaborate, communicate, nor operate as effectively as they could.

Recent community data reflects this challenge: while UGA contributes significantly to local economic development, cultural programming, and public service, a lack of coordinated visibility and truly unified efforts contribute to misunderstandings and the underutilization of resources. Housing pressures, student-community tensions, and separate lines of communication remain persistent friction points. The problem is not simply a lack of collaboration, but rather a lack of shared narrative, shared space, and shared opportunity.



Team Members

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To address these issues and reframe the perceived relationship between UGA and ACC as one of active partnership, our Young Gamechangers Group would like to propose the following initiatives:

- ▶ **“All in for Athens,” a Campus & Community Awareness Campaign**
A coordinated communication effort including a joint newsletter, an integrated town–gown website, and a shared 311 digital reporting platform. The campaign will highlight public-facing university programs, correct misperceptions, and promote transparency, accountability, and shared responsibility through accessible storytelling and digital infrastructure.
- ▶ **Campus & Community Engagement Center**
A co-owned physical space located centrally in Athens that houses UGA and ACC offices, meeting rooms, coworking areas, and commercial retail. This hub will serve as a visible and functional symbol of the UGA–ACC partnership, supporting collaboration, civic programming, and ongoing community engagement.

- ▶ **The Classic City Pathway (CCP) Articulation Program**
A seamless articulation program between Athens Technical College and University of Georgia, designed to support local high school students through college completion. The CCP includes dual enrollment, transfer advising, and a living-learning community on UGA’s campus, modeled after successful national programs. It aims to increase access to higher education, enhance student retention, and support local workforce development.

Together, these initiatives promote a new era of shared investment between the University of Georgia and Athens-Clarke County, rooted in communication, connection, and community impact.

Athens-Clarke County 2025: Athens UNITED

Big Idea #1: All In For Athens: Campus & Community Awareness Campaign

Description

“All in for Athens” is a campus and community awareness campaign that addresses a persistent misconception in Athens: that the University of Georgia and the local community operate separately or in tension. In reality, the county and university do collaborate in many ways, but that relationship often goes unseen. As Bruning, McGrew, and Cooper (2006) explain, “Relationships are built not on physical proximity or shared geography, but on quality communication, trust, and mutual benefit.”

This campaign seeks to address that perception gap by correcting misinformation and highlighting shared contributions. It focuses on telling real stories of collaboration, improving public access to university resources, and implementing tools that reinforce a sense of shared responsibility. As Harris and Pickron-Davis (2011) note, “Effective community engagement must be visible, consistent, and reciprocal.” When universities fail to communicate their contributions, a perception gap widens.” The Campus and Community Awareness Campaign is a coordinated approach to reshaping that narrative.

Scope of the Initiative

The campaign is built around accessible and scalable tools that address the perception of poor town-gown relations:

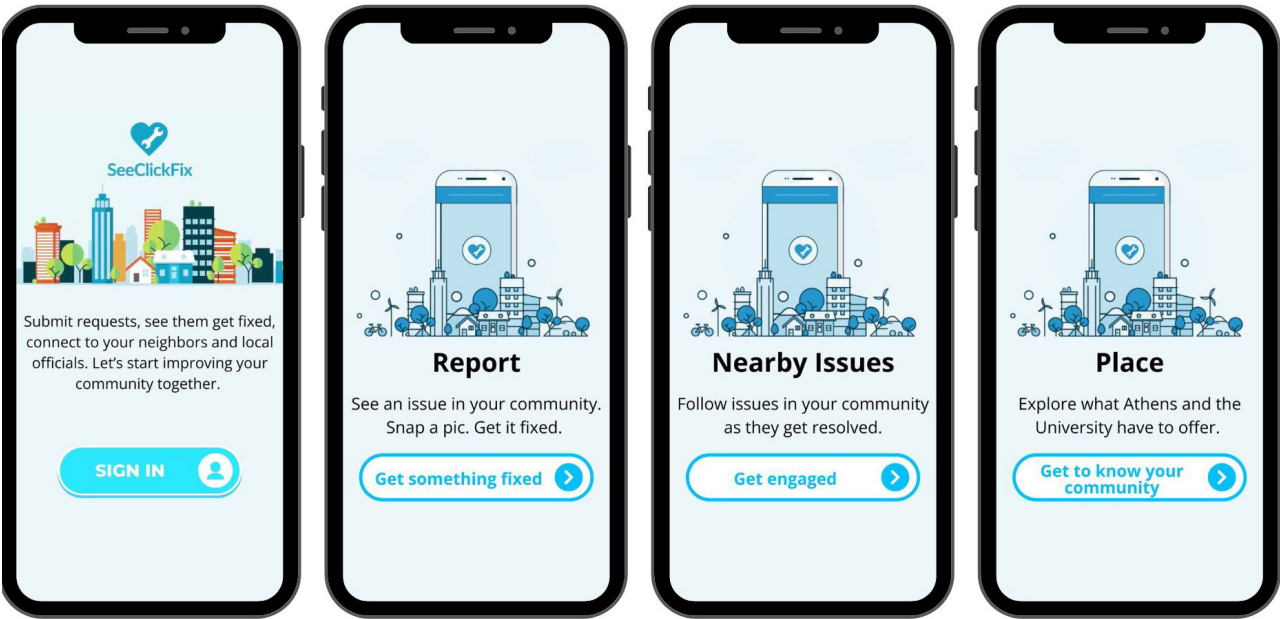
Joint Newsletter - A recurring newsletter, co-authored by university and county representatives, will share stories of collaboration, public-facing university programs, upcoming events, and resources available to residents. This newsletter will serve as a consistent space for both proactive messaging and community updates.

Website - A centralized webpage will serve as a community access point for programs, services, and opportunities supported by UGA and local

government. The site will include plain-language explanations of university resources available to the public, such as clinics, lectures, public safety programs, cultural events, or continuing education offerings. While UGA currently maintains a community relations page, “UGA in Our Community”, it does not sufficiently address or counter the widespread perception that the university operates independently from Athens. The goal is to create a practical and accessible page that helps residents better understand and navigate the university’s relationship to Athens.

Athens-Clarke County 2025: Athens UNITED

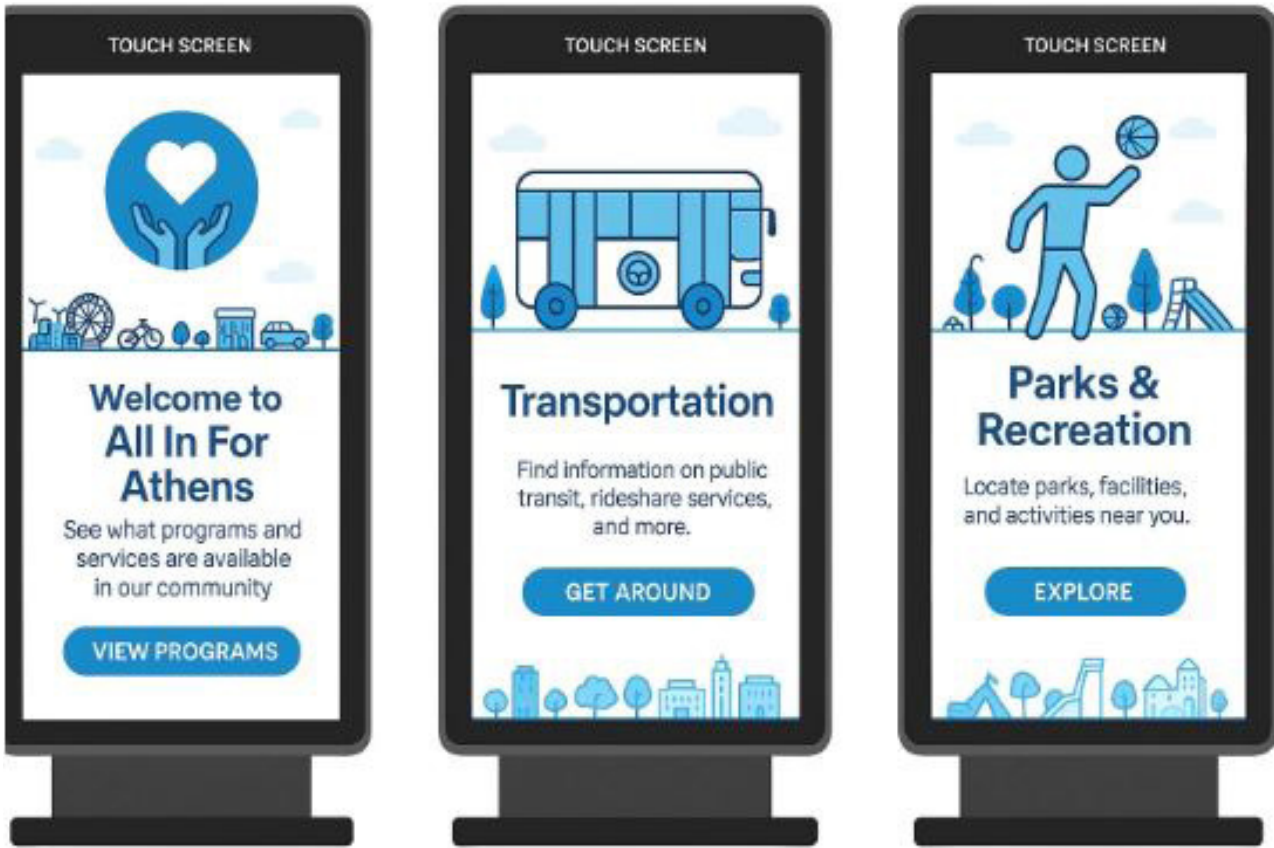
Big Idea #1: All In For Athens: Campus & Community Awareness Campaign



Shared 311 Platform - In a 2020 briefing on communication best practices, International Town & Gown Association noted: “One of the simplest and most effective ways to improve town–gown relations is to develop shared digital infrastructure where both city residents and university stakeholders can access services, report concerns, and see responsiveness in action.” A key part of this campaign is the proposed use of SeeClickFix or a similar tool to create a shared 311 reporting system. This platform would allow both Athens residents and student citizens to submit non-emergency service requests (e.g., streetlight outages, pedestrian hazards, or noise concerns) and receive responses from either local government or university units as appropriate. Shared digital infrastructure will reinforce accountability and mutual investment in quality-of-life issues, which aligns with best practices identified by the International Town & Gown Association (2020).

Athens-Clarke County currently uses CivicPlus for its municipal website. CivicPlus has a SeeClickFix feature that can be activated for community use.

Interactive Digital Kiosks – To increase visibility and improve access to shared information, interactive digital kiosks will be installed in central locations across campus and the city, such as downtown corridors, transit stops, and community centers. These touchscreen kiosks will display rotating stories, event updates, and QR codes linking to the joint website and shared 311 platform. They offer a practical way to connect residents, students, and visitors to real-time resources and reinforce the message that UGA and Athens are actively working together. As Harris and Pickron-Davis note, “Effective community engagement must be visible, consistent, and reciprocal.” These kiosks are a visible step toward closing the perception gap.



Storytelling and Media Engagement - This campaign envisions a recurring storytelling feature in Athens’ local media, such as a standing column in print or a regular segment on local radio. This series will feature stories of collaboration between the University of Georgia and the Athens community. The stories would highlight shared efforts on public safety, economic development, arts and culture, and civic engagement. It would help to dismantle the narrative that the university and town operate separately. Currently, The Red & Black, UGA’s student-led publication, includes an “Athens News” section. While informative, this framing reinforces a sense of separation between campus and community.

Scalable Model - As Wiewel and Perry (2008) observed, “Universities that deliberately engage their host cities as partners rather than just neighbors tend to contribute more meaningfully to local problem-solving, and are viewed more favorably by the public.” The campaign is designed to be scalable and responsive. It can begin with low-cost communications like newsletters and social media, then expand to include app development, service coordination, or integrated data dashboards based on funding and capacity.

Athens-Clarke County 2025: Athens UNITED

Big Idea #1: All In For Athens: Campus & Community Awareness Campaign

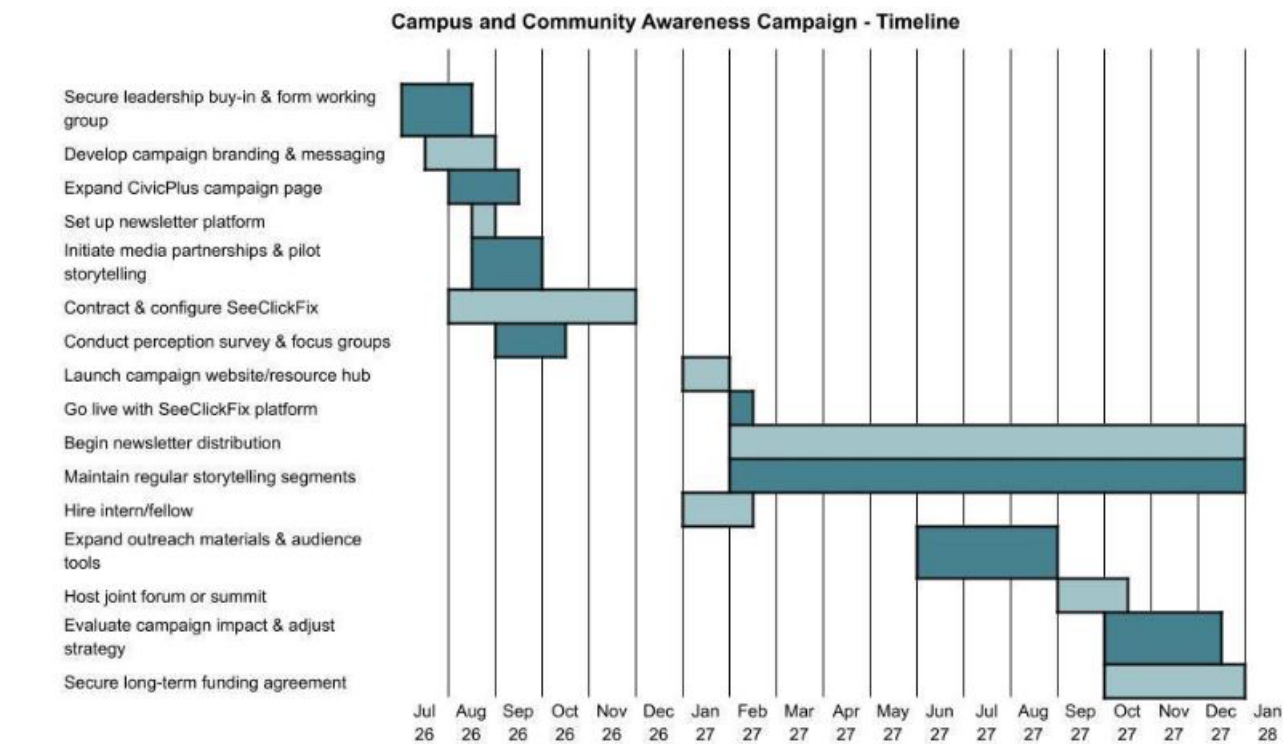
Action Steps & Timeline

- Short-term goals (0 - 6 Months)

 - Focus: Planning and Foundation
 - Secure leadership buy-in & form a working group
 - Conduct perception survey & focus groups
 - Develop campaign branding & messaging
 - Set up newsletter platform
 - Hire interns/fellows
 - Focus: Infrastructure and Early Rollout
 - Expand the CivicPlus campaign page
 - Contract & configure SeeClickFix
 - Initiate media partnerships & pilot storytelling
 - Launch campaign website/resource hub
- Medium-term goals (6-12 Months)

 - Focus: Campaign Launch
 - Go Live with the SeeClickFix platform
 - Begin monthly newsletter distribution
 - Maintain regular storytelling segments
 - Focus: Engagement and Growth
 - Expand outreach materials & audience tools
 - Host a joint forum or civic summit
- Long-term goals (12 Months and Beyond)

 - Focus: Sustainability and Evaluation
 - Evaluate campaign impact & adjust strategy
 - Secure a long-term funding agreement



Budget

Item	Description	Estimated Cost	
		Low	High
Working Group Stipends & Admin	Small honorariums, meeting space, facilitation materials	\$500	\$5,000
Perception Survey & Focus Groups	Consultant-led, includes survey design, recruitment, incentives	\$5,000	\$15,000
Branding & Messaging Development	Professional designer and comms consultant	\$8,000	\$12,000
Newsletter Platform Setup	Platform (e.g., Mailchimp, Constant Contact), initial templates	\$500	\$1,500
Intern/Fellow(s)	1-2 part-time students or recent grads @ ~\$1,500/mo	\$12,000	\$18,000
CivicPlus Page Expansion	Web development hours or vendor support	\$3,000	\$5,000
SeeClickFix – Licensing & Setup	Base software license, setup & staff training	\$15,000	\$25,000
Pilot Storytelling & Media	Initial 3–5 stories, media consultant, video editing	\$8,000	\$12,000
Campaign Website/Hub	One-time website build or upgrade	\$5,000	\$15,000
SeeClickFix Go-Live Support	Final training, promotional materials	\$2,000	\$2,000
Newsletter Distribution	Content creation, analytics, monthly production	\$5,000	\$8,000
Ongoing Storytelling	Writers, photographers, video production	\$8,000	\$20,000
Digital Kiosk	Informational kiosk station	\$2,500	\$5,000
Outreach Materials & Tools	Flyers, toolkits, translation, digital ads	\$10,000	\$15,000
Joint Civic Summit	Venue, speakers, logistics, refreshments	\$10,000	\$30,000
Campaign Evaluation	Consultant or university partner, surveys, reporting	\$8,000	\$25,000
Strategy Adjustment Planning	Workshops, reports, communications refresh	\$5,000	\$10,000
Secure Long-term Funding	Grant writing, stakeholder outreach, sponsorship materials	\$10,000	\$15,000
Estimated Startup Cost		\$117,500	\$238,500
Estimated Costs in Subsequent Years		\$23,000	\$50,000

Athens-Clarke County 2025: Athens UNITED

Big Idea #1: All In For Athens: Campus & Community Awareness Campaign

Possible funding sources

The majority of the components that comprise the “All in for Athens” campaign will leverage existing infrastructure and human capital in its planning and implementation, specifically the joint newsletter, website, and storytelling and media campaign. These ideas will ask existing marketing, communications, community engagement, and other staff from the University of Georgia and Athens-Clarke County Unified Government to utilize their capacity to compile and package existing information on resources and data into these formats.



Once the website, newsletter, storytelling, and media campaign have been created, we encourage the upkeep and production of these resources to be built into the job descriptions of existing staff.

Several community, state, and federal grants are available for the cost of the Shared 311 Platform. A non-comprehensive list of these grants is listed below:

- ▶ Georgia Department of Community Affairs (DCA)
 - ▷ Community Development Block Grant
- ▶ Robert W. Woodruff Foundation
- ▶ The Coca-Cola Foundation
- ▶ Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation
- ▶ The Ford Foundation
- ▶ Athens-Clarke County Police Department
 - ▷ Community Policing Grants
- ▶ Georgia Criminal Justice Coordinating Council
 - ▷ Victim Assistance Grant Program
 - ▷ Community-Based Crime Reduction Program
- ▶ Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA)
 - ▷ Smart Policing Initiative

Potential partnerships

- ▶ **Community Partners**
 - ▷ UGA Office of Community Relations
 - ▷ UGA Public Service & Outreach
 - ▷ UGA Office of Sustainability
 - ▷ UGA Student Affairs and student organizations
 - ▷ UGA Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication
 - ▷ UGA Division of Marketing & Communications
 - ▷ Athens-Clarke County Government
 - ▷ Mayor’s Office
 - ▷ Visit Athens
 - ▷ Athens Downtown Development Authority
 - ▷ Clarke County School District
- ▶ **External Partners**
 - ▷ International Town & Gown Association
 - ▷ Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (CASE)
- ▶ Downtown Athens businesses for campaign promotions
- ▶ Athens Area Chamber of Commerce
- ▶ Historic Athens
- ▶ United Way of Northeast Georgia
- ▶ Local media: (Athens Banner-Herald, Flagpole, The Red & Black)

Expected impact/Measures of success

Expected Impact

The “All In for Athens” campaign will strengthen the connection between residents, businesses, students, and the University of Georgia. It will expand access to university resources, support local businesses, and promote mutual respect between campus and community. This campaign begins with an acknowledgment: many Athenians perceive a divide between the university and the town, and that perception is real. The campaign will correct misinformation and close communication gaps using true stories and shared digital platforms. “All in for Athens” invites the UGA community to engage more deeply with Athens and encourages Athens to explore and benefit from the university. The campaign will be assessed using both quantitative and qualitative methods to make sure its work is meaningful to the community.

Quantitative Measures

- ▶ Pre- and post-campaign surveys will be used to assess shifts in public perception and awareness. These surveys will ask participants about their views on the relationship between UGA and the Athens-Clarke County community before and after exposure to the campaign.
- ▶ Social media analytics will track performance metrics including likes, shares, comments, reach, and impressions on co-branded content. Engagement will be monitored across official accounts like @universityofga, @accgov, and others.
- ▶ Attendance at campaign-sponsored events (such as All In for Athens Day) will be tracked through sign-in sheets, RSVPs, and volunteer hours.

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Big Idea #1: All In For Athens: Campus & Community Awareness Campaign

- ▶ Digital engagement, such as the number of downloads and link clicks from shared toolkits, newsletters, and community resource guides, will be monitored to assess public interest and usage.
 - ▶ Business participation will be measured using QR codes, stamp card completions, or gamified engagement tools like the Hidden Bulldogs scavenger hunt.
 - ▶ The number and placement of street lamp banners and digital billboards will be recorded to quantify visibility across the city.
- Qualitative Measures**

 - ▶ Open-ended survey responses will capture detailed feedback on how participants felt about the campaign and whether it influenced their understanding or engagement with the university-community relationship.
 - ▶ Informal interviews or testimonials from students, business owners, faculty, and residents will be collected to provide context around the campaign's perceived value.
 - ▶ Stories shared through the digital campaign will show the connection and impact of the programs and services.
 - ▶ Community forums or listening sessions can be held post-campaign to gather verbal feedback and assess how the initiative shaped public dialogue.

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Big Idea #2: The Classic City Pathway: Articulation Program



Description

The Classic City Pathway (CCP) is a collaborative articulation initiative between Athens Technical College and the University of Georgia designed to support Athens-Clarke County students from high school through college completion. This program creates a seamless pipeline by targeting current dual enrollment students to provide academic advising, student engagement, leadership opportunities, and a clear transfer pathway from Athens Technical College to UGA. Focused on increasing local access to higher education, the program empowers students with the tools, support, and flexibility to achieve their educational goals close to home.

With 25% of current Athens Technical College students enrolled through dual enrollment, the institution is well-positioned to serve students from the Athens-Clarke County School District. By expanding pathway programs that specifically support academically strong, underserved populations, Athens Technical College can create a seamless pipeline to the University of Georgia. This initiative would not only enhance educational equity but also align with UGA's new enrollment strategy to increase transfer student enrollment while deepening its commitment to the surrounding community.

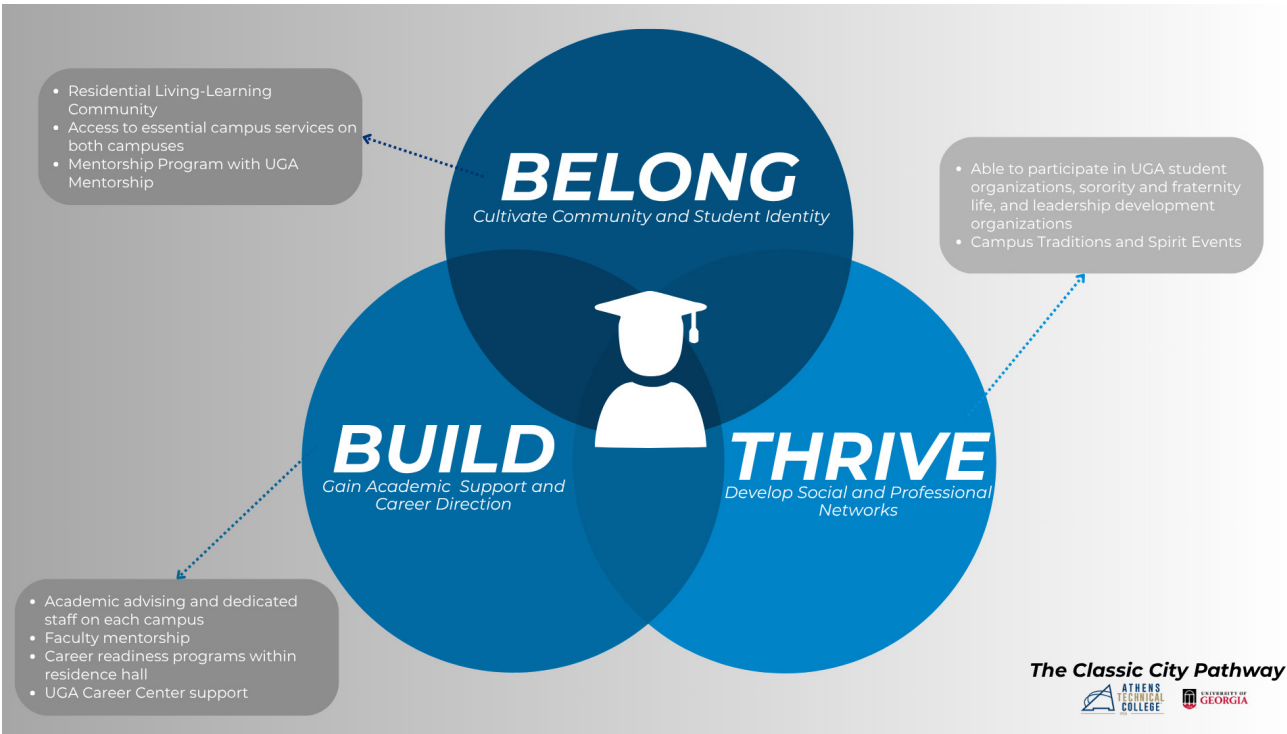
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Big Idea #2: THE CLASSIC CITY PATHWAY -

Articulation Program

Backed by Vincent Tinto’s 1993 Model of Student Departure theory, student’s inability to resolve their educational goals and failure to become incorporated into the intellectual and social life of the institution is a major source of student’s departure rates. The Model states that to persist to graduation, students need integration into formal (academic performance) and informal (faculty/ staff interactions) academic systems and formal (extracurricular activities) and informal (peer-group interactions) social systems.

To further support the long-term student success of participants and utilize Tinto’s theory, the program will eventually incorporate a living-learning community model for first-year students that brings students together in a supportive, community-driven learning environment on UGA’s campus while meeting academic requirements. Grounded in the core tenets of Belong, Build, and Thrive, students are encouraged to approach their success holistically.



Starting in high school and continuing through their time at Athens Technical College and UGA, students in the cohort will benefit from peer mentorship, tailored academic support, leadership development, and consistent guidance from dedicated advisors. This model fosters a strong sense of belonging and accountability, helping students persist through each stage of their educational journey and graduate prepared to thrive in the workforce or pursue advanced degrees.

Modeled after the Bridge to Clemson articulation agreement between Tri-County Technical College and Clemson University, and the Augusta Advantage agreement between Augusta Technical College and Augusta University, this program builds off of the existing articulation agreement between the Technical College System of Georgia and the University System of Georgia. Currently, 38 courses transfer through this agreement, which is almost two years of academic classes that are accepted by University System of Georgia schools

Scope of the Initiative

This project will establish a formal articulation agreement between Athens Technical College and the University of Georgia, specifically designed for Athens-Clarke County high school students. The program will include:

- ▶ Dual enrollment opportunities beginning in high school (already existing)
- ▶ A clearly defined course transfer and academic advising structure between institutions
- ▶ A living-learning community model to provide community, mentorship, and wraparound support services
- ▶ Shared programming and workshops focused on college readiness, financial literacy, and career planning

- ▶ Regular data tracking to monitor student outcomes and support continuous improvement

Project Deliverables:

- ▶ Formal articulation agreement documentation
- ▶ Recruitment materials for high school students and families
- ▶ Program website or digital portal
- ▶ Living-learning community program curriculum and engagement calendar
- ▶ Advisor training materials and student support guides
- ▶ Baseline data report and annual impact reports

Action Steps & Timeline

Short-term Goals (0 months- 1 year)

- ▶ Focus: Program Design, Partnership Building, and Approval
 - ▶ Finalize the articulation agreement between Athens Technical College and the University of Georgia and get BOR approval
 - ▶ Identify and onboard key staff (program coordinator, advisors, and support team)

- ▶ Establish a working group with representatives from ACCSD, Athens Tech, and UGA
- ▶ Develop a recruitment strategy and informational materials for students and families
- ▶ Build and launch a dedicated program website or portal
- ▶ Host informational sessions at local high schools to promote the program

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Big Idea #2: THE CLASSIC CITY PATHWAY -

Articulation Program

Medium-term Goals (1 year - 3 years)

- Focus: Program Implementation, Student Support, Early Outcomes
 - ▷ Design and pilot a living-learning community curriculum and support model
 - ▷ Enroll and support the first and second student LLC
 - ▷ Provide regular living-learning programming, including workshops, advising, and mentoring
 - ▷ Monitor student academic progress and engagement using data dashboards
 - ▷ Evaluate transfer processes and academic alignment between institutions
 - ▷ Collect qualitative and quantitative data to assess student experience and program effectiveness
 - ▷ Refine and expand advising tools and curriculum based on feedback

Long-term Goals (3+ years)

- Focus: Sustainability, Growth, and Broader Impact
 - ▷ Achieve measurable increases in college retention, transfer, and graduation rates
 - ▷ Expand program offerings to include additional majors, certifications, or pathways
 - ▷ Secure ongoing funding through grants, institutional support, or public-private partnerships
 - ▷ Build an alumni network of program graduates for mentorship and advocacy

Budget

The following is for 25 students in the program annually. Tuition and fees would be covered through the HOPE or Zell Miller Scholarship. Room and Board would be covered as a benefit of the program.

Item	Description	Frequency
Room and Board (at UGA)	\$12,000/student - \$300,000	Annually
Books and Supplies	\$500/student- \$12,500	Semesterly
Programmatic Elements	\$30,000	Annually
Program Director	\$80,000 salary + 30% Benefits- \$104,000	Annually
Academic/Transfer Advisor	\$55,000 salary + 30% benefits- \$71,500	Annually
Marketing and Recruitment	\$5,000	Annually
Overall	\$535,500.00	Annually

Possible Funding Sources

- Why Georgia Works Alignment Grant
 - ▷ Role: Provides state-level workforce development funding aligned with strategic goals.
 - ▷ Potential Contributions: Could supply foundational support for career readiness and transfer programs by funding advising, training modules, and wraparound services that align Athens Technical College students with University of Georgia pathways.
- HOPE Career Grant
 - ▷ Role: State tuition assistance specifically designed for high-demand career fields.
 - ▷ Potential Contributions: Helps offset tuition costs for Athens Tech students in eligible programs, lowering financial barriers and increasing retention within The Classic City Pathway cohorts.
- Athens-Clarke County Partnership Program
 - ▷ Role: Local government-backed funding initiative supporting collaborative projects with community impact.
 - ▷ Potential Contributions: Could finance pilot projects, program marketing, and dual-enrollment expansion—demonstrating the city's investment in keeping students local while strengthening town and gown ties.
- Continue funding through the Georgia College Advising Corps for the Athens-Clarke County School District Continue CCSD Funding for GCAC
 - ▷ Role: Ongoing financial support from Clarke County School District for the Georgia College Advising Corps (GCAC).
 - ▷ Potential Contributions: Ensures early outreach and advising capacity at the high school level, directly feeding into The Classic City Pathway by preparing dual-enrolled students for Athens Technical College and eventual transfer.
- Athens Area Community Foundation
 - ▷ Role: Local philanthropic hub connecting donors and nonprofits.
 - ▷ Potential Contributions: Could serve as a long-term philanthropic partner by stewarding endowed funds or competitive grants for scholarships, student support services, and leadership development within the pathway.
- Individual Donations through Crowdfunding Activities
 - ▷ Role: Grassroots funding stream engaging alumni, parents, and the Athens community.
 - ▷ Potential Contributions: Provides flexible dollars for immediate student needs (e.g., textbooks, transportation, enrichment programs). Also builds broad-based community ownership of The Classic City Pathway by engaging many small donors.

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Big Idea #2: THE CLASSIC CITY PATHWAY -

Articulation Program

Potential partnerships

- ▶ Athens-Clarke County School District (CCSD)
 - ▷ **Role:** K-12 pipeline partner providing direct access to high school students.
 - ▷ **Potential Contributions:** Supplies dual-enrollment participants, integrates pathway messaging into counseling/advising, and provides early exposure opportunities. Their continued funding and collaboration ensure that underserved students have access to structured postsecondary pathways.
- ▶ Athens Technical College
 - ▷ **Contributions:** Offers dual-enrollment and associate degree programs that articulate to UGA, delivers advising and student engagement, and provides a supportive academic transition for The Classic City Pathway students.
- ▶ University of Georgia
 - ▷ **Contributions:** Ensures seamless transfer pathways, expands financial aid and scholarship opportunities for pathway participants, provides student success resources, and signals long-term commitment to local students through admissions and retention strategies.
- ▶ Georgia College Advising Corps (GCAC)
 - ▷ **Role:** Near-peer advising program supporting high school students in postsecondary planning.
 - ▷ **Potential Contributions:** Offers advising, FAFSA and college application support, and strong early intervention to guide students into Athens Technical College and on to University of Georgia through the pathway model.
- ▶ University of Georgia and Athens Technical College Alumni Associations
 - ▷ **Role:** Volunteer and donor engagement networks with long-term investment in educational access.
 - ▷ **Potential Contributions:** Can provide mentoring, fundraising through affinity groups, and advocacy for the program. Alumni involvement also strengthens community ties and generates philanthropic momentum for scholarships and support services.
- ▶ Athens Area Chamber of Commerce
 - ▷ **Role:** Business and economic development leader in the region.
 - ▷ **Potential Contributions:** Can connect local employers to the pathway, sponsor workforce-aligned initiatives, advocate for community investment, and provide internship, mentorship, and career placement opportunities for pathway students.
- ▶ University System of Georgia Board of Regents

Expected impact/Measures of success

- Expected Impact:**

 - ▶ Increased college enrollment and completion rates among Athens-Clarke County students
 - ▶ Strengthened educational partnerships between secondary and postsecondary institutions
 - ▶ Improved economic and workforce outcomes for students from underserved backgrounds
 - ▶ A scalable model for regional educational pipeline programs
- Measures of Success:**

 - ▶ Number of students enrolled in the pathway program each year
 - ▶ Percentage of students successfully transferring from Athens Tech to UGA
 - ▶ Retention and graduation rates at both Athens Tech and UGA for pathway participants
 - ▶ Student satisfaction and sense of belonging as measured by surveys and focus groups
 - ▶ Post-graduation employment or continued education outcomes for cohort graduates

Big Idea #3: Campus & Community Engagement Center

Description

Since their inception, Athens-Clarke County and the University of Georgia have been intertwined. When Athens was incorporated in 1806, its name was inspired by the newly opened college, an homage to “the center of higher learning that has flourished in classical Greece” (Visit Athens, n.d., para. 3). In the more than 200 years since then, both entities have mutually benefited from one another. While UGA is a public institution and many of its spaces regularly welcome the public, there has never existed a truly shared, collaborative, and dual-owned and operated physical space.

A community engagement center would serve as a physical manifestation of the relationship and partnership between Athens-Clarke County and the University of Georgia. This brick-and-mortar establishment would be designated for existing shared initiatives, as well as newly established opportunities. The multi-use space would include meeting rooms, classroom space, offices for UGA and ACC employees, open work spaces, and potentially dining and retail to assist in generating revenue through commercial leasing.



The location of the center is vital as it should be centrally located and accessible to ACC residents and UGA students, faculty, and staff. Access to public transportation and parking should be considered as well when selecting the location.

As aforementioned, the space could provide a few office spaces for employees of both UGA (e.g., the Office of Government Relations, the Office of Service-Learning, or the greater Public Service & Outreach Division), as well as ACC Unified Government and/or the ACC Extension office (in partnership with UGA). Theoretically, this shared working space would lend itself to greater collaboration and stronger communication.

Meeting spaces could be used for community gatherings and hearings, student organizations and non-profit organizations’ events and meetings, and collaborative UGA and ACC events.



Open workspaces could serve as independent and individual cubicle-like hubs providing reservable (and potentially revenue-generating) workspace opportunities similar to many “cowork” options increasing in popularity for individuals who work remotely. Users would have access to WiFi, printing, and private conference room space.

Commercial retail and dining spaces could be made available and open for leasing to generate regular revenue for the center. Examples could include a coffee shop, a sandwich shop, a UGA-branded merchandise store, a bank branch, a mobile phone company storefront, etc. These offerings would attract citizens to engage and utilize the space and in turn encourage vendors to engage with their community. For example, should a bank branch open in the community engagement center, staff could host regular financial literacy workshops for community members and students, faculty, and staff in partnership with ACC and UGA.

Athens-Clarke County 2025: Athens UNITED

Big Idea #3: Campus & Community Engagement Center

Scope of the Initiative

This project will encompass the specific need for a physical building, co-owned and operated by Athens-Clarke County Unified Government and the University of Georgia, to serve as the Community Engagement Center accessible to both ACC residents and UGA students, faculty, and staff. The Center would serve UGA’s existing and future outreach goals and efforts, as well as provide additional space for partnerships among UGA students, faculty, and staff, ACC, and local non-profit organizations.

Project deliverables will include:

- Architectural & Design Plans: Full schematic and detailed designs that reflect accessibility, sustainability, and multipurpose use for both community and university partners.
- Construction of Physical Building: Completion of a co-owned facility that meets safety, accessibility, and technological standards

- Ownership Agreement: A formal co-ownership memorandum between Athens-Clarke County Unified Government (ACCUG) and the University of Georgia (UGA).
- Operational Governance Plan: Creation of a joint board/committee structure outlining roles, responsibilities, and decision-making processes.
- Shared Workspaces: Dedicated areas for collaborative projects, tutoring, advising, and nonprofit partnerships.
- Technology Resources: Installation of Wi-Fi, presentation equipment, hybrid meeting capabilities, and digital resource libraries.
- Annual Impact Report: Joint publication highlighting programming, participation, success stories, and strategic goals for the future.

Action Steps & Timeline

Short-Term Goals (0–6 months)

- Focus: Vision Clarity, Stakeholder Alignment, and Foundational Planning
 - ▷ Define the mission, vision, and core values of the Engagement Center
 - ▷ Identify key stakeholders (UGA departments, ACC leaders, student orgs, nonprofits, entrepreneurs)
 - ▷ Conduct stakeholder interviews or listening sessions

- Benchmark peer institutions for structure, programming, and funding models
- Develop a stakeholder map and engagement strategy
- Draft a concept brief with visuals and narrative (for internal and external communication)
- Establish a working group or steering committee
- Outline initial funding needs and potential sources (grants, university, city, philanthropy)

Medium-Term Goals (6–18 months)

- Focus: Feasibility, Partnerships, and Early Commitments
 - ▷ Secure institutional buy-in from UGA and Athens-Clarke County
 - ▷ Conduct a feasibility study (including ROI, community impact, and operational models)
 - ▷ Launch a programmatic needs assessment (surveys, focus groups, town halls)
 - ▷ Identify and evaluate potential sites (consider accessibility, visibility, and symbolic value)
 - ▷ Develop a partnership framework (formal agreements and shared governance models)
 - ▷ Begin early fundraising conversations with sponsors, foundations, and alumni
 - ▷ Create a phased implementation roadmap (pilot programs, pop-up events, etc.)

Long-Term Goals (18+ months)

- Focus: Capital Development, Staffing, and Launch
 - ▷ Launch a capital campaign (naming opportunities, donor tiers, campaign branding)
 - ▷ Finalize site acquisition or leasing
 - ▷ Engage architects/designers for community-informed design
 - ▷ Hire key staff (executive director, operations manager, community liaisons—prioritize local and student hires)
 - ▷ Begin construction or renovation
 - ▷ Develop operational policies (space usage, programming, evaluation)
 - ▷ Plan a soft launch or pilot phase with select programs
 - ▷ Host a grand opening with a community celebration and media coverage

Budget

Option 1: Ground Up Construction of a New Facility		
Land Procurement	Cost/Acre	Total (~2 acres)
Low	\$500,000	\$1,000,000
Medium	\$750,000	\$1,500,000
High	\$1,000,000	\$2,000,000
Ground Up Construction	Cost/SF	Total (~12,500 SF)
Low	\$350	\$4,375,000
Medium	\$500	\$6,250,000
High	\$650	\$8,125,000
Option 2: Building Lease & Renovation		
Lease (Annual)	Cost/SF	Total (~12,500 SF)
Low	\$16	\$200,000
Medium	\$18	\$225,000
High	\$22	\$275,000
Interior Renovation Construction	Cost/SF	Total (~12,500 SF)
Low	\$200	\$2,500,000
Medium	\$300	\$3,750,000
High	\$400	\$5,000,000

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Big Idea #3: Campus & Community Engagement Center

Operating Budget		
Item	Cost	Frequency
Center Coordinator	\$50,000	Annually
Utilities	\$25,000	Annually
Furnishings	\$625,000	One Time
Oper. & Maint.	\$9,000	Annually

Possible funding sources

Funding Strategy: Construction of a Campus-Community Engagement Center

I. University of Georgia Capital Commitment & Leadership Giving

The most crucial starting point for a project of this scale is a significant commitment from the University of Georgia itself. This demonstrates institutional buy-in and provides a critical foundation for attracting other major donors.

- ▶ **UGA Capital Campaign Integration:**
 - ▷ **“Lead Gift” from UGA:** There is an opportunity to seek financial support from the university as a major stakeholder in the center. Strong partnership from the university through capital campaigns and endowment would assist in pushing this initiative forward. There is an understanding of how spending of certain university finances must be approved by the Board of Regents, Georgia Legislature, and other governing bodies.
 - ▷ **“Named” Facilities/Wings:** Offer naming opportunities within the center for significant university contributions (e.g., “The UGA

[Department/College] Wing,” “The [President’s Name] Welcome Center”).

- ▶ **UGA Foundation:** Engage the UGA Foundation early. They manage university endowments and can facilitate major gifts. They also have expertise in large-scale fundraising campaigns.
- ▶ **Trustee/Regent Engagement:** Secure buy-in from key UGA Trustees and University System of Georgia Regents

II. Major Private Philanthropy (Individuals & Family Foundations)

- ▶ **Targeted Major Donor Cultivation:**
 - ▷ **UGA Alumni Network:** Identify UGA alumni who are passionate about community development, education, or civic engagement.
 - ▷ **Athens Community Leaders:** Identify prominent families, entrepreneurs, and long-standing philanthropists within the Athens community who have demonstrated a commitment to local betterment.
 - ▷ **Cornerstone Donors:** Focus on securing a few very large gifts to establish momentum and inspire others.

- ▷ **Family Foundations:** Research private family foundations (both local to Georgia/Athens and national) whose mission aligns with community building, education, social justice, or university-community partnerships.
- ▶ **Capital Campaign Committee:** Form a high-level committee comprised of influential UGA alumni, Athens community leaders, and business figures.

III. Corporate Sponsorships & Partnerships

- ▶ **Naming Rights Opportunities:**
 - ▷ **Building Naming:** The most prominent opportunity for a lead corporate sponsor (e.g., “The [Company Name] Community Center”).
 - ▷ **Named Spaces:** Offer naming rights for:
 - Auditoriums/Lecture Halls
 - Community Kitchen/Café
 - Innovation Labs/Makerspaces
 - Conference Rooms/Meeting Suites
 - Outdoor Plazas/Gardens
 - Technology Hubs/Computer Labs
 - Children’s Play Areas/Youth Zones
 - Fitness or Wellness Areas
 - ▷ **Program Sponsorships:** While less about initial construction, ongoing programs can also attract multi-year corporate support that helps with operational costs, freeing up capital for debt service or further expansion.
- ▶ **Target Corporations:**
 - ▷ **Large Georgia-Based Corporations:** Synovus, Coca-Cola, Delta, Home Depot, UPS, Southern Company, Truist (banks often have strong community investment arms).
 - ▷ **National Corporations with Local Presence:** Companies like Amazon, Google, etc., that have distribution centers or significant operations in Georgia and a commitment to the community.

- ▷ **Local Athens Businesses:** Large employers, law firms, healthcare providers (e.g., Piedmont Athens Regional Medical Center), real estate developers, and construction companies within Athens-Clarke County. They benefit directly from a thriving local community.
- ▷ **Construction/Building Material Companies:** Approach companies that provide materials or services for the building (e.g., concrete, steel, HVAC, interior design) for in-kind donations or discounted rates in exchange for recognition.
- ▶ **Sponsorship Tiers:** Create clear sponsorship tiers with associated benefits (e.g., Platinum, Gold, Silver, Bronze), detailing recognition opportunities (signage, press releases, website mentions, invitations to opening events).

IV. Public Funding & Grants

- ▶ **Athens-Clarke County Unified Government (ACCGov):**
 - ▷ **Community Development Block Grants (CDBG):** ACCGov is an “Entitlement Community” and receives annual CDBG allocations from HUD. CDBG funds can be used for the acquisition, construction, or renovation of community facilities, especially those serving low- and moderate-income individuals. This would be a strong avenue.
 - ▷ **Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST):** Athens-Clarke County voters approve SPLOST referendums for specific capital projects. The next SPLOST cycle would be a prime opportunity to advocate for the community center’s inclusion as a designated project. The existing “Athens Youth & Community Facilities Project” in SPLOST 2020 demonstrates a precedent.
 - ▷ **Local Bonds:** ACCGov could issue bonds for public projects, potentially including the community center, with voter approval.

Big Idea #3: Campus & Community Engagement Center

- **State of Georgia:**
 - **Georgia Department of Community Affairs (DCA):** Beyond CDBG, DCA has other programs and financing tools (e.g., OneGeorgia Authority, Appalachian Regional Commission if applicable, Rural Workforce Housing Construction Loan Program) that might support aspects of the construction if framed appropriately for regional economic development or community revitalization.
 - **State Capital Budget Appropriations:** Lobby the Georgia General Assembly for a direct state appropriation for the project, emphasizing its benefit to the state (e.g., through UGA's role as a flagship university, community development model).
- **Federal Grants:**
 - **Economic Development Administration (EDA):** Grants for public works and economic adjustment assistance, which can include community facilities that support job creation or economic diversification.
 - **USDA Rural Development:** If parts of Athens are classified as rural, USDA offers grants and loans for community facilities.
- **Department of Commerce/HUD:** Look for specific programs targeting community infrastructure, urban renewal, or university-community partnerships.
- **Congressionally Directed Spending:** Engage Georgia's U.S. Congressional delegation to request specific appropriations (earmarks) for the project within federal legislation.

V. Other Creative & Supplementary Funding

- **Land Donation/In-Kind Contributions:** If the land is university-owned, its value is an in-kind contribution.
- **“Buy a Brick” Campaigns/Paver Programs:** For smaller contributions, allow community members and alumni to purchase engraved bricks or pavers that become part of the center's walkway or plaza, creating a sense of ownership.
- **Challenge Grants:** Solicit a major donor to offer a “challenge grant,” where they will match new donations up to a certain amount, incentivizing widespread giving.

Potential partnerships

- I. University of Georgia (UGA) Departments & Initiatives:
 - **UGA Office of Government Relations:**
 - **Role:** This office serves as the primary liaison between UGA and the Athens-Clarke County community, including local government, businesses, neighborhoods, and non-profit organizations. They are actively involved in building and maintaining relationships and identifying opportunities for UGA to address community needs.
 - **Contributions to the Center's Operations:**
 - Leveraging their existing deep relationships with local government officials, community leaders, and non-profits, they can actively identify potential programmatic partners and ensure the center's offerings are truly responsive to community needs.
 - Act as a crucial bridge between the center and Athens-Clarke County government departments (Leisure Services, Housing & Community Development, Police, etc.), assisting with permits, navigating local regulations, and ensuring smooth collaboration on joint initiatives.
 - Contribute insights from their ongoing engagement with the community to help shape the center's programs and services to be impactful and relevant.
 - Assist in promoting the center's programs and success stories within the Athens community, ensuring broad awareness and participation.
 - Help mediate and navigate any complexities or challenges that arise in the intersection of university and community operations at the center.
- **Office of Public Service and Outreach (PSO):** The umbrella organization for UGA's outreach efforts, including the Archway Partnership and the J.W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development. PSO's mission directly aligns with the center's purpose. They can provide:
 - Programmatic oversight and coordination.
 - Funding for specific outreach initiatives housed at the center.
 - Expertise in community needs assessment and program development.
 - Connections to other university resources.
- **Office of Service-Learning:** This office already facilitates partnerships between UGA faculty, students, and community organizations. They can:
 - Directly connect UGA courses with service-learning opportunities at the center.
 - Provide transportation for students to and from the center.
 - Offer grants for faculty to develop service-learning courses at the center.
 - Help track student impact and engagement.
- **Student Affairs & Student Organizations:**
 - **Serve UGA:** The leading student organization for community service. They can be a primary source of student volunteers for programs, events, and day-to-day operations.
 - **Student Government Association (SGA):** Could provide student input, advocate for center resources, and potentially allocate student activity fees to specific center programs.
 - **Student Life Departments:** Housing, Multicultural Services, Health Center – can run specific programs (e.g., wellness workshops, diversity dialogues, tutoring) at the center.
 - **Various Student Clubs:** Offer space and resources for student groups to host events, workshops, or study sessions with community members.

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Big Idea #3: Campus & Community Engagement Center

- ▶ Academic Departments & Colleges: Many departments have a strong community engagement focus and can offer programs, research opportunities, and faculty expertise.
- ▶ UGA Libraries: Access to resources, digital literacy training, and public computer access.
- ▶ UGA Arts Council/Georgia Museum of Art: Collaborate on exhibitions, cultural events, and arts education programs for the community.
- ▶ Athletic Association (The Georgia Way): Community outreach initiatives, youth sports clinics, athlete appearances.
- ▶ UGA Extension: Agricultural and environmental education, youth development (4-H), family resource management.

II. Athens-Clarke County Unified Government (ACCGov) Departments:

- ▶ Leisure Services Department: Already runs numerous community programs, including youth sports, arts classes, and senior activities. They could operate programs within the center, leveraging their existing staff and expertise.
- ▶ Therapeutic Recreation Division: Programs for individuals with disabilities.
- ▶ Arts & Culture Division (e.g., Lyndon House Arts Center): Art classes, exhibitions, cultural events.
- ▶ Housing and Community Development (HCD): Given their focus on affordable housing, economic development, and public services, they could house outreach programs, information sessions, or resource navigation services at the center.

- ▶ Library System (Athens-Clarke County Library): Joint programs, literacy initiatives, digital access points, reading groups.
- ▶ Police Department/Fire Department: Community safety programs, outreach initiatives, youth mentorship.
- ▶ Public Health Department (Athens-Clarke County Health Department): Health screenings, vaccination clinics, health education.

III. Athens-Clarke County Non-Profit Organizations:

- ▶ Social Services & Advocacy:
 - ▶ Athens Community Council on Aging (ACCA): Senior programs, caregiver support, nutrition services.
 - ▶ Project Safe, Inc.: Domestic violence support and resources.
 - ▶ Athens Area Homeless Shelter/Family Promise of Athens: Services and support for individuals experiencing homelessness.
 - ▶ Brightpaths (Child Abuse Prevention Center): Parenting support, family education.
 - ▶ Lydia's Place: Services for young adults experiencing homelessness.
 - ▶ United Way of Northeast Georgia: Connects volunteers and resources to various community needs.
- ▶ Education & Youth Development:
 - ▶ Clarke County School District (CCSD): After-school programs, tutoring, parent engagement initiatives, and adult education.
 - ▶ AthFest Educates: Music and arts education for youth.

- ▶ Boys & Girls Clubs of Athens: Youth development programs.
- ▶ YMCA/YWCO: Health, wellness, and youth programs.
- ▶ Envision Athens: While a planning initiative, their focus on a unified vision for ACC could inform and partner on center programs.
- ▶ Arts & Culture:
 - ▶ ATHICA (Athens Institute for Contemporary Art): Contemporary art exhibitions and programs.
 - ▶ Nuci's Space: Mental health resources for musicians, performance space.
 - ▶ Historic Athens: Local history education, preservation workshops.
 - ▶ Athens Film Arts Commission: Film screenings, media education.
 - ▶ UGA Lamar Dodd School of Art/ACC Public School Art: Potential location for each respective local art entity to showcase art in a shared location.
- ▶ Food & Sustainability:
 - ▶ Food Bank of Northeast Georgia: Food distribution, nutrition education.
 - ▶ Athens Land Trust: Community gardens, urban agriculture education, affordable housing.
- ▶ Workforce Development:
 - ▶ Northeast Georgia Workforce Development Board: Job training, career counseling, resume workshops.
 - ▶ Goodwill Industries of North Georgia: Job training and placement services.

IV. Local Businesses & Corporate Foundations:

- ▶ Local Healthcare Providers: Piedmont Athens Regional Medical Center, Athens Orthopedic Clinic – health screenings, wellness workshops, community health education.
- ▶ Banks/Financial Institutions: Financial literacy workshops, small business advising.
- ▶ Large Employers: Employee volunteer programs, skills-based volunteering.
- ▶ Retail/Food Service: Potentially operate a cafe or small retail space within the center, creating jobs and serving as a community gathering spot.

V. Other Community Groups:

- ▶ Neighborhood Associations: Host regular meetings, facilitate neighborhood-specific programs.
- ▶ Clarke County School District: public school accessibility for meeting space and/or workshops.
- ▶ Faith-Based Organizations: Partner on community service projects, interfaith dialogues.
- ▶ Civic Clubs (e.g., Rotary, Kiwanis, League of Women Voters): Host meetings, volunteer, sponsor specific programs.
- ▶ OLLI@UGA (Osher Lifelong Learning Institute): Offers programs for older adults, leveraging UGA faculty expertise.

Athens-Clarke County 2025: Athens UNITED

Big Idea #3: Campus & Community Engagement Center

Expected impact/Measures of success

- The Campus & Community Engagement Center is expected to have multiple different levels of impact and can be measured in various ways as follows:
- ▶ Create a space where there is enhanced awareness and accessibility of UGA programs for residents by creating a tangible space where this is exemplified
 - ▶ Target to Host 30,000+ Visitors in Year 1
 - ▶ Target to Host 1,000+ First-Time Visitors Every Year
 - ▶ Increased participation in existing UGA programs aimed at the local Athens-Clarke County community
 - ▶ Target 5% program participation increase Year-Over-Year
 - ▶ Increased coordination between the Athens-Clarke County Government and the University of Georgia
 - ▶ Host 12 Monthly Meetings Between Entities per Year
 - ▶ Host 2 UGA/ACC Town Halls per Year for Collaboration on Issue Resolution
 - ▶ Better the overall perception of the University of Georgia amongst Athens-Clarke County residents
 - ▶ Survey local citizens on the UGA/ACC relationship annually - show increased “Approval Ratings” over the course of the engagement center’s existence.

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- ▶ Mayor Kelly Girtz, Athens-Clarke County Government
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- ▶ Allison McCullick, University of Georgia Office of Community Engagement
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- ▶ Jeff Montgomery, Athens-Clarke County Government Marketing and Outreach
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- ▶ Josh Podvin, University of Georgia Office of Public Service and Outreach
- ▶ Sarah Urbanski, University of Georgia Engagement, Leadership, and Service
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Section 2

Change Crafters

Challenge Question:
With great need in Athens-Clarke County, there is also a wealth of resources and stakeholders. 610 non-profits, a major university, and a consolidated city-county government exist alongside a lack of coordination and mixed community perceptions that hinder progress. How can we motivate local leaders to take action in implementation and achieve shared community goals?

Athens-Clarke County 2025

Change Crafters

Introduction

Athens-Clarke County is a community rich in potential, bolstered by more than 600 nonprofit organizations, a consolidated city-county government, and a major research university. Yet despite this concentration of resources and civic engagement, systemic issues such as poverty, education inequity, and fragmented collaboration continue to limit progress. A lack of coordination among stakeholders and inconsistent public perceptions further complicate efforts to align around shared community goals.

In response to the question of how to motivate local leaders to take collective action and deliver results,

our team identified and developed three high-impact initiatives. These proposals are grounded in community input and designed to leverage Athens' unique assets to achieve meaningful, long-term change. Each idea emphasizes collaboration, sustainability, and most importantly, measurable outcomes.

Top Three Ideas:

- **Athens Reads:** A county-wide early literacy initiative focused on closing the learning gap before kindergarten. By expanding access to evidence-based literacy interventions for children from birth to age five, Athens Reads



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- Meredith Stinson** | Georgia EMC – Atlanta, GA

seeks to ensure all children are reading on grade level by third grade, which is a critical milestone for long-term academic success.

- **Community Event With Resources:** A recurring, inclusive event series designed to foster collaboration between nonprofit and for-profit sectors. These events will highlight community needs, showcase success stories, and serve as a structured platform for partnership development, ultimately strengthening social cohesion and achieving a coordinated impact.

- **Catalog Initiative to Cultivate Partnerships:** A strategic tool housed within the Athens-Area Community Foundation that will match for-profit businesses with nonprofit partners. This initiative will include a shared database, partnership benchmarks, and engagement resources to promote sustainable, mission-aligned collaborations throughout the county.

These initiatives represented a coordinated approach to unlocking Athens-Clarke County's collective capacity and building the trust and infrastructure needed to meet shared community goals.

Athens-Clarke County 2025: Change Crafters

Big Idea #1: Athens READS

Description

In Athens-Clarke County, there is a pressing, emergent need. Fewer than one third of local elementary students are on track to proficiently in English Language Arts (ELA) in third grade. Evidence shows that proficiency in ELA (which includes reading, writing, six other key constructs) is predictive of post-secondary educational readiness. Non-proficient 3rd-graders are also four times less likely to graduate from high school. We can start to predict success in college and beyond all the way down to 3rd grade. Reading is the first step to employability.

In response to this problem, we propose Athens Reads, a bold, community-wide commitment to early childhood success. Data shows only 29% of Clarke County 3rd-grade were proficient on the ELA Milestones test, in 2024 (GA DOE Milestones dashboard). Proficient Learners demonstrate proficiency in the knowledge and skills necessary at this grade level/course of learning, as specified in Georgia's content standards. The students are prepared for the next grade level or course and are on track for postsecondary readiness. This means (and the data supports) that we can start to predict success in college and beyond all the way down to 3rd grade. Keep in mind that the Milestones ELA test is not just about reading alone. It includes all aspects of ELA in the following domains:

This underscores a critical gap at a pivotal educational milestone—when children transition from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.” This initiative aims to

complement and build on the incredible impact that the Get Comfortable Literacy Mentor Initiative has made in the last three years and to forge a pipeline that creates a literacy environment for all children from birth to age 5. At present, most children in Clarke County are not exposed to evidence-based literacy interventions until the age of 5. This means there is a critical early learning gap that is creating severe disparity in learning outcomes for most of the county's young children.

Athens Reads is centered on a **three-pronged approach**:

- **PRONG ONE:** Creating a birth-to-three literacy pipeline that begins with families and their young children collaborating with existing home visiting programs to create language-rich home environments and foster parent engagement.
- **PRONG TWO** would then focus on children, ages four and five. The first goal would be to boost GA Pre-k enrollment from the current 55% to 75% of eligible children. The second goal would be to implement universal school readiness assessments for kindergarten.
- **PRONG THREE** Bolster internal CCSD-led efforts, including:
 - A. Get Comfortable Storytellers literacy mentor intervention by supporting the efforts in scaling up district wide. The intervention, which deploys trained community volunteers into early grades (1st-3rd), initially focused on the early grades. This successful program is grounded in evidence-based impact



Athens-Clarke County 2025: Change Crafters

Big Idea #1: Athens READS

- evaluation data showing significant effects on 3rd-grade literacy in only three years of pilot programming in two CCSD elementary schools.
- ▶ B. CCSD's internal reading campaign. This plan includes district staff going into schools and reading to young kids. It also includes building more little free libraries at every school in the district and a social media engagement plan with target hashtags. This campaign was launched in the 2024-2025 school year and can be built upon as part of the wider community-wide campaign.
- ▶ The key to defining and measuring success with all three prongs is to rely on already established assessment tools that we would leverage to understand the impact of each of these individual prongs and the support that would be offered to these children.
- ▶ The theory of change is that if we provide these three pillars of support to children in Athens-Clarke County, ages birth to 8, then we can achieve an 80% on-level proficiency on the Georgia Milestones in five years.

Scope of the Initiative

A county-wide initiative that calls on investment from the public, private, and non-profit sectors, to ensure that every child in Athens-Clarke County is reading proficiently by third grade.

Action Steps & Timeline

- Short-term goals/action items:**
- ▶ Create a literacy council, made up of experts in the field who would help guide the work.
 - ▶ Secure commitment from a champion, such as Creature Comforts or Athens Area Chamber of Commerce.
 - ▶ Solidify partnerships and buy-in from:
 - ▶ Mayor's Office
 - ▶ Clarke County School District
 - ▶ Chamber of Commerce



Medium-term goals/action items

- ▶ Obtain administrative approval from the Athens Area Community Foundation to establish a fund as the home of the endowment.
- ▶ Launch community-wide, cross-sector funding campaign.
- ▶ Hire a program coordinator.
- ▶ Coordinate with local agencies/organizations to create a robust literacy pipeline.

Long-term goals/action items

- ▶ Advocate for inclusion of ATHENS READS in 2028-2029 SPOLST-approved projects.
 - ▶ Possible public/private child care center, owned by the county.
- ▶ Scale up projects and work with surrounding counties on how to best support their young children and families.

Timeline:

- ▶ Presented to the Athens community in November 2025.
- ▶ Hire a program coordinator in early 2026.
- ▶ Launch a fundraising campaign in winter/spring 2026.
- ▶ The 2026-2027 focus will be on meeting fundraising goals while continuing to support existing pilots and programs.



Budget

- ▶ A 5-million-dollar endowment, where the funds will sit at the Athens Area Community Foundation. This will enable an annual grant payout of 5%.
- ▶ This endowment will pay for early learning initiatives, parent engagement events, interventions and support, and a program coordinator.
- ▶ Program coordinator position created that can be housed at Athens Area Community Foundation, Athens Area Chamber of Commerce
- ▶ \$100,000 a year.

Possible funding sources

There is already an established fund at the Athens Area Community Foundation, the Get Comfortable Campaign, that we could leverage. Then seek and leverage funding opportunities from federal and

state agencies, such as GADOE and DECAL, as well as national, state, and local organizations, such as the Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students (GEEARS) and the Georgia Council on Literacy.

Big Idea #1: Athens READS

Potential partnerships

- Create Comforts Brewing Company will be the owner of Athens Reads, with the Athens Area Community Foundation holding the funds. Other potential partners include the following:
- ▶ Clarke County School District

▶ Athens Area Chamber of Commerce

▶ Classic City Rotary

▶ Athens Rotary

▶ University of Georgia
- ▶ Athens Technical College

▶ Athens Christian School

▶ Piedmont Athens Regional Foundation

▶ St. Mary's Hospital

▶ Athens Clarke Libraries

▶ Athens business community

▶ Statewide literacy organizations such as Get GA Reading, Literacy for All, and GA Reads.

▶ Private donors

Expected impact/Measures of success

EXPECTED IMPACT: The goal is for 60% of third graders in Athens-Clarke County to be reading proficiently in 5 years.

MEASURE OF SUCCESS: The percentage of children who are kindergarten-ready, using GKIDS scores, and the percentage of third graders who are reading proficiently.

Big Idea #2: : Unity in the Community

Description

During our listening sessions and meetings with community members, an extensive discussion emerged, consistent with a divide between East and West Athens.

This divide had more to do with a lack of access to resources, free activities, and fun events on the east side as compared to the west. The East-West divide is illustrated in the Equity Assessment Map shown below. It was created by Athens-Clarke County for use by community organizations evaluating the need for and impacts of proposed programs or services. Equity census tracts include the following:

With this divide in mind, community members charged us to “go back to the basics.” When reminded of the ACC Family Fun Day at the library and the Christmas Parade downtown, people encouraged us to think of fun events and activities that could take place on the east side of Athens, bringing all community members together, much like those events do. The goal of this big idea is to see people gather and represent Athens with their family and kids. This will help to develop a greater sense of community and help community pride continue to grow.

- ▶ 1404
- ▶ 1405
- ▶ 301.01
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- ▶ 1
- ▶ 302
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- ▶ 9
- ▶ 21
- ▶ 4.01
- ▶ 1505
- ▶ 1504



Athens-Clarke County 2025: Athens Regional Coalition - ARC

Big Idea #2: Unity in the Community

Scope of the Initiative

As the community impact group, this idea is a great way to bring the community together. We were very intentional in listening to what people wanted in our sessions, and they made it clear that they did not want another leadership group to provide suggestions that wouldn't be implemented. By focusing on the community itself and bringing people together, they encouraged us to return to the basics: people. We aim to demonstrate that Athens is a place where people genuinely care and are willing to help. It's essential to meet each other where they are. It was made clear that the east/west divide favors fun activities and access to resources on the west side, which ultimately excludes some members and families that live on the opposite side of town. When we continuously show up for our community, we begin to build trust, and people believe we're on their side.

We propose a family event that will take place in East Athens over the summer, before the start of the new school year. With volunteers and sponsors from the community, this free (and FUN) event will have activities for the kids such as bounce houses, fire trucks, trash trucks, crafts, and more. We will also encourage various community resources to set up booths throughout the event, offering swag items and informational pamphlets to allow families to gather as much information as they would like. Some examples of these resources that we heard about during the listening sessions include dentists, after-school programs, healthcare providers, backpack drives, employment services, and many more.



Action Steps & Timeline

Short term goals/action items

- ▶ Create/find a committee willing to take on the event
- ▶ Establish the event vision & objectives
- ▶ Set biweekly or monthly meetings to begin brainstorming the details of the events.
- ▶ Secure a venue/location for the event to take place
 - ▷ Consider amenities such as bathrooms, parking, and shelter.
- ▶ Determine a budget
 - ▷ Research sponsors, donors, and grants
- ▶ Contact potential vendors
- ▶ Recruit volunteers
- ▶ Apply for permits if necessary
- ▶ Promote the event
- ▶ Plan activities/logistics
- ▶ Accessibility and inclusivity planning

Medium-term goals/action items

- ▶ Secure partners and sponsors
- ▶ Finalize activities
- ▶ Confirm vendors
- ▶ Safety & security arrangements
- ▶ Community engagement & launching marketing plan

Long-term goals/action items

- ▶ Secure long-term funding
- ▶ Develop a multi-year plan
- ▶ Create sustainable branding and marketing strategies
- ▶ Feedback and continuous improvement methods
- ▶ Grow the event value & impact
- ▶ Integrate into community goals

Budget

Item	Cost
Venue Rental: Includes shelter rental/cleanup deposit at parks or impact fees for city festivals	\$450
Permits/Fees: ACC event permit \$25, final permit cost determined by impact, \$250 for road closure	\$400
Event Insurance	\$400
Security: Additional security/off-duty pay for police officers, typically \$200 per officer.	\$1,600
Kids Activities: 3 Bounce houses, free setup, and staff	\$500
Marketing: Printing costs & advertising	\$1,000
Registration/Base Tent: Tent, clipboards, etc.	\$200
Signage/Banners: Thanking sponsors, informational signage	\$500
Volunteer Shirts: Recognize sponsors, visibility for issues, \$20 @ 20 shirts	\$500
Restrooms: 8 Potties, two handwash stations @ \$95 each	\$950
Sanitation: Trash cans & pickup service	\$800
Total	\$7300

Athens-Clarke County 2025: Athens Regional Coalition - ARC

Big Idea #2: Unity in the Community

Possible funding sources

- Logos/branding on marketing materials for business sponsors
- Mentions in press releases/social media posts for funding partners
- Request donated goods/services, such as food, event space, and equipment.
- Host a benefit dinner to raise funds to host the event
- United Way of Northeast Georgia - Community Impact Grant (Awards in summer)
- ACC Computer Partnership Program (Tailor some of the vendors to the nonprofits that are eligible for these funds)
- Community Development Block Grant Challenge Grants (25% match required)

Potential partnerships

- Chamber of Commerce
- Friends of Advantage
- Friends of the Library
- Family Promise of Athens
- Athens Area Habitat for Humanity
- Nuci’s Space
- Classic Center Cultural Foundation
- UGA
- Flagpole
- Visit Athens
- Creature Comforts
- Little Ice Cream Dude
- Jittery Joe’s
- Sips
- Synovus Bank
- Books for Keeps
- Local Businesses
- Local churches
- School system
- Library
- Hilsman Middle School

Expected impact/Measures of success

- Attendance
- Resources contacted/used/inquired about
- Feedback/surveys from the community
- Interest in another event
- Financials - budget v. actual spend
- Number of sponsors/vendors
- Social media listening
- Increased awareness of a cause/issue
- Strengthened community relationships
- Media coverage/online presence

Athens-Clarke County 2025: Change Crafters

Big Idea #3: : Catalog Initiative to Cultivate Partnerships between Nonprofit and For-profit Businesses

Description

Athens is a vibrant city, home to an abundance of engaged community leaders and nonprofits. However, our team discovered through listening sessions with Athens leaders and residents that there is a perception of a disconnect between nonprofit and for-profit businesses, as well as an overlap in the work of nonprofits, with a limited framework in place to ensure these organizations jointly advance the community’s shared goals.

The for-profit businesses in the community have the financial means and desire to support nonprofits in Athens, but lack the collective clarity and coordination to connect with the right

partner to make an impact for Athens’s current and future residents. By creating a resource program for the business community and clear benchmarks for nonprofit organizations, the Athens Area Community Foundation (AACF) can build on its impact by serving as a matchmaker for nonprofit/for-profit relationships to foster thriving partnerships and ensure nonprofits in Athens are efficiently utilizing resources and advancing their missions within the community. Athens may sit in the smallest county within the state, but with these intentional local partnerships, Athens will be known as the “Smallest County, Biggest Heart.”

App Features

Mission, Goals, & Needs

Find out the mission, goals, and project needs of the organization.

Organization Details

Learn more about the organization, see their contact information, and organizational rating if available.

Swipe Right or Left

Allow users to browse through organizations and “swipe” right or left to find the organization that best aligns with their needs and goals.



Athens-Clarke County 2025: Change Crafters

Big Idea #3: Catalog Initiative to Cultivate Partnerships between Nonprofit and For-profit Businesses

Scope of the Initiative

The scope of the project will include the following objectives:

- 1. Create a digital “Athens Nonprofit Catalog” of local nonprofit organizations that are seeking to engage with a for-profit business partner.
 - a. This initiative would be more than a directory of nonprofits. It would be a resource for all leaders in the community interested in partnerships, needing community volunteers, and with an active project pipeline. The catalog would be housed within the AACF and build on its existing history and connections within the community to streamline a regularly updated database that avoids duplication of efforts and fosters connections with Athens-area for-profits and community members. This opportunity is open to any nonprofit that is currently meeting its benchmarks via Candid, has an active project pipeline, and is seeking a for-profit partner to support its mission. Community leaders would utilize the catalog to explore the current needs of nonprofits, the necessary resource commitment to engage, and where collaborative alignment can occur to impact Athens.
- 2. Connect nonprofit and for-profit businesses in Athens to tackle shared community goals.
 - a. Utilizing the nonprofit catalog provides for-profit partners with a resource to identify organizations that best reflect their vision for advancing Athens, and it also gives nonprofit

businesses a framework and resource to access the necessary support to grow their organizations. By agreeing to “match,” the partners would have clear expectations and goals for the partnership before committing to align their efforts.

- 3. Advertise and promote the “Athens Nonprofit Catalog” to the local community.
 - a. The program will utilize the support from the local Chamber and business leaders to advertise and educate business owners on the resources available to them within the catalog through business community events and forums.
- 4. Create a “Partnering with Nonprofits” engagement guide.
 - a. Let’s not reinvent the wheel. Athens has examples of successful, long-term community partnerships that continue to make a lasting impact. This toolkit would utilize that community impact model to serve as a guide for for-profit businesses seeking to initiate a relationship with a nonprofit partner and ensure Athens is fostering impactful, long-term connections between the two sectors.
- 5. Address the overlap of efforts in the community and encourage businesses to partner for common goals.
 - a. It’s a tremendous asset that Athens is full of residents who have a passion for their community and are committed to addressing areas for growth to make the city a better

place to live, work, and visit. However, we want to ensure community leaders are not duplicating efforts and resources. By incentivizing nonprofits to meet benchmarks set by Candid to be eligible for programs like the “Athens Nonprofit

Catalog” and promotions to highlight their organizations, we can ensure the nonprofits in the community are thriving and producing successful campaigns that work to solve Athens’s most critical issues.

Action Steps & Timeline

Short term goals (within Year 1)

- Develop a Nonprofit Catalog through the Athens-Area Community Foundation
- Assign responsibility of creating and maintaining the catalog to a position within AACF; no need to create a new position
- Produce a guide for for-profit businesses, structure-based on a successful community partnership model, that shares the framework, resources, and commitment needed to enter a successful nonprofit partnership

Medium-term goals/action items (Years 1-2)

- Nonprofits interested in being included in the Catalog must meet specific benchmarks through Candid.
- Develop a “matching system” for Athens-area nonprofit and for-profit businesses seeking to partner, whether it be through a specific project or board service.
- Initiate a partnership with the Athens Chamber to advertise the catalog’s resources available to businesses through Chamber initiatives like Member 101 sessions.

Long-term goals/action items (3-5 years)

- Develop a digital tool (website or application) that houses all nonprofits seeking partners, including a description of their mission, organizational goals, organizational rating, and project needs.

- Create a tier system for nonprofits based on their Candid platform and prior partnerships, to be highlighted on their catalog profile.
- Explore avenues to advance program incentives through discounted ticket prices to community and business events for partnerships developed through the catalog (i.e., Partnership of the Year Award, Non-profit summit, etc.)
- Brand Recognition of “Smallest County, Biggest Heart” and “Home of the Strongest Partnerships”



Athens-Clarke County 2025: Change Crafters

Big Idea #3: Catalog Initiative to Cultivate Partnerships between Nonprofit and For-profit Businesses

Budget

Item	Cost
Technology Platform: Development or licensing of shared database platform; includes hosting, setup, and customization	\$7,500
Data Management & Updates: Staff or contracted support to verify nonprofit benchmarks via Candid, update project pipeline entries, and maintain accuracy	\$12,000
Marketing / Outreach: Printing, advertising, and awareness campaign to recruit nonprofits and engage for-profit partners	\$3,500
Sponsorship/Recognition Materials: Banners, signage, digital visibility recognizing AACF and sponsors	\$1,500
Training & Workshops: Sessions for nonprofits and business leaders on how to use the catalog effectively	\$2,000
Ongoing Evaluation: Annual impact measurement and reporting	\$1,500
Total Estimated Budget	\$28,000

Possible funding sources

- ▶ Annual sponsorships with presentation rights (i.e., 2026 Partnership Catalogue Presented by...)
- ▶ Advertisements in AACF’s monthly newsletter
- ▶ Minimum donation requirement for for-profit businesses participating in the program
- ▶ Subscription fee for access to the catalog
- ▶ Athens Economic Development Authority

Potential partnerships

- ▶ Athens Area Community Foundation
- ▶ Athens Area Chamber of Commerce
- ▶ Athens-Clarke County Unified Government
- ▶ University of Georgia

Expected impact/Measures of success

- ▶ Number of nonprofit registrations in the Catalog
- ▶ Number of nonprofit and for-profit partnerships created through the Catalog matches
- ▶ Feedback from business partners and nonprofit leaders
- ▶ Social media listening
- ▶ Sign-ups and progress through the Candid platform
- ▶ Hours volunteered
- ▶ Board members recruited from partner for-profit businesses
- ▶ Brand recognition of the Athens community

Athens-Clarke County 2025: Change Crafters

Acknowledgements

We extend our sincere gratitude to all who attended the listening session for the 2025 Gamechangers program. Your time, perspectives, and dedication to spark meaningful change in Athens-Clarke County inspired us. The diverse participants, representing local government, higher education, K-12 schools, nonprofits, and businesses, enriched our discussions and provided the foundation for our recommendations.

Participants

Local Government & Regional Agencies

- ▶ Kelly Gritz – Mayor, Athens Unified Government
- ▶ Mark Beatty – Director, Planning and Government Services, Northeast Georgia Regional Commission
- ▶ Usha Fleming – Uniformed Community Outreach Liaison Officer, Athens-Clarke County Sheriff’s Office
- ▶ Alejandra Calva – Assistant Director, Athens Housing and Community Development
- ▶ Melinda Lord – Director, Athens Housing and Community Development

Higher Education

- Athens Technical College
- ▶ Antoine Boynton – Vice President of External Affairs and Institutional Advancement
 - ▶ Lenzy Reid III – Vice President of Student Affairs
- University of Georgia
- ▶ Denise Spangler – Dean, Mary Frances Early College of Education
 - ▶ Bob Capuozzo – Professor, Mary Frances Early College of Education

- ▶ Nipuna Ambanpola – Data Evaluation Manager, J.W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development
- ▶ Chris Mojock – Professor, Department of Kinesiology
- ▶ Marques Dexter – Interim Director for Multicultural Services and Programs, Student Affairs
- ▶ Lori Tiller – Director of Non-Profit Leadership Program, School of Social Work
- ▶ Beau Seagraves – Associate Vice President for Student Well-being, Student Affairs
- ▶ Leslie Hale – Public Service Faculty, J.W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development
- ▶ Erin Wyatt – Student
- ▶ Nathan Demas – Student
- ▶ Dominique Lowe – Student

K-12 Schools

- Clarke County School District
- ▶ James Barlament – Executive Director of Innovation, Strategy, and Governance
 - ▶ Emily Boness – Director of Strategic Projects
 - ▶ Randall Watkins – Assistant Principal, Hilsman Middle
 - ▶ Kenneth Vaughan – Principal, Hilsman Middle School
 - ▶ Montu Miller- Teacher, Cedar Shoals High School

Foothills Regional School

- ▶ Sherrie Gibney-Sherman – Superintendent
- ▶ Dawn Meyers – Regional Director

Nonprofits & Community Organizations

- ▶ Erin Berger – CEO, Athens Food Bank
- ▶ Shawonna Coleman – Executive Director, Athens Boys and Girls Club
- ▶ Lizette Guevara – Neighborhood Leader, Family Connection–Communities
- ▶ DaVina Jackson – Neighborhood Leader, Family Connection–Communities
- ▶ Sally Sheppard – Executive Director, Envision Athens
- ▶ Sarah McKinney – Manager, Athens Area Community Foundation
- ▶ Sallie Starrett – Executive Director, Bright Paths
- ▶ Michael Bien – Director, Athens Homeless Coalition
- ▶ Evan Mills – Director of Development & Housing, Advantage Behavioral
- ▶ Demetrius Jordan – Executive Director, Athens Land Trust
- ▶ Heather McElroy – Realtor/President, Berkshire Hathaway / Classic City Rotary
- ▶ Victoria Prevatt – CEO, Good Works

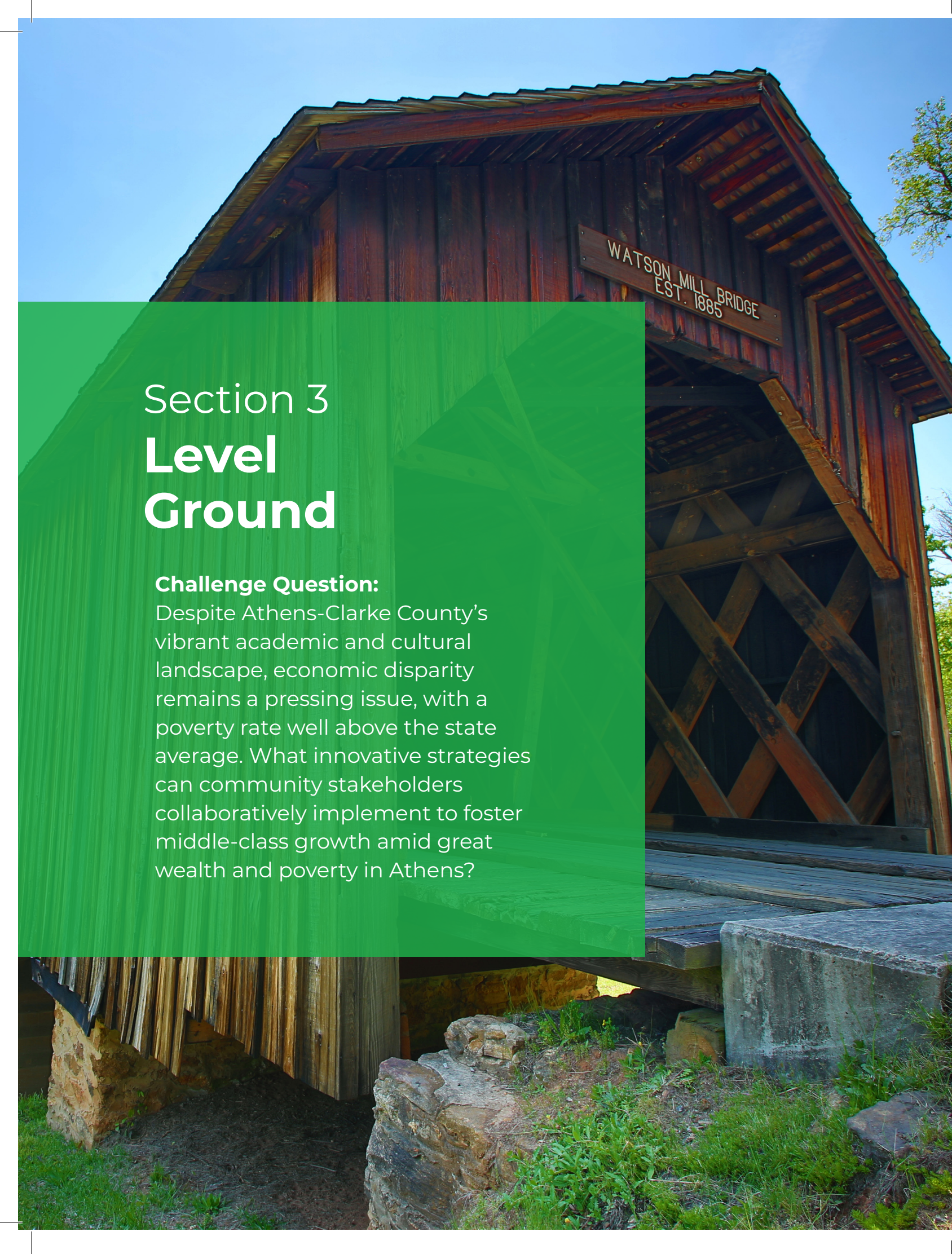
Business & Economic Development

- ▶ Matt Stevens – Sr. Director of Community Impact, Creature Comforts
- ▶ Danielle Bezila – Sr. Manager of Culture and Company, Creature Comfort Beer Co.
- ▶ Tino Johnson – Business Development Manager, Jackson EMC
- ▶ Myung Cogan – Small Business & Entrepreneurship Coordinator, Economic Development Authority
- ▶ Whit Richardson – Owner, Taziki’s Café
- ▶ Joshua Hares – Executive Vice President, Better Business Bureau of Atlanta and NE GA
- ▶ Meredith Lysaught – Program Manager, Athens Area Chamber of Commerce
- ▶ Tyler Mize – CEO, Barrett’s Towing Company

Community Members

- ▶ Eliza Booker – Community Member
- ▶ Sarah Ruppensburg – Community Member
- ▶ Tawana Mattox – Clarke County School





Section 3 Level Ground

Challenge Question:

Despite Athens-Clarke County’s vibrant academic and cultural landscape, economic disparity remains a pressing issue, with a poverty rate well above the state average. What innovative strategies can community stakeholders collaboratively implement to foster middle-class growth amid great wealth and poverty in Athens?

Athens-Clarke County 2025 Level Ground

Introduction

Athens-Clarke County, despite its abundant resources and compassionate community, faces significant economic disparity, with nearly 26% of residents living in poverty, nearly twice the percentage of the state average (Chmura, 2024). This gap is evident in access to quality jobs, literacy resources, and affordable housing. These structural inequities are particularly evident in historically underserved neighborhoods and among minority populations. Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated, community-driven collaboration.

In light of these challenges, Level Ground proposes the following initiatives to reduce economic disparity and increase economic mobility in Athens-Clarke County.

- **Crayons to Careers**
Crayons to Careers is designed to strengthen Athens-Clarke County’s workforce and economic mobility by expanding access to affordable, high-quality childcare. Through partnerships with employers, educators, and community



Team Members

Jeffrey Burke, University of Georgia, Archway Partnership - Athens

Morgan Ferguson, Electric Cities of Georgia - Atlanta

Danielle Hall, AmericasMart ANDMORE - Atlanta

Dennis Lamar Handy, Emory University & The DL Handy Foundation, Inc. - Athens

Caitlin May, ACLU of Georgia - Athens

Ebonie Medious, LinkedIn - Decatur

Callen Moore, Foothills Regional High School - Bogart

Hue Nguyen, City of Morrow - Morrow

Reginald Rainge, City of Atlanta - Atlanta

Urie Register, South Georgia Regional Commission - Valdosta

David Stahl, City of Port Wentworth - Guyton

Kimberly Wilder, Davis, Chapman, and Wilder, LLC Attorneys at Law - Augusta

organizations, the initiative increases childcare capacity, supports nontraditional work schedules, and promotes inclusive services for children with disabilities. By removing childcare as a barrier to employment and training, the program empowers parents to pursue career opportunities, fosters early childhood development, and builds a more resilient, skilled local workforce.

► **Thrive Hubs**

Thrive Hubs exist to empower the Athens community at every stage of life by providing accessible, community-based centers for wellness, lifelong learning, and financial empowerment. Through strategic placement in redeveloped neighborhoods and collaboration with local government, nonprofits, and other organizations, the Thrive Hubs will deliver inclusive services, including childcare, financial literacy, healthcare access, and career

development, to promote a thriving future for all residents in Athens-Clarke County.

► **Pathway to Homeownership**

The Pathway to Homeownership initiative is committed to advancing economic equity and community preservation in Athens-Clarke County by creating sustainable pathways to home ownership in historically and culturally significant neighborhoods. Through collaborative partnerships with key stakeholders, the program is intended to prevent displacement, support residents by building generational wealth, and revitalize the community. By pairing affordable housing opportunities with financial literacy resources, Athens’ stakeholders have the opportunity to promote economic inclusion and ensure that all families can thrive and remain rooted in the place that they call home.

Athens-Clarke County 2025: Level Ground

Big Idea #1: Crayons to Careers

Description

Athens-Clarke County is home to more than 129,000 residents, yet only 62% of adults participate in the labor force – well below the state and national averages (Chmura, 2024). As of April 2025, unemployment stood at 2.7%, but this understates broader disengagement: around 26% live below the poverty line, and nearly 30% of working-age adults are economically insecure (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025; Chmura, 2024; ACC Government, 2021). Notably, families headed by single parents experience poverty rates in excess of 37%, reflecting deep socioeconomic divides that exclude many from solid middle-class pathways (Atlanta Regional Commission, 2024). Access to affordable, high quality childcare is a key factor in supporting workforce participation and economic mobility in Athens-Clarke County.

Athens-Clarke County is home to more than 6,200 children under age 5, yet only 36 licensed childcare providers serve the entire community. Just 17 of these are Quality Rated, meaning only about half can accept subsidies that help families afford care (JobsEQ, 2025; Georgia DECAL, 2025). With fewer than 3,000 licensed slots—and all facilities at full capacity—options are severely limited. Only one provider offers weekend care, and just a few offer limited nontraditional hours. This shortage creates a significant barrier to employment: when safe, reliable childcare is unavailable, parents may be forced to cut work hours, leave the workforce, or delay job and training opportunities. For single parents in particular, the lack of accessible childcare leaves few choices, ultimately weakening the local labor force and slowing economic growth for both families and the broader community.

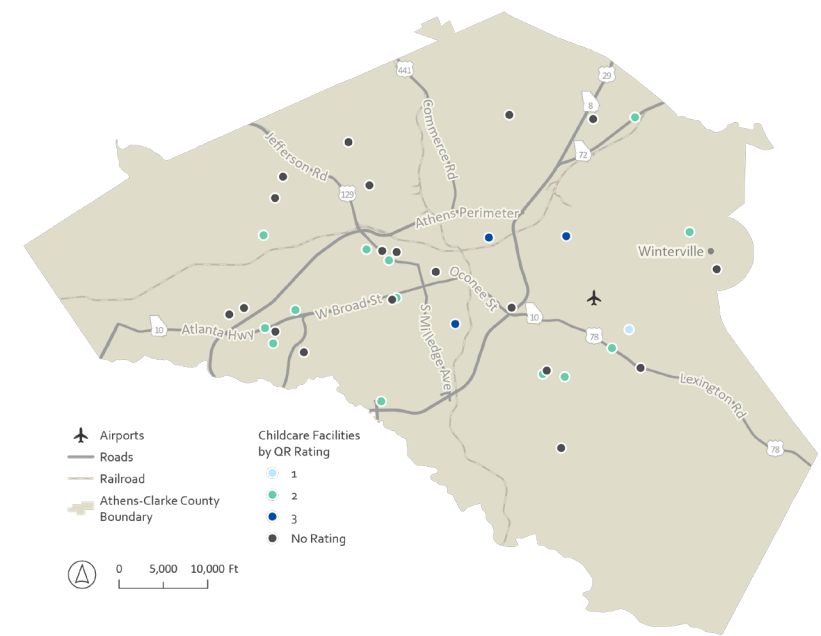


IMAGE SHOWS THE LIMITED CHILD CARE FACILITIES ACROSS ATHENS-CLARKE COUNTY. EACH FACILITY IS DISTINGUISHED BY THEIR QUALITY RATED LEVEL. FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THE QUALITY RATED TIER SYSTEM, PLEASE VISIT [HTTPS://QUALITYRATED.DECAL.GA.GOV/](https://qualityrated.dec.state.ga.us/).

Big Idea #1: Crayons to Careers

Scope of the Initiative

The Crayons to Careers program is a multi-phase initiative designed to expand access to high-quality, affordable childcare in Athens-Clarke County while strengthening the local workforce. By aligning childhood education with economic development, this program supports families, employers, and childcare providers through a series of strategic action steps. Without expanded access to affordable childcare, a substantial portion of Athens’ workforce remains locked out of middle class mobility. By strategically linking childcare, workforce development, and economic inclusion, Crayons to Careers represents a long-term

investment in the prosperity of families, businesses, and the broader community.

In addition to improving access and affordability, this initiative seeks to position early childhood care and education as a driver of economic development, workforce readiness, and community well-being in Athens-Clarke County. By integrating childcare infrastructure with broader development efforts, the initiative will support multigenerational economic mobility for families who have been in Athens for many years and those who intend to remain in the area.

Action Steps & Timeline

Short Term Goals and Action Items (0-1 year): Building the Foundation

- ▶ **Participate in Statewide Initiatives**
 - ▶ Join the next cohort of the Georgia Child Care Accelerator Program, convened by the Georgia Municipal Association and funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. This year-long initiative is designed to equip local governments and partners with the tools to expand access to early care and education. The most recent cohort, featuring Albany, Augusta, Columbus, and Savannah, demonstrated how cross-sector collaboration can drive impactful strategies. These cities have committed to bold, data-driven action plans that leverage public and private resources, align workforce and childcare

systems, and strengthen community infrastructure to ensure more families can access quality, affordable childcare.

- ▶ **Build Cross-Sector Partnerships**
 - ▶ Convene a bimonthly “Birth-to-Eight” partnership team with childcare providers, Athens Technical College, Athens Community Career Academy, DECAL, local government, and workforce agencies (TCSG, WIOA, Chamber) to align childcare capacity with job training pipelines.
 - ▶ Partner with after-school programs offered by the Athens-Clarke County School District and connect them with workforce training providers—such as Athens Technical College, the Northeast Georgia Workforce Development Board, the Athens Area

Chamber of Commerce, and the Athens-Clarke County Economic Development Department—to deliver job training, career readiness workshops, and skills development for parents while their children participate in academic and enrichment activities.

- ▶ **Expand Access to Childcare for Working Families**
 - ▶ Increase awareness of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), a federal program that funds workforce training and support services, including childcare assistance for low-income parents in WIOA-funded programs.
 - ▶ Expand Early Head Start capacity and integrate it with local workforce initiatives so parents can access quality childcare while pursuing training or employment.
 - ▶ Expand outreach through initiatives like YouthForce to connect youth and underserved populations with career pathways, soft skills training, and job placement, creating a seamless family workforce pipeline.

Medium Term Goals and Action Items (1-3 years)

- ▶ **Support and Incentivize Providers**
 - ▶ Secure funding to help childcare facilities achieve or improve their Quality Rated status. Building on Clarke County’s E3Z legacy, recruit more centers into Georgia’s Quality Rated system and provide small grants or technical assistance to help providers advance in their ratings—making care more affordable for families through tiered co-pays under the CAPS program.
 - ▶ Include childcare facilities in (re)development plans for Tax Allocation Districts (TADs) and Community Improvement Districts (CIDs) to ensure that new and revitalized commercial areas incorporate accessible, high-quality

childcare that supports working parents, attracts employers, and links community development to workforce participation.

- ▶ Leverage Quality Care for Children training to promote employer-sponsored or subsidized childcare partnerships. The Athens Well-Being Project recommends public advocacy and employer-supported models as effective strategies to expand the supply of and access to quality childcare. In Savannah, a similar approach used micro-grants to help centers meet Quality Rated standards, resulting in increased capacity, improved service quality, and stronger connections between childcare and workforce development.
- ▶ **Increase Affordable Childcare Through Collaborative Funding**
 - ▶ Threefold Care is a proposed collaborative childcare program designed to meet the needs of Athens’ working families by sharing costs equally among the public sector partners, participating employers, and employees. Families apply and are selected based on factors such as household income, child age, and residency. Modeled after Michigan’s Tri-Share program, Threefold Care reduces the financial burden on 20 families each year while ensuring access to high-quality care. MI Tri-Share has shown success by dividing childcare costs evenly among the employee, employer, and the State of Michigan, with regional hubs like United Way coordinating enrollment, payments, and provider connections.

Long Term Goals and Action Items (3-5 years)

- ▶ **Expand Employer Partnerships to Provide Affordable and Flexible Childcare**
 - ▶ Encourage collaboration among small businesses, public-sector employers,

Athens-Clarke County 2025: Level Ground

Big Idea #1: Crayons to Careers

- and major industries to create on-site or shared childcare facilities. In these models, participating employers share operating costs and offer employees pretax payroll deductions for fees, placing affordable care near worksites. Shared facilities can serve clusters of downtown businesses, public agencies, or industrial employers. Possible partners include the Classic Center, ACCGov, CCSD, Meissner, Caterpillar, Accurus, the Athens Area Chamber of Commerce, and the Athens-Clarke County Economic Development Department.
- ▶ Partner with employers in shift-based industries such as healthcare, manufacturing, logistics, and hospitality to offer childcare options near worksites during early mornings, evenings, and weekends. Begin with employer-distributed surveys to determine specific needs for location, hours, and services. Support facilities through public incentives and family financial assistance from programs like CAPS and WIOA. To meet staffing needs, collaborate with Athens Technical College and DECAL to expand early childhood education programs and create a fast-track credential option for childcare workers.
 - ▶ **Expand Access to Inclusive Childcare Options**
 - ▶ There are nearly 2,300 students in the Athens-Clarke County School District with a disability (Governor’s Office of Student Achievement, 2024). To increase the number of high-quality, accessible childcare slots in Athens-Clarke County, the Chamber of Commerce can offer a tiered reimbursement program to childcare

providers depending on their quality level and service to priority populations. The program offers reimbursements to providers who complete specialized inclusion training, employ staff trained in early childhood special education, demonstrate compliance with ADA standards, and maintain individualized care plans in partnership with families and specialists. An example tier system is below:

Tier 1 - Licensed Inclusive Provider

\$200 per child per week

Must be licensed by the state and complete basic disability inclusion training (12 hours).

Tier 2 - Inclusion Certified

\$250 per child per week

Maintains an inclusion coordinator role (part time or full time) and offers accessible classroom spaces and sensory-friendly areas.

Tier 3 - Advanced Inclusion Care

\$280 per child per week

Has an on-site or on-call occupational/physical/speech therapy access, offers individualized learning plans for each child with a disability, and demonstrates partnerships with early intervention programs.

Tier 4 - Model Inclusion Center

\$300 per child per week

Serves as a training site for other childcare providers, has a multidisciplinary support team available to families, and uses adaptive technology and specialized curriculum.

- ▶ Playground equipment experts recommend \$1,000 per child that is expected to be playing on the playground (PlaygroundEquipment.com, 2025). The Athens-Clarke County Chamber of Commerce will partner with childcare facilities in the county to provide cost-match funding for additional accessible playground equipment. Facilities will apply for the funding based on the number of children that they serve with disabilities.



IMAGE SHOWS AN ACCESSIBLE PLAYGROUND. FOR MORE GUIDELINES AND RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING ACCESSIBLE PLAYGROUNDS, PLEASE VISIT [PLAY IT SAFE PLAYGROUNDS’ WEBSITE](#).

Budget

Initiative	1-Year Budget	5-Year Budget	10-Year Budget
Threefold Care Childcare costs are assumed to be \$7,500 per child annually Only 20 families in the program each year	\$100,000	\$500,000	\$1,000,000
Athens-Clarke County Government (33%)	\$50,000	\$250,000	\$500,000
Participating Employers (33%)	\$50,000	\$250,000	\$500,000
Inclusive Childcare Tier Reimbursement Program Up to \$300 per child per week (budget assumes 20 children at 50 weeks)	\$300,000	\$1,500,000	\$3,000,000
Playground Equipment Cost-Match \$500 per child (budget assumes 20 children)	\$10,000	\$50,000	\$100,000
ShiftCare - Training	\$66,000	\$180,000	\$360,000
Curriculum Adaptation and Certification Pathway Convert ECCE courses to 6-8 week stackable modules	\$10,000	-	-
Equipment and teaching supplies Age appropriate materials, sensory kits, assessment tools, first-aid/ CPR materials, computers	\$20,000		
Instructor / Professor Each year program offers four cohorts with 20 slots \$5,000 stipend per cohort assumed	\$20,000	\$100,000	\$200,000
Student preparation / materials Background checks, supplies, immunization/TB test facilitation \$200 per student assumed	\$16,000	\$80,000	\$160,000
Total Operating Costs	\$476,000	\$2,230,000	\$4,460,000

Big Idea #1: Crayons to Careers

Possible funding sources

- ▶ Federal and State Workforce Development Grants
 - ▷ Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)
 - ▷ WorkSource Georgia
 - ▷ United Way of Northeast Georgia
 - ▷ Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)
 - ▷ U.S. Department of Labor - Apprenticeship Building America
 - ▷ Federal TRIO Program
- ▶ Athens-Clarke County Government Funding
 - ▷ ACC Foundation
 - ▷ Local SPLOST Funding
- ▶ Private Philanthropy & Foundations
 - ▷ Annie E Casey Foundation
 - ▷ Ford Foundation
 - ▷ Strive Together Network
 - ▷ Employer and Industry Partnerships

Potential partnerships

- ▶ Chamber of Commerce
- ▶ Manufacturing Employers (Caterpillar, Meisner, Accurus)
- ▶ Downtown Employers Group led by Classic Center
- ▶ County Commission
- ▶ Athens-Clarke County Development Authority
- ▶ YouthForce
- ▶ Athens Technical College

Expected impact/Measures of success

Expected Impact

The Crayons to Careers program is designed to reduce childcare-related barriers to entry into the workforce and to education, especially for the underserved and working-class families in Athens-Clarke County. By expanding access to affordable, high-quality, and flexible childcare options, while aligning these services with other county-wide workforce initiatives, the program is expected to generate the following key impacts:

- ▶ Increased labor force participation
 - ▷ With more licensed childcare slots available and targeted support for nontraditional work hours, more parents will be able to seek and maintain employment or participate in training programs.
- ▶ Stronger workforce pipelines
 - ▷ By integrating childcare access with existing workforce development programs (i.e. WIOA, Athens Technical College, YouthForce, etc.), parents have the opportunity to pursue career advancement without sacrificing appropriate care for their children. This builds a stronger, more skilled, and more economically secure workforce.
- ▶ Child development and school readiness
 - ▷ Children enrolled in quality-rated programs will benefit from early learning environments that promote cognitive, social, and emotional development, thus laying the foundation for

long-term academic and personal success. More information on the benefits of the Quality Rated program can be found on the Georgia Department of Early Care And Learning (DECAL) website.

- ▶ Economic mobility and equity
 - ▷ Families receiving support through Crayons to Careers will be better positioned to increase their household income and build wealth to break cycles of poverty. Ultimately it will help close opportunity gaps across the community.
- ▶ Community growth, dependability, and stability
 - ▷ As more employers join the program and invest in these family-friendly practices, Athens-Clarke County will experience a more inclusive and resilient local economy.

Measures of Success

The following will be evaluated annually:

- ▶ Number of children enrolled in childcare
- ▶ Number of children with disabilities in childcare
- ▶ Number of open/available subsidized childcare spots
- ▶ Number of facilities in Athens-Clarke County
- ▶ Number of employees at each childcare facility and their student:teacher ratio
- ▶ Labor force participation rate

Athens-Clarke County 2025: Level Ground

Big Idea #2: Thrive Hubs

Description

Thrive Hubs in Athens will deliver coordinated health and mental wellness, financial empowerment and continued learning—helping residents gain healthier habits, greater economic stability, and improved mental wellbeing. Thrive Hubs are intentionally placed centers within redeveloped communities, offering access to reading literacy, financial literacy, and healthcare resources for every stage of life for Athenians to stay and THRIVE in Athens. Nellie B. Housing, Bethel Homes and Brookside West are ideal locations for potential THRIVE Hubs. This will cover all three areas of Athens that house a large population of residents. These areas house not only youth but also many adults and elderly citizens. Our goal of the Thrive Hubs is to give residents hope for a better future and provide essential services that will also include workshops speaking about saving, financial literacy and homeownership. Bringing

these services to the community will also help start to foster conversations within the homes and communities among the youth.

Thrive Hubs will provide integrated, community-centered services in Athens that combine physical wellness programs, financial coaching, and accessible mental-health support. In year one, there is potential to serve 50-100 residents in Nellie B. Housing, 100 residents in Bethel Homes and 100 in Brookside West. We aim to reduce reported stress/anxiety, increase monthly learning opportunities, and connect residents to continuing care, financial and employment resources. Our mixed-methods evaluation will include surveys, administrative data and qualitative stories, to quantify health and economic outcomes and measure community-level reach and equity of access.

Scope of the Initiative

Thrive Hubs are community-based centers in Athens that integrate wellness, financial empowerment, and health and mental health services under one roof. The goal is to improve quality of life, increase economic stability, and strengthen emotional resilience for residents—particularly underserved populations. These centers will service all community members from children to the elderly. The focus will be to provide services that promote sustainable pathways for financial mobility, improved quality of life, and long-term health outcomes for res-

idents with collaboration from local government, organizations, and nonprofits. Thrive Hubs will offer childcare, financial literacy training, access to free healthcare screenings, and career development.



Our geographic focus area is Athens-Clarke County, Georgia with a potential secondary reach of surrounding rural counties in Northeast Georgia. Our priorities for the community is to focus on neighborhoods with higher rates of poverty, unemployment, chronic health issues, and limited access to mental-health care. Our

targeted population low- to moderate-income individuals and families, communities of color disproportionately affected by health and economic disparities, at-risk youth and young adults, working-age adults seeking job stability and financial growth and seniors experiencing isolation or fixed-income challenges.

Action Steps & Timeline

Short-Term Goals (0-1 year plan)

- ▶ **Phase 1: Strategic Planning & Partner Alignment (Checkpoint: Months 1–3)**
 - ▶ Kickoff meeting with Athens Housing Authority, Piedmont Hospital, Athen-Clarke County School District, Credit Unions, and community leaders
 - Establishing a relationship on how to join the impact of Clarke County School District’s new investment program for high school seniors. Developing ways to possibly get this learning into our communities within years 1-3 of the plan.
 - ▶ Define shared vision, goals, and initial roles
 - ▶ Thrive Hubs will initially start in Nellie B, Bethel Homes and Brookside West Housing. After assessment, potentially adding another neighborhood to the Hub list and adding site selection criteria.
 - ▶ Begin asset mapping of existing community centers
 - ▶ Draft partnership MOUs
 - ▶ Create working groups: Programming, Facilities, Community Engagement



- ▶ **Phase 2: Design & Infrastructure Setup (Checkpoint: Months 4–6)**
 - ▶ Conduct site assessments and determine renovation/tech needs
 - ▶ Begin co-design workshops with residents to define program offerings
 - ▶ Finalize the service rotation schedule with all partners
 - ▶ Identify and onboard local Thrive Hub Coordinators
 - ▶ Install necessary technology, signage, and furnishings at the pilot site
 - ▶ Launch a communications campaign for community awareness

Athens-Clarke County 2025: Level Ground

Big Idea #2: Thrive Hubs

Mid-Term Goals (1-3 years)

- Phase 3: Pilot & Community Engagement (Checkpoint: Months 12-36)
 - Host grand opening events
 - Begin phased rollout of core services (health, financial literacy, youth education)
 - Continue programming
 - Collect real-time feedback through surveys and informal community chats
 - Midpoint evaluation of pilot sites
 - Adjust programming/staffing based on data

Long-Term Goals (3-5 years)

- Phase 4: Evaluation & Expansion (Checkpoint: Months 36-72)
 - Full evaluation report with impact metrics and community insights
 - Secure long-term funding (public + private), grant proposals, and budget forecasts
 - Formalize advisory structure and sustainability plan
 - Plan and launch Thrive Hub expansion to additional communities
 - Begin documentation for replication toolkit

Budget

Initiative	Short Term (0-1 Years)	Mid-Term (1-3 Years)	Long-Term (3-5 Years)
Literacy	\$30,276	\$40,500	\$70,600
Bridging the gap that stands between health services and financial knowledge. Offering monthly seminars.			
Improving literacy and testing scores through tutoring services for math and reading. Partners: ARK Commonwealth			
ARK Commonwealth - financial education https://www.athensark.org/copy-of-the-challenge			
East Athens Development Corporation (Individuals receive job coaching and weekly seminars partnering with Department of Labor)			
Health Care Services	\$35,400	\$45,576	\$60,400

Advantage behavior services and non-profits in the city that offer services in mental health awareness.

Technology Readiness	\$10,000	\$20,000	\$20,000
Goodwill to help increase revenue and hire new employees			
Restorative Justice helping in communities with reoffenders Partners: People Living in Recovery			
Design and Infrastructure	\$10,000		
TOTAL	\$85,676	\$106,076	\$151,000

*USED AN ESTIMATE BASED ON HISTORICAL ACC GRANT



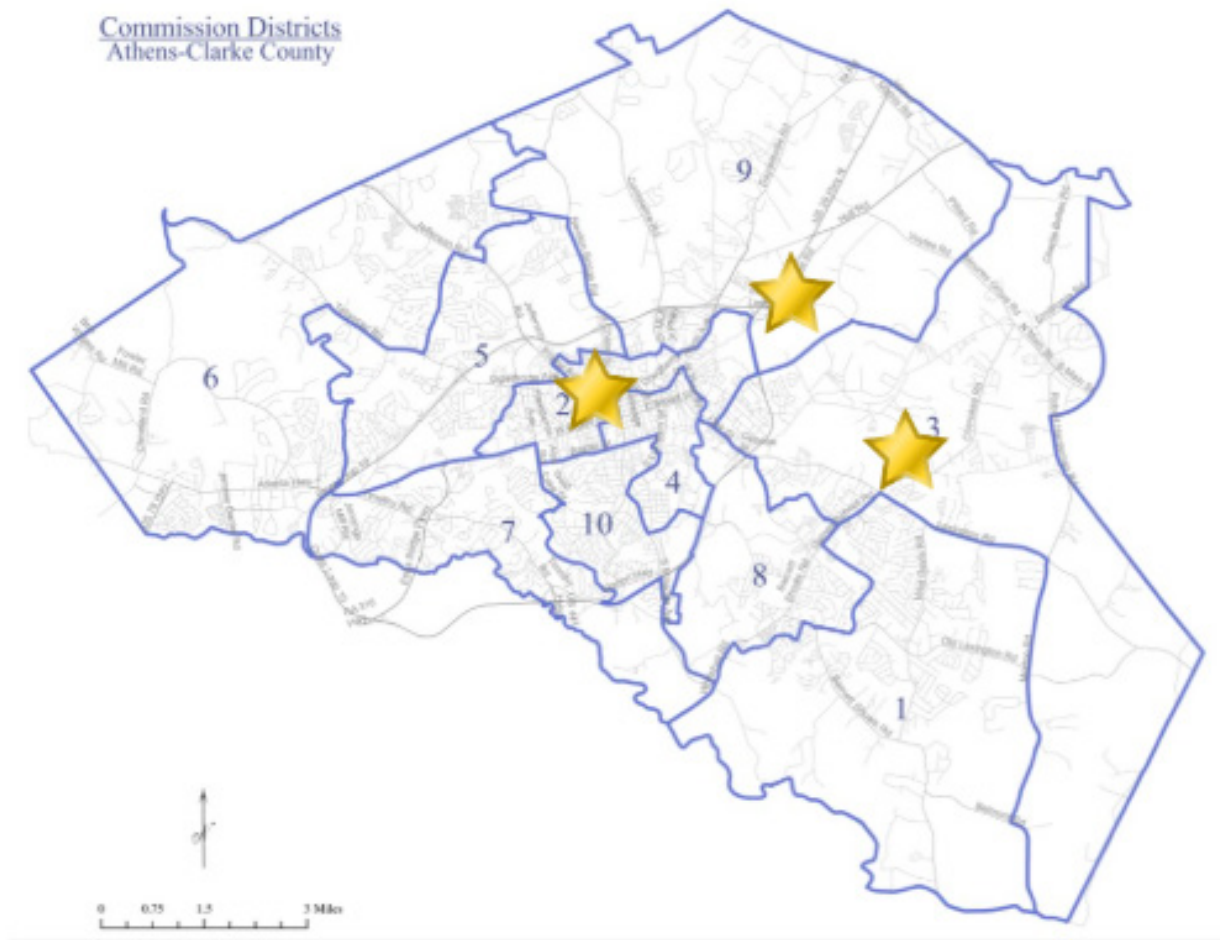
Big Idea #2: Thrive Hubs

Possible funding sources

- Community Development Block Grant
- Athens Foundation
- HUD Grant

Potential partnerships

- Athens Housing Authority (AHA)
- Credit Unions
- Piedmont Hospital
- Local nonprofits
- Athens-Clarke County School District
- Head Start



Expected impact/Measures of success

Expected Impact

- 1. Improve Community Success**
 - Increase access to physical, mental, and preventive health services
 - Reduce avoidable ER visits and improve chronic condition management
- 2. Advance Educational & Digital Equity**
 - Improve literacy and academic performance for K-12 students
 - Expand digital literacy and upskilling opportunities for adults and seniors
- 3. Promote Financial Stability**
 - Increase financial literacy and savings among community members
- 4. Strengthen Intergenerational Engagement**
 - Create safe, inclusive spaces where children, adults, and seniors feel supported and connected
- 5. Empower Local Voices & Leadership**
 - Build community-led governance and ownership of Thrive Hub programming
 - Increase civic participation and resident confidence in institutions



Big Idea #2: Thrive Hubs



Measures of Success

1. Health & Wellbeing

- of individuals screened for chronic conditions (e.g., diabetes, hypertension)
- of mental health referrals and counseling sessions completed
- Self-reported health improvements (pre/post program surveys)
- Reduction in non-urgent ER visits (if data is shareable from Piedmont)

2. Literacy & Education

- of children participating in after-school tutoring or reading programs
- Student literacy/numeracy improvement (in partnership with ACC Schools)
- Adult participants completing GED prep or digital literacy courses
- Technology access: # of residents trained on digital tools or using computer labs

3. Financial Empowerment

- of residents attending financial literacy or credit repair workshops
- of new savings/checking accounts opened (via credit union partner)
- of residents starting side businesses or enrolling in workforce training
- Average credit score increase among tracked participants

4. Intergenerational Community Engagement

- Event attendance and repeat participation rates by age group
- Resident satisfaction surveys (feeling of safety, belonging, usefulness)
- Volunteer hours contributed by community members

5. Operational Success & Sustainability

- Monthly foot traffic and program utilization rates per site
- Partner service fulfillment (e.g., how often each organization shows up)
- Community advisory board participation and retention
- Funding raised (grants, donations, public support) year-over-year



Big Idea #3: Pathway to Home Ownership

Description

According to Lozada-Aguayo et al. (2025), Athens-Clarke County is experiencing a significant shortage of affordable housing, with an estimated 8,800 units needed to meet current demand. More than 37% of households are considered low-income—above the state average—and 26% of residents live below the poverty line. Over half of renters spend more than 30% of their income on housing, and nearly one-third are severely cost-burdened, spending more than 50%. Median home values have risen to \$271,800 (a 62% increase since 2014–2018), and median rent is now \$1,162. Fair Market Rent for a 3-bedroom unit has grown from \$1,104 to \$1,627 in just four years, outpacing wage growth. Without intervention, these trends will continue to push long-term residents—especially in historically and culturally significant neighborhoods—out of the communities they have long called home.

This project proposes a strategy to address economic disparities in Athens by creating pathways to homeownership in historically and culturally significant neighborhoods throughout Athens, such as the Bethel Homes. As development accelerates, many long-term residents are priced out of the communities they helped shape. This initiative seeks to preserve those neighborhoods while offering attainable housing options for individuals and families with deep community ties, particularly those who have historically faced barriers to building wealth through homeownership.

Our proposal involves a coalition of local partners, including nonprofits, civic leaders, and housing advocates, that would work together to identify and purchase homes as they become available in priority neighborhoods, reducing blighted property and preventing further decline. These properties would be renovated with intentionality and respect for their historical character, following local preservation standards and ensuring any required certificates of appropriateness are in place. Rather than being flipped for profit, these homes would be positioned as long-term investments in community stability and opportunity.

To help residents prepare for successful homeownership, each renovated home would be offered with a flexible lease-to-purchase option. Rent payments would be set to mirror future mortgage costs, and a portion of each payment would be credited toward the purchase price. During this period, tenants would have access to financial literacy training, credit-building support, and other resources designed to remove common obstacles to ownership and create a strong foundation for long-term success. If at any point the resident determines that the financial commitment is more than they can comfortably manage, they can end the agreement without penalty — providing both a pathway to ownership and a safety net.

By combining housing preservation with targeted support, this project offers a practical strategy to narrow economic gaps and strengthen neighborhood resilience. It promotes generational

wealth-building, helps retain community identity, and ensures that more residents have a fair chance to thrive and remain rooted in the places they call home.

Scope of the Initiative

This initiative is designed to support the preservation of culturally and historically significant neighborhoods in Athens through concentrated efforts that promote homeownership and economic stability for residents connected to these areas. The following objectives define the primary focus of the project:

- **Preserve Neighborhood Identity and Heritage:** Protect and revitalize neighborhoods with rich cultural and historical significance by maintaining architectural integrity and fostering community pride. Concentrated efforts help ensure these areas remain vibrant and connected to their roots.



- **Increase Affordable Homeownership Opportunities:** Expand access to quality, affordable homes within targeted neighborhoods. This supports housing stability and counters displacement caused by rising development pressures and market speculation.
- **Build Generational Wealth Through Homeownership:** Facilitate pathways for residents to transition from renters to homeowners with the goal of creating lasting wealth and economic opportunity that can be passed down through families.
- **Support Financial Readiness and Stability:** Provide education and resources focused on financial literacy, credit building, and homeownership preparedness, helping residents sustain successful ownership and improve their long-term economic well-being.
- **Strengthen Community Resilience and Economic Inclusion:** By concentrating investments and support within key neighborhoods, the initiative aims to foster stronger, more inclusive communities where residents have equitable opportunities to thrive and remain rooted.

Program Eligibility

The goal of this program is to preserve neighborhood stability and prevent displacement of existing residents. Local ties are one way to advance that goal and will be considered as part of eligibility. Examples include current residency in Athens-Clarke County or a targeted neighborhood for a minimum period (e.g., two years or more), current employment within Athens-Clarke County, previous residency in the area,

Athens-Clarke County 2025: Level Ground

Big Idea #3: Pathway to Home Ownership

or having immediate family members who currently live in the county. These factors will be applied consistently to all applicants to ensure fairness and compliance with fair housing laws.

The participant’s household income must qualify as low-income, falling below 80% of the county’s median income, based on the table below. Family size adjustments based on a preliminary 4-person income limit are included in the table, and each amount is rounded up to the nearest \$50.

FY 2025 HUD Income Limits for Athens-Clarke County, Georgia MSA

Location	Median Family Income	Persons in Family							
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Family Size Adjustment		0.7	0.8	0.9	1	1.08	1.16	1.24	1.32
Athens-Clarke County	\$94,300	\$52,850	\$60,400	\$67,950	\$75,450	\$81,500	\$87,550	\$93,600	\$99,600

(U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT)

Action Steps & Timeline

Short Term Goals and Action Items (0-1 year)

- **Identify a Backbone Organization**
 - ▷ Select a backbone organization to lead the effort, coordinate partners, manage resources, and provide sustained support for the project. This organization will serve as the central point of contact and drive progress from planning through implementation.
- **Reestablish Land Bank Authority**
 - ▷ The successful reestablishment of the Athens-Clarke County Land Bank Authority (LBA) is essential to this work, as it provides the mechanism to acquire, manage, and repurpose vacant or underutilized properties in targeted neighborhoods.

- **Build Support**
 - ▷ The backbone organization will convene local partners, including nonprofits, housing groups, and community leaders, to build a supportive team for the project.
- **Mapping/Neighborhood Selection**
 - ▷ Identify and map neighborhoods that are culturally and historically important in order to focus efforts where they matter most.
 - ▷ Seek input from long-term residents.
- **Real Estate Monitoring**
 - ▷ Set up a system to track homes coming on the market in these neighborhoods to spot good opportunities early.

- **Financial Literacy/Community Support**
 - ▷ Create and pilot financial literacy workshops to help prepare residents for homeownership.
- **Pilot Funding**
 - ▷ Secure initial funding by applying for local/state grants and seeking philanthropic/private support. See “Possible Funding Sources” section for related recommendations.

Medium Term Goals and Action Items (1-3 years)

- **Home Acquisition & Renovation**
 - ▷ Purchase one or two homes as a pilot, or solicit donations of houses from individuals, estates, or organizations.
 - ▷ Complete renovations to home(s), making sure changes respect the neighborhood’s history and meet the Certificate of Appropriateness requirements if necessary.
- **Launch Transitional Rental Program**
 - ▷ Begin offering renovated homes, while providing financial education in preparation to buy.
- **Monitor/Evaluate**
 - ▷ Gather feedback from residents and the community to understand what’s working and what needs improvement.
- **Expansion**
 - ▷ Expand outreach to build awareness and support for the project.
 - ▷ Continue to actively seek funding to support the future growth of the initiative.
- **Establish a Formal Entity for the Program**
 - ▷ Selection based on input received from local city officials and nonprofit agencies.

Long Term Goals and Action Items (3-5 years)

- **Refining/Evaluating**
 - ▷ Refine the model based on feedback from the community, supporters, investors, and lessons learned.
 - ▷ Regularly evaluate the initiative’s impact on neighborhood preservation, homeownership rates, and generational wealth building to guide next steps.
 - ▷ Build a long-term metrics dashboard to track relevant data, including homeownership rates, property value stability, family wealth growth, and neighborhood turnover.
- **Expand Inventory**
 - ▷ Gradually increase the number of homes acquired and renovated based on lessons learned from the pilot.
- **Community Awareness Campaign**
 - ▷ Share success stories.
 - ▷ Host community events and forums.
- **Resident/Community Support**
 - ▷ Continue providing financial counseling and other support to help families transition from renters to homeowners.
- **Secure Sustainable Funding**
 - ▷ Strengthen partnerships and secure sustainable funding to maintain and grow the project.

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Big Idea #3: Pathway to Home Ownership

Budget

Initiative	Cost	Frequency
Staffing	\$150,000	Annual
Home Acquisition (Foreclosure/Auction)	\$90,000	Per Home
Renovation	\$75,000	Per Home
Permits, etc.	\$5,000	Per Home
Financial Literacy Classes	\$5,000	Per Home
Legal Assistance	\$5,000	Per Home
TOTAL	\$150,000 annually	\$180,000 per home

Possible funding sources

- Community Development Block Grant (CDBG)
- HOME Investment Partnerships Program (HOME)
- Continuum of Care (COC) Grants
- American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) - Local Allocation
- Georgia Environmental Finance Authority (GEFA) - Low Interest Loans
- Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST)
- Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation - Revolving Fund
- Athens Land Trust
- Donations of houses from individuals, estates, or organizations

Potential partnerships

- Local Government & Housing
 - Athens-Clarke County Unified Government (Housing & Community Development, Planning Department)
 - Athens Land Bank Authority
 - Athens Housing Authority
 - ACC Historic Preservation Commission
 - Athens Land Trust
- State Agencies
 - Georgia Department of Community Affairs
 - Georgia Municipal Association (GMA)
 - University of Georgia Carl Vinson Institute of Government
- Nonprofit & Community
 - Habitat for Humanity of Athens
 - Athens Homeless Coalition

- Historic Athens
- East Athens Development Corporation
- Empowerment Resource Center of Athens
- Casa de Amistad
- Family Connection Communities in Schools of Athens
- University of Georgia Schools and Colleges
- Financial & Development
 - Local Credit Unions & Community Banks
 - Local Realtors Association - for property tracking and referrals
- Community Development Financial Institutions
 - UGA Archway Partnership
 - UGA School of Social Work or Housing & Community Development Program
- Private Sector/Philanthropy
 - Local developers with community interest
 - Athens Area Chamber of Commerce
 - United Way of Northeast Georgia
 - Synovus, Truist, or Wells Fargo Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) officers

Expected impact/Measures of success

Through this program, the goal is to preserve the character of Athens neighborhoods while increasing homeownership opportunities for local residents. Measures of success could include, but are not limited to:

- The number of homes acquired, renovated, and sold to residents with ties to the community.
- Improvements in participants' credit scores, savings, and completion of financial literacy programs.
- Feedback from residents and community members about neighborhood stability, sense of belonging, and satisfaction with the program.
- Long-term homeownership retention and evidence of wealth-building, such as equity growth and families remaining rooted in the community.
- Partnerships formed and funding secured to support the program's sustainability and growth.

Similar projects have been successfully conducted throughout Georgia. Turn Back the Block in Augusta, which has revitalized the historic Harrisburg neighborhood since 2010. Once a thriving mill village, Harrisburg experienced decades of decline

following mill closures. Turn Back the Block, founded by local leaders, adopted a block-by-block approach to restore the area, combining volunteer labor, donated properties, and homebuyer preparation. Over the past decade, the program has established 9 homeowners, constructed 7 new homes, renovated 8 others, and maintained more than 20 vacant lots—demonstrating the long-term impact of pairing housing rehabilitation with pathways to sustainable homeownership. More information about Turn Back the Block can be found at turnbacktheblock.com.

Historic Macon Foundation has successfully used state and federal historic tax credits to make home rehabilitation more affordable. These incentives can significantly reduce renovation costs and, in some cases, freeze property taxes for several years. In downtown Macon, dozens of homes have been rehabilitated through this approach, demonstrating how tax-credit financing can be an effective tool for improving housing affordability in historic neighborhoods. More information about Historic Macon Foundation can be found at historicmacon.org.

FCS Ministries (Focused Community Strategies) in Historic South Atlanta offers a tested model

Athens-Clarke County 2025: Level Ground

Big Idea #3: Pathway to Home Ownership

combining mixed-income housing development with supportive financial pathways. Since 2010, FCS has partnered to create over 100 rental and homeownership opportunities. Their program includes rental units affordable to workforce families, support for eventual homeownership, and a locally managed housing team overseeing acquisition, renovation, and resident education. This integrated approach promotes long-term affordability and community stability. More information about FCS Ministries can be found at fcsministries.org.

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- ▶ Dexter Fisher, District 5 Commissioner, Athens-Clarke County Unified Government
- ▶ Tammy Gilland, Director of Community Relations, Piedmont Athens Hospital
- ▶ Mayor Kelly Girtz, Mayor, Athens-Clarke County Unified Government
- ▶ Melinda Lord, Director of Housing, Athens-Clarke County Unified Government
- ▶ Dr. Tawana Mattos, Athens Land Trust
- ▶ Al McCall, Vice President of Economic Development, Athens Technical College
- ▶ Sarah McKinney, Executive Director, Community Foundation
- ▶ Lenzy Reid, Vice President of Student Affairs, Athens Technical College
- ▶ Vickie Scotland, WIOA Marketing, North East Regional Commission
- ▶ Dr. Jennifer Scott, Interim Superintendent, Athens-Clarke County Board of Education
- ▶ Solomon Smothers, Housing Coordinator, Athens-Clarke County Unified Government
- ▶ Tonja Tift, Executive Director, City of Tifton
- ▶ Daniel Young, Business Development and Incentives Coordinator, Invest Athens

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Section 4

Athens Regional Coalition - ARC

Challenge Question:

As a regional hub for commerce, culture, education, and healthcare, Athens-Clarke County plays a vital role in Northeast Georgia. How can we balance this regional role and metro growth while prioritizing and addressing critical local challenges?

Athens-Clarke County 2025

Team Athens Regional Coalition - ARC

Introduction

A Bold Vision for Athens-Clarke County's Future

Athens-Clarke County stands at a defining crossroads. As a vibrant mid-sized city anchoring Northeast Georgia, Athens has the capacity to lead transformational change—not just for itself, but for peer communities across the state. With a growing population of approximately 128,691 residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024), Athens is home to tremendous assets: a world-class research university, a thriving cultural scene, a strong nonprofit sector, and a deeply-rooted spirit of civic engagement.

However, it also faces urgent challenges: 26.3% of Athenians live below the poverty line, more than double the national average of 12% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). Local transportation systems hinder employment access and mobility for many low-income residents, with limited mobility options both locally and regionally (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019–2023). In Clarke County, 3,211 households lack access to a vehicle, equating to roughly 6% of households (County Transportation Profiles | Bureau of Transportation Statistics, n.d.). Of local residents, 11% rely on public transportation and



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21% rely on walking as their primary mode of transportation (Athens Wellbeing Project, 2022). As a regional hub, Athens benefits from visitor spending, but also feels a strain on its resources as it provides employment, healthcare, education, and commerce to surrounding areas. Fortunately, the city also draws strength from its robust tourism, which has grown to be one of its main economic drivers. In 2022, tourism generated \$434.7 million in direct visitor spending, supported over 4,400 jobs, and produced \$31.5 million in state and local tax revenue (Georgia Department of Economic Development, 2022).

In this context, Athens has the opportunity—and the obligation—to lead. This report outlines three initiatives that, together, ensure that both local and regional needs are met for a more connected, inclusive, and resilient future:

1. **Change for the Classic City Fund: Harnessing Micro-Giving for Macro Impact:** Every UGA game day brings over 100,000 visitors to Athens. What if those visits also brought tangible community benefit? This philanthropic initiative invites residents and tourists to “round up” purchases at local businesses, UGA events, and other venues to support the most pressing local needs—such as healthcare, youth programs, and infrastructure. With tourism already driving nearly half a billion dollars in economic activity annually, this fund would ensure that a portion of that impact is reinvested into Athens’ most urgent priorities.
2. **Woven Together: Making Athens a Leader in Transportation:** Athens must also evolve into a city that connects rather than divides. This transportation initiative calls for strategic investment in multi-modal systems—bicycle/pedestrian infrastructure, transit, and commercial air service—to offer equitable local

mobility and long-term economic opportunity. With nearly 30% of residents living in poverty and many relying on limited transportation options, a new kind of transportation system is called for that can support both equity and conscientious economic development.

3. **Hub Cities Strong: Athens as a Statewide Catalyst:** This initiative positions Athens as the anchor of a new Hub Cities Coalition—a peer network of Georgia’s thirteen Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) cities, including Macon, Columbus, Albany, Rome, and others. Each faces shared structural pressures in housing, mental health, infrastructure, and workforce development. Athens, through its collaborative ecosystem and academic strength at the University of Georgia, can pilot scalable solutions and serve as a statewide model for high-impact governance and community resilience.

A Call to Action

Together, these three initiatives form a comprehensive roadmap for Athens-Clarke County to lead with purpose: as a giving city, a connected city, and a hub city. This is more than a proposal—it is a call to local leaders, community members, business owners, and institutional partners to shape the next chapter of our shared future.

Let’s build a Classic City that’s not just known for its culture and character, but for its commitment to progress, equity, and collaboration—here in Athens, and across Georgia—while thoughtfully balancing the delivery of essential regional services with the needs and priorities of our own community.

Athens-Clarke County 2025: Athens Regional Coalition - ARC

Big Idea #1: Change for the Classic City

Description

On any given UGA home football weekend, there are over \$100,000 visitors enjoying the Classic City and all it has to offer. **What if we could harness the power of visitors to meet the most pressing needs that Athens residents are facing?**

Even more - imagine a culture of giving back that is ingrained in the experience of the Classic City - from sporting events to everyday dining, shopping, and culture - where both visitors AND residents come together to give back.

Together, we can make more possible for this Classic City we all love! How? Through the Change for Classic City fund, where rounding up your purchase creates good for all.

Athens is more than a college town—it’s a place where art, food, music, and philanthropy come together. Our community thrives because of meaningful partnerships. Now, imagine if every purchase you made—even rounding up your change—could help a child get dental care, support local infrastructure, or boost youth programming. That’s exactly what we’ll do with the Change for the Classic City Fund.



Big Idea #1: Change for the Classic City Fund

Scope of the Initiative

- **What:** Patrons at local businesses, UGA Athletics events, and tourist hot spots will be invited to round up purchases to the nearest dollar. Eventually, student housing rent and utilities can be incorporated to increase the reach and capacity of the Fund.
- **Where:** Participating partners include restaurants, breweries, music venues, retailers, UGA concessions, and more!
- **Where It Lives:** Funds will be held and managed by the Athens Area Community Foundation as a dedicated Field-of-Interest Fund - able to grant flexible dollars for targeted impact.



Impact Scope

- Generate an estimated \$100,000+ annually from local and visitor contributions.
- Every three years, focus funds on one major community priority—ranging from healthcare access to youth programs, public infrastructure, or sustainability. Allowing the collective impact to “move the needle” on one community need.



Partnership & Leadership Structure

- A steering committee will be established to oversee the strategy, marketing, partner engagement, and grant-making decisions.
- The steering committee will be made up of representatives from the Athens Area Chamber, University of Georgia, Athens-Clarke County, local business owners, Georgia Power, Athens Area Community Foundation, and others as needed.
- Anchor partners that are needed include: UGA Athletics, Athens-Area Chamber of Commerce, Visit Athens, local business owners, and student housing providers.
- We propose anchoring \$70,000 for the first three years of the initiative to fund a Fellowship Position for a recent UGA Graduate. This position would be shared between the Athens Area Community Foundation and the Athens-Area Chamber of Commerce to coordinate partner onboarding, marketing, and operations.

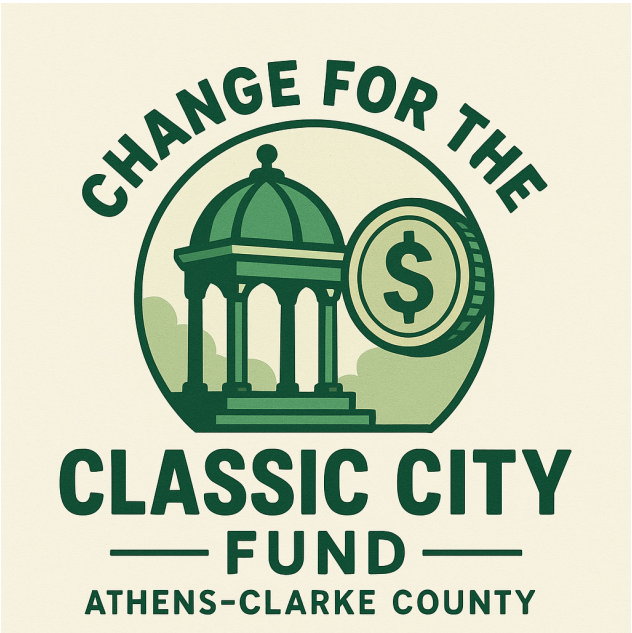
Action Steps & Timeline

Short term goals/action items (Year 1)

- Form 8-11 person steering committee, representative of the partners below and local residents.
- Identify funding sources to anchor \$50,000 per year for 3 years to fund the Fellowship Position,
- or establish a partnership with a UGA Graduate program utilizing a graduate assistant or PHD candidate.
- Hire/Select for the fellow position.
- Formalize partnerships and create buy-in with needed partners:

Partner	Ask	Motivation
Athens Area Community Foundation	Manage the round-up fund and distribution of grants	Increases foundation's visibility and expands its impact in the community
Athens Area Chamber of Commerce	Promote the program among local businesses	Strengthens business-community ties and supports Chamber's mission to uplift Athens
UGA Athletics	Add round-up option at all UGA Athletic Event concession stands	Demonstrates UGA's leadership in community engagement; leverages high-volume foot traffic for high impact
Proof of the Pudding (UGA's Caterer)	Enable round-up on POS systems at UGA Athletic Events	Enhances corporate social responsibility; aligns with UGA's community mission
Visit Athens, GA	Include round-up messaging in tourist campaigns	Showcases Athens as a caring, connected destination
The Classic Center	Promote the program through events and bookings	Builds on existing round-up success; deepens local goodwill
Property Management Companies (Landmark, Collegetown, etc.)	Add round-up to student rental payments	Engages student populations in giving; offers easy way to contribute

Big Idea #1: Change for the Classic City



Medium-Term (6–24 months):

- Launch Change for the Classic City Fund at the Athens Area Community Foundation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit equipped to manage donations and direct community giving.
 - A [Field of Interest Fund](#) will be established to support broad community needs, with flexibility for an external steering committee to lead fundraising, promotion, and grantmaking.
 - The fund can accept donations via ACH, check, or online, making it easy for partners and local businesses to contribute.
 - A **steering committee**—made up of partners, community members, and Foundation board members—can advise on grant distribution.

- Once aligned on goals and budget, partners can use this fund to efficiently collect round-up contributions and distribute grants to local nonprofits.
- Build the Infrastructure for the Round-Up Program: To successfully launch Change for the Classic City, a reliable backend system must connect with various **Point-of-Sale (POS)** systems across participating businesses.
 - [Pledge](#) is a recommended donation platform that integrates with most POS systems and allows direct donations to registered 501(c)(3)s. It has no setup fees, contracts, or monthly costs—and waives processing fees on donations under \$1,000.
 - Integration may vary depending on each business's POS. Some may require technical support or custom APIs, while others may need to change systems entirely. This will require **staff time and local business support**, led by the Fellowship position established in the short-term goals.
- Launch a Unified Marketing Campaign for the Round-Up Program: To ensure the success and sustainability of the Change for the Classic City round-up initiative, we recommend developing a **formal, coordinated marketing campaign designed to engage fans, visitors, and local businesses**. This effort will serve as a crucial medium-term milestone, laying the foundation for broad community participation.

- **Key Objectives:**
 - **Drive Awareness & Buy-In:** Create a compelling narrative around the program's purpose—supporting community needs through everyday purchases.
 - **Minimize Barriers to Participation:** Equip businesses with simple, ready-to-use materials to make onboarding effortless.
 - **Highlight Impact & Value:** Emphasize the reputational benefits for businesses and the tangible outcomes for the community.
- **Marketing Components**
 - Promotional Materials for Businesses:
 - ◇ Window decals, digital display templates, counter signage, and QR code table cards.
 - ◇ Social media graphics and copy for businesses to share.
 - ◇ One-pagers explaining the program and how to join.
 - Visitor Engagement Assets
 - ◇ Collateral for UGA athletic events, Classic Center shows, and tourism brochures via Visit Athens.
 - ◇ Inclusion in fan-facing digital and physical platforms (e.g., event apps, game-day guides).
- **Implementation Strategy**
 - **Outsource** development through a local marketing firm, like [See Spark Go](#).
 - **Central Ownership:** A designated partner (e.g., the Community Foundation or Chamber) should own the design and distribution of materials.
 - **Shared Access:** Marketing assets should live in a shared digital hub where all partners—UGA, The Classic Center, Visit Athens, and local businesses—can easily access and share materials.
- **Content Strategy:** Messaging should focus on *community impact, ease of participation, and shared success stories*, curated by the steering committee.
- Develop a pilot program in a small targeted area with five or six local businesses.
 - Determine a methodology for adding new businesses in the program.
 - Identify potential barriers to implement the program on a large scale, and document questions and lessons learned through the pilot program.
 - After twelve months, determine the feasibility of scaling and expanding the program to incorporate additional businesses, UGA athletics, property management companies, ACC utilities, and others.



Big Idea #1: Change for the Classic City

- Long-Term (2–3 years and beyond):
- Align annual ask with a defined cause. Ideas for causes to focus on include:

▸ Infrastructure costs for affordable housing developments

▸ Behavioral health services - reimbursements to providers

▸ Dental/healthcare for Athens kids

▸ Workforce attraction/childcare

▸ Others identified from the Athens Wellbeing Project data

► Raise \$100,000 by Year 3 with 15% local business engagement target.

► Distribute grants based on impact data.

► Publicly share success stories to sustain engagement.

► Continuously evaluate new community needs from data like the Athens Wellbeing Project.

Budget

Item	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
Anchor partner contributions for staff	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$50,000		
UGA Concessions Round Up *Estimated baseline of 30% participation rate in round up sales, and an average of \$0.35 per transaction on \$3M in concession sales per year, growing year over year		\$90,000	\$100,000	\$115,000	\$130,000
Local Business (Dining & Shopping) Round Up *Estimated baseline of 10 businesses participating in Year 1 and growing by 10 businesses each year.3		\$60,000	\$90,000	\$120,000	\$150,000
General Donations for the public	\$15,000	\$15,000	\$30,000	\$60,000	\$120,000
Budgeted Revenue	\$65,000	\$215,000	\$270,000	\$295,000	\$400,000
Staff Position	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$50,000		
Marketing & Promotional Development Initial design of messaging, website, and promotional materials to market the program in Year 1 and then ongoing annual maintenance	\$15,000	\$15,000	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$50,000
Promotional Materials and Supplies Annual Marketing shared across participating businesses		\$5,200	\$5,400	\$5,500	\$5,600
Administrative Fee for Fund at the Athens Area Community Foundation 2% of fund balance with minimum \$1,000 annual fee		\$3,860	\$5,020	\$6,480	\$8,540
Annual Grant Awarded to Community Remaining balance after expenses		\$140,940	\$159,580	\$233,020	\$335,860
Budget Expenses	\$65,000	\$215,000	\$270,000	\$295,000	\$400,000

Athens-Clarke County 2025: Athens Regional Coalition - ARC

Big Idea #1: Interconnectivity between Current Ecosystems

Possible funding sources

- ▶ Initial Funding of Staff Position:
 - ▷ Athens Area Chamber of Commerce
 - ▷ The Classic Center
 - ▷ Georgia Power
 - ▷ Etc.
- ▶ Grants (private or government) to offset costs of businesses implementing POS System for rounding up sales
 - ▷ Ongoing Round Up Contributions:
- ▶ Athens Clarke County Government Utility Round Ups
- ▶ Landmark Properties/Collegetown Properties Rental Round Ups
- ▶ UGA Athletics Concessions Round Ups
- ▶ Local Round Up Organizations and Businesses Participating

Potential partnerships

- ▶ Athens-Clarke County Government
- ▶ Athens Area Chamber of Commerce
- ▶ Athens Area Community Foundation
- ▶ The Classic Center
- ▶ The University of Georgia
- ▶ Local Athens Businesses and Restaurants
- ▶ Local Property Management Companies
- ▶ Jackson EMC
- ▶ Georgia Power

Expected impact/Measures of success

- ▶ Goals: Engage 25% of local businesses in Athens to buy-in to participate in the round up program
- ▶ Goals: Raise and deploy \$100,000 per year through round up giving program
- ▶ Goals: “Move the needle” in impacting one area of need through the community giving to show a true impact on local needs

Athens-Clarke County 2025: Athens Regional Coalition - ARC

Big Idea #2: Woven Together: Making Athens a Leader in Transportation

Description

As Athens grows in its role as a regional hub, it must also lead in creating a modern, inclusive, and connected transportation system. To enhance quality of life, drive economic growth, and ensure equitable access to community resources, Athens

needs a bold, comprehensive strategy that expands local transportation options while strengthening regional and national connections through transit and commercial air service.

Scope of the Initiative

This initiative builds on Athens’ existing transportation framework while acknowledging persistent challenges—from stalled high-speed rail efforts to gaps in regional transit coordination. Unless significant changes are made, continued reliance on car-centric infrastructure will worsen congestion, undermine safety, and leave low-income residents with limited options. Amid ongoing local trends of income inequality, rapid adoption of e-bikes and e-scooters (particularly among University of Georgia students), and increasing levels of tourism and commerce, one of Athens’ critical needs is a transportation system that is flexible, equitable, and future-ready. By investing in bike/walk infrastructure, public transit, and air service, Athens can create a transportation system that works for everyone. This isn’t just about getting from place to place; it’s about positioning Athens as a model for regional hub cities in the Southeast and beyond.

- To become a transportation leader, Athens will need to:**
- ▶ **Expand access and equity** by offering affordable and inclusive transportation choices for all residents, including the 3,211 zero-car households in Clarke County (approximately 6% of total households)(County Transportation Profiles | Bureau of Transportation Statistics, n.d.).
 - ▶ **Strengthen regional and national connectivity** through strategic investments in air travel and transit.
 - ▶ **Use high-quality transportation to drive economic growth** by unlocking new development potential and building Athens’ reputation as a great place to live, work, or visit.
 - ▶ **Set a new standard** for integrating transportation with land use planning.

Athens-Clarke County 2025: Athens Regional Coalition - ARC

Big Idea #2: Woven Together: Making Athens a Leader in Transportation

Action Steps & Timeline

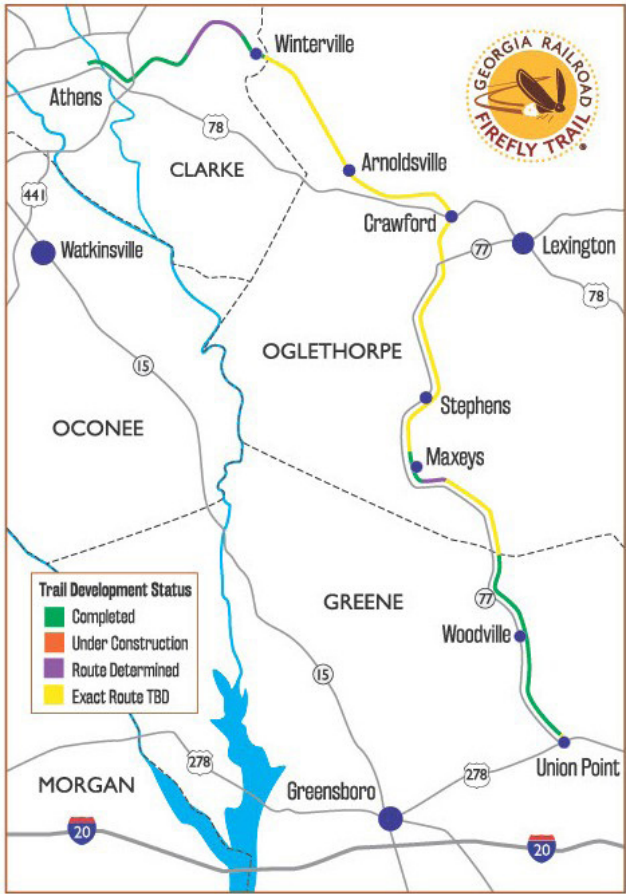
Short term goals/action items (Year 1)

1. Position Athens for Commercial Air Service
- What it is: Develop a data-driven pitch for airlines while working to build strong community support. Attaining commercial air service will attract investment, improve regional access, and unlock economic opportunities tied to tourism and business.
 - How it works: ACC partners with the Airport Authority, Visit Athens, The Classic Center, UGA, and local businesses to create:
 - A visually-appealing, data-backed **professional proposal** for airlines featuring Athens’ economic growth, demand forecasts, potential routes, and incentives offered by the City and Airport Authority.
 - A **community marketing campaign** to build public and corporate support, featuring a dedicated webpage, downloadable one-pager (“*Why Commercial Air Matters for Athens*”), and “Fly Athens” social media campaigns. Local businesses are encouraged to contribute to a Revenue Guarantee Fund.
2. Create an Athens E-Bike Rebate Program to increase affordable transportation for low-income residents.
- What it is: E-bike purchases are subsidized through a rebate program to provide affordable transportation options for all Athenians, with a particular emphasis on low-income residents.”

- How it works: ACC dedicates funding for point-of-sale rebates for e-bikes purchased from local bike shops. Rebates are distributed using a lottery system, with preference given to low-income residents. Successful, replicable models exist in other cities, including Atlanta.
- Impact scope:
 - Equity benefits as low-income rebate recipients are able to purchase reliable, efficient transportation that greatly expands the distance they can travel without a car.
 - Small business and local economic development benefits as participating local bike shops reap benefits, which ripple out into the local economy; Atlanta’s rebate investment of \$746,112 generated \$1.2M in bike shop sales.
 - Community and transportation benefits as more people adopt e-bikes for short trips, including reduced traffic congestion and shortened commute times.
 - Public health and community cohesion benefits as residents increase activity and interact with neighbors.

Medium-Term (6–24 Months):

1. Prepare for Firefly Trail-Oriented Development
- What it is:
 - Build momentum and community support/vision for a future “Firefly District”.
 - How it works:
 - Conduct a small area study to identify the best locations for trail-oriented development, including a robust public engagement component.
 - Increase trail connectivity to downtown and neighborhoods by constructing strategic connections/spur trails to the Firefly.
 - Impact scope:
 - The community is prepared for and bought into Firefly-oriented development in the near future.
 - Eventual trailside development boosts tax revenue, encourages healthy lifestyles, and creates vibrant and exciting community-centered public space.
 - Successful models include the Atlanta Beltline and Greenville, SC’s Swamp Rabbit Trail.



FIREFLY TRAIL INC.



FIREFLY TRAIL INC.

Athens-Clarke County 2025: Athens Regional Coalition - ARC

Big Idea #2: Woven Together: Making Athens a Leader in Transportation



2. Build the Case for Commercial Air in Athens

- What is it: A comprehensive community and business engagement campaign to support the launch of commercial air service in Athens.
- How it works:
 - FAM Tours: Host airline route development teams in Athens with curated itineraries, themed gifts, and event access to showcase the city’s growth potential.
 - Business Engagement: Partner with the Athens Area Chamber of Commerce and Visit Athens to gather business testimonials and secure financial commitments to the Revenue Guarantee Fund.
 - Community Outreach: Host a public town hall to inform residents about benefits and address concerns. Launch a “Fly Athens” pledge campaign encouraging residents and businesses to commit to using the service.
- Impact Scope:
 - Builds airline confidence in Athens as a viable market through in-person experiences and data-backed local support.

- Demonstrates unified community and business commitment, strengthening the city’s air service proposal.
- Increases public awareness and trust, laying the groundwork for successful commercial air service adoption and long-term sustainability.

3. Implement Impact Fees

- What is it: Require new development to contribute to the cost of public infrastructure—such as roads, trails, parks, and public safety—through one-time fees. Impact fees reduce the burden on existing taxpayers and help fund essential improvements that support, rather than strain, public infrastructure.
- How it works: ACC partners with a third-party consultant to define eligible projects, and create a fee structure and a Capital Improvement Element reviewed annually by the Northeast Georgia Regional Commission and the Georgia Department of Community Affairs.
- Impact scope:
 - Funds support a range of enhanced transportation infrastructure (in addition to other community needs) such as safety projects, sidewalks, bike lanes, trail expansion, and road improvements. The Brookings Institution’s national research confirms that, when properly implemented, impact fees do not slow job

growth, but may actually help sustain local economies and improve both development predictability and land supply.

4. Expand Public Transit Options to Serve Adjacent Counties

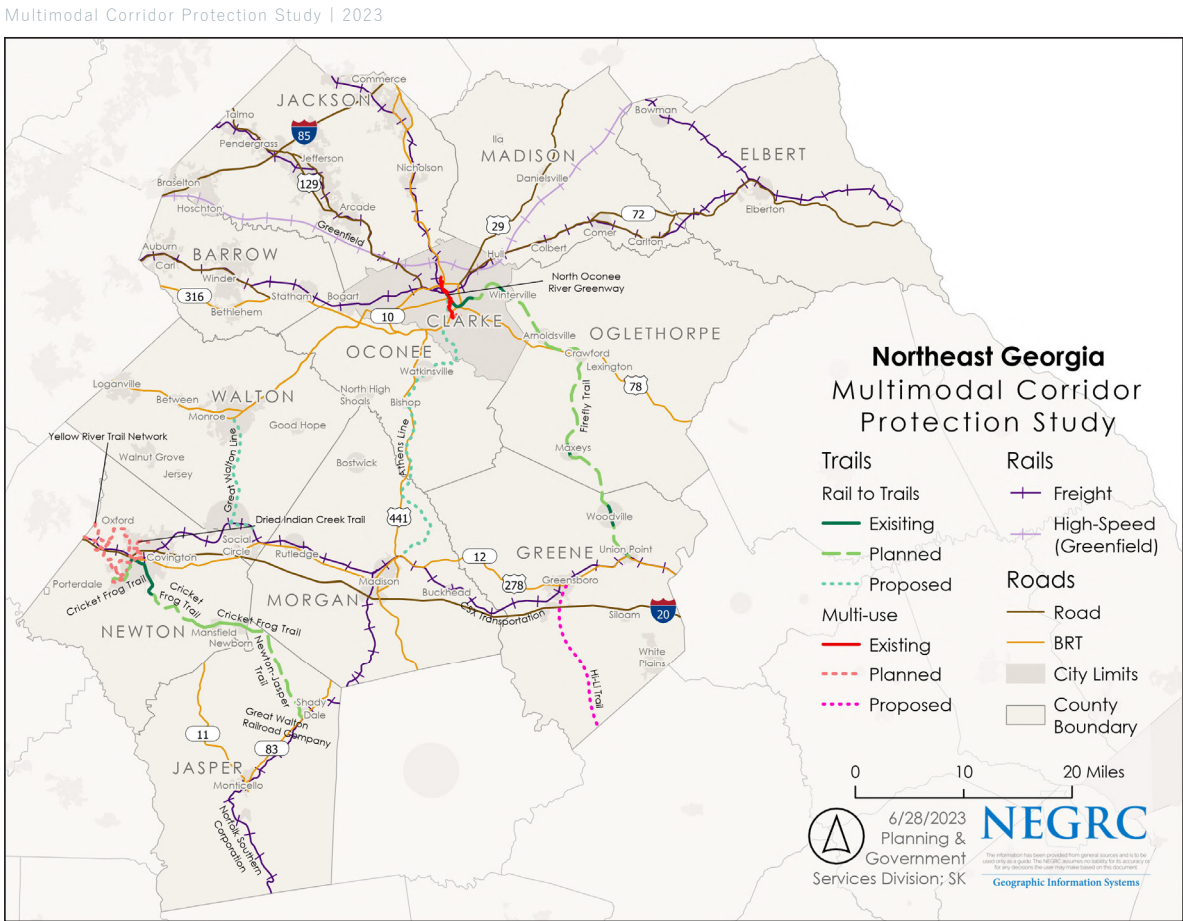
- What it is: Expand transit service beyond ACC boundaries, connecting Athens to the broader Northeast Georgia region
- How it works:
 - Revive past conversations with adjacent counties about potential high-speed rail connectivity to metro Atlanta and inter-jurisdictional bus service.
 - Engage a professional third-party mediator or other neutral partner like NEGRC to facilitate negotiation

of memorandums of agreement with neighboring jurisdictions; work to identify funding sources that adjacent communities can use to offset operational costs.

- Lean on the completed research to determine best routes (see figure 4).

Impact Scope:

- Low-income and transit-dependent residents, who are more likely to live further from workplaces or community services, have increased transportation opportunities.
- Tourism increases as transportation options increase both locally and regionally.



Athens-Clarke County 2025: Athens Regional Coalition - ARC

Big Idea #2: Woven Together: Making Athens a Leader in Transportation

Long-Term (2–3 Years and Beyond):



GO RALEIGH

- 1. Establish a regional transit authority to service Athens, University of Georgia, and surrounding counties
 - What it is: Unite ACC Transit and UGA Transit under the umbrella of a regional transit service.
 - How it works:
 - Form a regional transit service to operate currently-separate transit services under one umbrella. Distinct service lines/brand identities may be retained for local routes, while inter-jurisdictional transit lines would fall under the regional brand umbrella.
 - Pursue multi-county TSPLOST referendum to increase funding
 - Examples exist in other regions, such as [Go Triangle](#), which provides bus and shuttle service throughout the Research Triangle (Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill) area of North Carolina.
 - Impact Scope:
 - Federal transit funding to the Athens area is optimized; ACC and UGA are no longer competing for the same funding.
 - Regional transit service offers opportunities to optimize and coordinate routes, eliminate any existing duplication

- of services, and provide higher quality service to residents and visitors throughout the region.
- Students, faculty, and staff have better connectivity to campus and car ownership is no longer a necessary part of the UGA experience.
- 2. Accelerate Local Bike/Walk Project Delivery by bonding against future TSPLOST revenue.
 - What it is: Revise the TSPLOST (Transportation Special Purpose Local Option Sales tax) process to use municipal bonds to build selected projects, and use TSPLOST collections to repay the bonds over time.
 - How it works: In the next TSPLOST referendum, include language authorizing the use of general obligation bonds (per Georgia law O.C.G.A. § 48-8-263). This allows projects to be built upfront, with sales tax collections used to repay the debt over time. Develop criteria for which projects are built utilizing bonds, which could include the project cost, stage of design at the time or selection, and other criteria.
 - Impact scope: Faster delivery means lower costs to taxpayers and higher public trust.
 - Cost Savings: Delays drive up project costs due to inflation and rising construction costs. Building sooner prevents waste and ensures timely benefits.
 - Community Trust: Long wait times lead to frustration, skepticism and anti-TSPLOST sentiment. Delivering projects faster shows responsiveness and helps build unity, an important goal for a community

- that continues to be segregated along income and racial lines.
- 3. Create a “Firefly District” to support vibrant, flexible, trail-facing development
 - What It Is: Capitalize on the Firefly Trail by encouraging mixed-use, commercial, and residential development along its route where appropriate—transforming parts of the corridor into a dynamic, trail-oriented “Firefly District.”
 - How It Works:
 - Integrate trail-oriented development into the next Comprehensive Plan update as a new or revised character area.
 - Implement a zoning overlay to encourage trail-oriented development; consider form-based code in these areas.
 - ◇ Require trail-facing development and trail connections, incentivize uses that cater to trail users
 - ◇ Allow flexible development where appropriate—like shipping container/railcar shops or micro-business spaces—to reduce barriers to development and provide small business incubator space.
 - ◇ Consider cost-sharing agreements/public-private partnership to execute a large anchor project to catalyze development
 - ◇ Utilize anti-displacement measures such as affordable housing incentives and explore land acquisition near the trail in order to preserve space for affordable housing as the Firefly District grows.
 - ◇ Ensure strong trail-to-downtown connectivity to increase access and visibility. Without it, the trail risks remaining a drive-to destination rather than a true community asset.

- Impact:
 - Athens and Northeast Georgia reap economic development benefits; once completed, the 39-mile Firefly Trail is projected to attract over 1.1 million users annually and generate \$14.7M in economic impact (Dhongde, 2016).
 - The Firefly District provides a new vibrant destination for both locals and tourists, enhancing the community and providing a gathering place rather than an area to simply pass through.



ATLANTA BELTLINE



CITY OF GREENVILLE



HOUSTON-GALVESTON AREA COUNCIL

Athens-Clarke County 2025: Athens Regional Coalition - ARC

Big Idea #2: Woven Together: Making Athens a Leader in Transportation

4. Secure Commercial Airline Service and Promote through an Integrated Campaign.

 - What it is: A strategy to secure commercial airline service in Athens, supported by a targeted marketing plan to ensure the airline’s long-term success.
 - How it works: Athens-Clarke County partners with key institutions to secure an airline agreement and launch a comprehensive marketing campaign to promote the new service.
- Impact scope: Commercial air service will strengthen Athens’ role as a regional gateway while boosting local economic development and tourism. It will provide new opportunities for businesses, nonprofits, and institutions to thrive by making Athens more accessible for conferences, recruiting, and collaboration—while enhancing quality of life and reducing travel burdens for residents.

Budget

Category	Item	Description	Estimated Cost	Notes/Partners
SHORT-TERM				
E-Bike Rebate Program				
	E-Bike Rebates		\$750,000	
	Admin	Coordination with local bike shops, marketing/communications, website, vendor portal, application process	\$150,000	ACC, Northeast Georgia Regional Commission
	Education/ Outreach	Publicize program, provide e-bike safety education	\$50,000	BikeAthens, Go Georgia, other advocate groups
	Program Evaluation	Evaluate effectiveness, recommend improvements for future rounds of funding	\$50,000	Third-party program evaluator or NEGRC
E-bike Rebates Subtotal			\$1,000,000	
Position Athens for Commercial Air Service				
	Market Study / Leakage Analysis		\$50,000	Previously completed by Airport Authority (optional to complete again)
	Revenue Guarantee Fund	Airline support for initial launch	\$750,000	Contributions from Athens Area Chamber of Commerce, Visit Athens, Grant Funding, and Corporate Donations
	Landing Fee Waiver - First Year	Landing fees subsidized by ACC Government for the first year of service.	\$300,000	Approx. \$350/ flight (2 Flights/day)
	Route Development Conferences		\$6,000	JumpStart, Routes Americas conferences
	Airline FAM Tours	Flights, lodging, meals, tours for planners	\$5,000	Host 1–2 airline representatives
	Airline Pitch Materials	Design & printing of value proposal	\$1,500	Printed and digital pitch decks & proposals
Position Athens for Commercial Air Subtotal			\$1,112,500	
Short-Term Recommendations Subtotal			\$2,112,500	

Athens-Clarke County 2025: Athens Regional Coalition - ARC

Big Idea #2: Woven Together: Making Athens a Leader in Transportation

Category	Item	Description	Estimated Cost	Notes/Partners
MEDIUM-TERM				
Build the Case for Commercial Air in Athens				
	Build/host “Fly Athens” interest page		\$2,500	
	Community Events	Town halls	\$4,000	Includes venue, AV, refreshments
	Branding & Messaging Development	Slogan, logo, templates	\$3,500.00	Outsourced to branding agency
	Stakeholder Video Production	Testimonials from business leaders	\$4,000.00	1-2 short campaign videos
	Collateral Printing	Flyers, fact sheets, signage	\$1,500.00	Distributed at meetings/ events
Build the Case for Commercial Air Subtotal			\$15,500	
Impact Fees				
	Consultant		\$15,000	Define eligible projects, and create a Capital Improvement Element
Medium-Term Recommendations Subtotal			\$6,220,500	
LONG-TERM				
Secure Commercial Air Service				
	Pre-Service Ad Campaign	Local print, radio, digital ads	\$10,000.00	Focused on education & pledge
	PR & Media Outreach	Agency or freelance support	\$5,000.00	Includes launch press release, media kit
	Social Media Management	Paid ads + content calendar support	\$5,000.00	3-6 month campaign
	Contingency	Misc. costs / overages	\$5,000.00	Buffer
Secure Commercial Air Service Subtotal			\$25,000	

Category	Item	Description	Estimated Cost	Notes/Partners
Firefly Trail District				
	Small area study for Firefly Trail		\$70,000	Third-party consultant
	Zoning overlay/ development code changes		\$100,000	Third-party consultant
	Affordable housing fund/land acquisition		\$5,000,000	
	Stakeholder Video Production	Testimonials from business leaders	\$4,000.00	1-2 short campaign videos
	Community engagement and promotion/ marketing		\$20,000	Community input events, town halls, trail events, etc.
	Anchor project public contribution		\$1,000,000	
Firefly District Subtotal			\$6,190,000	
Long-Term Recommendations Subtotal			\$6,215,000	
Woven Together Initiative Total			\$6,215,000	

Athens-Clarke County 2025: Athens Regional Coalition - ARC

Big Idea #2: Woven Together: Making Athens a Leader in Transportation

Possible funding sources

In order to become a transportation leader, Athens-Clarke County will need support from a diverse range of funding sources and robust collaboration with key partners.

Funding Sources

- ▶ **Athens-Clarke County:** Committed to covering all flight landing fees for the first year of commercial air service at Ben Epps Airport
- ▶ **Airline Revenue Guarantee Fund:** Under development to attract commercial airlines, with support from SCASDP grant funding and corporate contributions
- ▶ **Transportation Grants:** Multiple federal and state-level funding programs can support active transportation and local mobility improvements, including:
 - ▷ BUILD Grants
 - ▷ Safe Streets and Roads for All Grants
 - ▷ Transportation Alternatives Grants
 - ▷ Recreational Trails Program and Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Program
- ▶ **Multi-County TSPLOST** for regional transit service
- ▶ **Impact Fees:** Can help close funding gaps in the county's transportation infrastructure budget,

especially in light of TSPLOST oversubscription and transit funding shortfalls.

- ▶ **Corporate sponsorship:** Invite local corporate partners like Caterpillar, Piedmont Athens Regional, and Terrapin to sponsor anchor project amenities or other trailside amenities/greenspace.



CITY OF GREENVILLE

Potential partnerships

- ▶ **Local Government & Public Agencies:**
 - ▷ Athens-Clarke County Transportation and Public Works, Planning, and Transit Departments
 - ▷ Athens Airport Authority: currently offering to cover costs for all flight landing fees for the first year of service with a commercial airline.
 - ▷ Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT)
 - ▷ Madison Athens-Clarke Oconee Regional Transportation Study (MACORTS)
 - ▷ Northeast Georgia Regional Commission (NEGRC)
- ▶ **Educational & Healthcare Institutions:**
 - ▷ University of Georgia
 - ▷ Piedmont Hospital
- ▶ **Business & Economic Development Partners:**
 - ▷ Ben Epps Airport
 - ▷ Visit Athens
 - ▷ Athens Area Chamber of Commerce
 - ▷ Caterpillar
 - ▷ Meissner Corporation
 - ▷ Georgia Power
 - ▷ Synovus Bank

Expected impact/Measures of success

- Economic Development & Job Growth**
 - ▷ Commercial air service and modern transportation amenities attract new investment in Athens, including new business and skilled workers.
 - ▷ Growth in higher-paying industries and middle-class job creation.
 - ▷ Increased accessibility and community growth drive small business expansion, raise property values, and increase ACC's tax base.
- Equity & Accessibility**
 - ▷ Inclusive access to transportation, education, and economic opportunity means that residents without personal vehicles are able to access jobs and services.
 - ▷ Alleviate financial burdens associated with car ownership by making Athens a car-optional city.
- Expanded Tourism & Event Potential**
 - ▷ Enhanced regional and national access increases overnight stays and visitor spending.
 - ▷ Increased ability to host major events at venues like The Classic Center and Akins Ford Arena without negatively impacting locals.
 - ▷ New sales and hotel tax revenue generated, reducing pressure on local property tax revenue.
- Quality of Life, Health, and Environmental Benefits**
 - ▷ Increased mobility choices, safety, convenience, and physical activity for all income levels.
 - ▷ Reduced traffic congestion and commute times; reduced driving distances for flights
 - ▷ Expanded bus, bike, and trail networks increase access to jobs, education, and services.
 - ▷ Decreased car travel fosters social interaction and stronger community cohesion.

Athens-Clarke County 2025: Athens Regional Coalition - ARC

Big Idea #2: Woven Together: Making Athens a Leader in Transportation

Measure of Success:

Metric	Target / Indicator of Success
Commercial Air Service	
New Commercial Air Service Secured	At least one airline announces service within 12–24 months
Passenger Enplanements	Meet or exceed projected load factors (e.g. 65–75%+ after 6 months)
Community Support	1,000+ residents/businesses sign "Fly Athens" pledge
Business Buy-In	Successful financial contributions from local businesses
Hotel & Tourism Impact	Increased average hotel occupancy in overnight visitation tied to new routes
Public Awareness	Engagement on campaign website, social media reach, event participation
Media Coverage	Positive regional and industry press highlighting Athens' innovation and readiness
Local/Regional Mobility	
Transportation safety improvements	Serious injuries and fatalities among vulnerable road users begin to decline, reversing recent trends
Faster average project delivery time for TSPLOST projects	Increase average TSPLOST project delivery time by 25%
Increased transit ridership	Transit ridership increases by 25%
Average household transportation costs as a percentage of income	Household transportation costs decrease by 10%

Metric	Target / Indicator of Success
Local/Regional Mobility	
Traffic flow data on event days	Traffic slow-downs decrease by 30% on major event days
Average commute time by mode	Average commute time for each mode (driving, biking/ micromobility devices, transit) is reduced by 10%
Resident satisfaction	Annual surveys on mobility, safety, and quality of life yield increasingly positive results
Transit accessibility to key services (jobs, education, healthcare)	80% of ACC residents can access all three key services (jobs, education, healthcare) within 45 minutes by transit by 2030

Big Idea #3: Hub Cities Strong

Description

Georgia's hub cities are mid-sized urban centers that provide jobs, health care, education, and social services not only for their residents but for surrounding communities as well. However, they face many challenges including housing shortages, behavioral health constraints, additional infrastructure burdens, and workforce demands.

This proposal positions Athens-Clarke County as a pilot city to test strategies that build stronger, more equitable, and more connected cities across Georgia.

Athens' successes can serve as a model for cities like Macon, Columbus, Albany, and Rome which face similar challenges.



Strategic Vision

We envision Athens-Clarke County as a leader of Georgia's hub cities, innovating and excelling in service delivery, regional collaboration, and scalable community solutions.

- Local to Statewide Framework:**
- LOCAL:** Strengthen Athens' service delivery, civic trust, and leadership transitions.
 - REGIONAL:** Build collaborative infrastructure with surrounding counties.
 - STATEWIDE:** Formalize a Georgia Hub Cities Coalition to scale successful strategies

Scope of the Initiative

In order to balance regional and local needs, the Georgia Hub Cities Coalition aims to connect communities across the state that share similar challenges and goals. This collaborative network will begin with a focus on data-driven governance and smarter resource allocation. Over time, it could expand to address critical areas such as infrastructure funding, innovative service delivery models, mental health system coordination,

and solutions for homelessness and housing affordability. Athens would serve as a testing ground, or "living lab," for piloting cost-effective public service models that can be scaled across other cities. To ensure long-term impact and sustainability, the Coalition could be housed within established statewide organizations like the Georgia Municipal Association (GMA) or the Georgia Association of Regional Commissions (GARC).



Athens-Clarke County 2025: Athens Regional Coalition - ARC

Big Idea #3: Hub Cities Strong

Action Steps & Timeline

LOCAL STRATEGIES: Building a Strong Foundation in Athens

Strengthening Athens’ internal systems to increase capacity, access, and civic trust

1. Community Resource Guide (6-12 months)

A centralized, user-friendly directory of essential services—housing, mental health, legal aid, senior/veteran resources—developed through community input and UGA partnership.

- Deliverables: Digital + print guide, distributed across access points; annual update plan.
- Impact: Improves service navigation, reduces redundancy, and connects residents more quickly to help.
- Owner: Athens Area Community Foundation
- Partners: ACC Gov, Chamber, nonprofits, churches, Envision Athens, Housing Authority, UGA
- Inspiration: City of Austin (City of Austin, n.d.)

2. Mobile City Hall (6-12 months)

Pop-up city service events in high-need neighborhoods offering in-person access to housing support, IDs, utility assistance, and more.

- Approach: 3 events in underserved commission districts, co-hosted by local leaders.
- Impact: Brings government to residents, builds trust, and promotes equity in civic access. Brings forward local needs so that community leaders can make informed decisions.
- Owner: Athens-Clarke County Government
- Inspiration: City of Little Rock (City of Little Rock, n.d.)



Future Consideration: Representative Guide: Ensuring Continuity in Athens Leadership inspired by *League of Minnesota Cities’ Preparing Council Members for Success* guide (League of Minnesota Cities, 2024)

3. Roadmap to Success

A public-facing, interactive translation of the ACC strategic plan with clear pillars, timelines, and responsible parties.

- Components: 6–8 key pillars (e.g., Equity, Infrastructure, Workforce), 3–5 initiatives per pillar.
- Impact: Enhances transparency, builds public buy-in, and tracks progress over time.
- Owners: ACC Gov. Potential partner: GA CVIOG – grad student internship in the Master of Urban Design program
- Deliverables:
 - Branded roadmap (PDF & digital version)
 - Communications toolkit for staff and external use
 - Interactive online dashboard
 - Inspiration: City of Canton (City of Canton, 2020)



REGIONAL STRATEGIES

Positioning Athens as a service anchor and collaborator for surrounding counties.

Regional Services Inventory: Expanded directory capturing behavioral health, housing, and workforce services across Athens and adjacent counties.

- Partners: 211, nonprofit coalitions, Athens-Clarke County, Chamber of Commerce, Northeast Georgia Regional Commission, surrounding county leaders
- Impact: Supports cross-county collaboration, identifies gaps, and builds alignment around service delivery.

Athens Hub Task Force: A cross-sector leadership body focused on identifying shared priorities and coordinating responses to regional challenges.

Core Members: Mayor, City Manager, Commissioners, Northeast GA Regional Commission, nonprofit leaders, Chamber, K-12 and higher education representatives, healthcare providers, public safety officials, and Probate Court (long-term partner). Involvement from neighboring counties within the region is strongly encouraged.

- Cadence: First meeting in 90 days; ongoing biannual meetings..
- Impact: Creates space for cross-agency collaboration and regional alignment for long-term service delivery success.

Regional Impact Index: An annual report quantifying Athens’ role as a regional provider—healthcare access, nonprofit reach, workforce inflow, and student draw.

- Partner: Athens Wellbeing Project and UGA College of Public Health.
- Impact: Empowers advocacy and justifies regional funding through verified data.
- Potential Data Source: Placer AI can identify trends for local, regional, and out of town users to help inform service delivery strategies.

STATEWIDE STRATEGIES

Scaling Athens’ model to empower Georgia’s hub cities.



Big Idea #3: Hub Cities Strong

Georgia Hub Cities Coalition: A formal network of MSA cities throughout the state facilitated by GMA and GARC.

- **Focus Areas:** Housing, infrastructure, mental health, tax disparities, transient populations.
- **Structure:** Annual summit, peer learning sessions, and shared data resources.
- **Impact:** Institutionalized collaboration and strengthens collective advocacy.
- **Owner:** Georgia Municipal Association
- **Partners:** Georgia Association of Regional Commissions, Georgia Chamber of Commerce (at least one annual meeting). UGA Archway Partnership. Identify potential private partners (healthcare systems, utilities, etc.)

Regional Service Grant Program: A state-funded initiative supporting cities that deliver services across jurisdictions.

- **Justification:** UGA-led cost-benefit analysis quantifying service burdens and return on investment.
- **Impact:** Offsets fiscal pressure and incentivizes shared-service models.
- **Funding partner:** National League of Cities

University & Research Partnership: A multi-year MOU between UGA Athens Wellbeing Project and the Hub Cities Coalition to support data analysis, GIS, intern pipelines, and research continuity.

- **Key Partners:** Carl Vinson Institute, SPIA, Center for Geospatial Research, College of Public Health, Archway Partnership
- **Impact:** Builds a research backbone to inform smarter decision-making statewide.

Policy Lab Model (Future Consideration): Use Athens as a lab for region-wide policy solutions, starting with a behavioral health crisis response model. Identify other social gaps that contribute to the community's wellbeing. Partner with NLC Cities of Opportunity to establish diversified funding, cross-departmental alignment, community engagement, and authentic partnerships to reduce health and economic disparities across coalition regions.

- **Model:** Peer support, walk-in stabilization, mobile crisis teams inspired by Step Up Together (Step It Up, n.d.)
- **Impact:** Reduces ER and jail strain, improves care access, and scales prevention-first interventions.
- **Partner:** National League of Cities “Cities of Opportunity” Program (nlc.org, n.d.)

Budget

Category	Item	Description	Estimated Cost	Notes/Partners
Short-Term				
Local Strategy	Community Resource Guide	Development of a community resource guide.	\$10,000	UGA / In-house Internship
Local Strategy	Mobile City Hall	Invest in a mobile city hall to bring resources to neighborhoods throughout the community.	\$10,000 Annually	GMA, Local Non-profits
Local Strategy	Road Map to Success	Develop a roadmap to success outlining the core pillars of focus in ACC.	Staff Time	UGA / In-house Internship
Regional Strategy	Regional Impact Index	Development and maintenance of a regional impact index.	\$25,000 Annually	UGA, Athens-Well Being Project, GT, GARC
Statewide Strategy	Hub Cities Coalition	Staffing and support to the Hub Cities Coalition.	\$100,000 Annually	GARC, GMA
Statewide Strategy	GIS Open Data Portal	Shared GIS open data portal.	\$50,000	GARC, GMA

Possible funding sources

- United Way of Northeast Georgia Community Impact Grants - Can assist in funding direct service and program activities
 - Athens Area Community Foundation Grants Microgrants (up to \$3,000.00) which could be used for piloting Mobile City Hall initiatives
 - State Legislative Appropriation (with support from GMA & GA Chamber of Commerce)
 - Federal programs (SAMHSA, HUD, DOJ Behavioral Health Diversion grants)
- Private foundations
 - University funding or graduate research assistance for cost-benefit analysis
 - Regional Development Authorities and hospital community foundation funds
 - DCA Innovation Grant
 - Georgia Power Foundation

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Big Idea #3: Hub Cities Strong

Expected impact/Measures of success

For Athens - Local Strengthening: Accelerated local innovation, stronger service systems, and enhanced statewide leadership profile.

- Athens residents, service providers, and civic leaders will benefit from streamlined service navigation, smoother leadership transitions, and more equitable access to public resources. Civic innovation pilots (e.g., a Mobile City Hall and Community Resource Guide) will enhance responsiveness and rebuild public trust.
- Athens will model how hub cities can address complex challenges—housing instability, behavioral health gaps, and workforce strain—through coordinated, cross-sector solutions. These models will be piloted locally and made accessible for peer adoption across Georgia.

For Georgia - Statewide Collaboration: A replicable model of how mid-sized cities can lead with resilience, inclusivity, and data-driven collaboration.

- A formal coalition will unite communities across Georgia that share common structural challenges. This network, supported by shared data, toolkits, and intergovernmental agreements, will enable scalable innovation, coordinated advocacy, and sustainable policy reform.
- These short-term actions will strengthen Athens’ position as a collaborative, resilient regional hub and provide Georgia’s other hub cities with a replicable model for shared governance, equitable service delivery, and inclusive civic engagement.

Local - Track Mobile City Hall engagement and event-based surveys to gauge access and satisfaction among at least 200 households. Measure public trust through print distribution, social media engagement, and direct community feedback.

Regional - Evaluate the reach and relevance of the Community Resource Guide by tracking verified listings, particularly in housing, health, and workforce. Ensure diverse task force representation (≥90% of target sectors) and gather member feedback on collaboration quality and equity.

Statewide - Record the number of Georgia peer cities that request framework materials, attend webinars, or engage with the coalition to adapt the Athens model in their communities. Document the volume of out-of-county users of Athens-Clarke County services to justify regional service-sharing and funding alignment.

- Higher education network equipped to provide data within their respective regions

Future Considerations

- **Health System Impact:** Monitor reduction in emergency room visits tied to behavioral health needs, increase in use of mobile crisis response teams, and number of individuals diverted from jail to care alternatives as a result of improved regional coordination.
- **Policy Impact:** Track the introduction or adoption of new intergovernmental MOUs,

shared-service agreements, or legislative actions inspired by the coalition’s data and pilot projects.

Athens is ready to lead—not just for itself, but for the future of Georgia’s hub cities. By piloting grounded,

community-based tools and building a framework for regional and statewide replication, **Hub Cities Strong** offers a bold, actionable path forward. It is not just a local plan—it’s a blueprint for how mid-sized cities across Georgia can rise to shared challenges, together.

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