

Ware County
Identification of Issues and Opportunities

1. Population

Issues:

- ❖ Young people do not stay in Ware County/Waycross but move to other areas for jobs.
- ❖ Lack of diversity in the make-up of the population.

Opportunities:

- ❖ Pursue attraction of retirees to the area.
- ❖ Pursue the development of a quality “retirement community”.
- ❖ Increase opportunities and efforts to bring younger people back to the area through job opportunities and available activities.

2. Economic Development

Issues:

- ❖ Young people do not stay in Ware County/Waycross but move to other areas for jobs.
- ❖ Lack of job opportunities for people who graduate from the various local colleges. Waycross has an excellent technical college; however, few jobs are available locally to retain this education workforce.
- ❖ The existing rail system is under-utilized in helping to recruit new businesses. At the same time the need for additional developable property close to rail lines needs to be addressed.
- ❖ Lack of large tracts of land suitable for larger businesses. The largest industrial tract available is 25 acres.
- ❖ Inadequate marketing and under-utilization of the City's Technology and Professional Office Park.
- ❖ Inadequate promotion of the area's greatest assets such as quality of life and small town feel with the amenities of larger communities.
- ❖ Inadequate utilization of tourism opportunities – insufficient promotion of tourist attractions such as Obadiah's, Wildes Massacre Site, Heritage Center, and the Okefenokee Swamp Park. And Okefenokee Wildlife Refuge.
- ❖ Perceived lack of support and endorsement of local tourism attractions by local employees of the Hotel and Service Industry.
- ❖ The service industry does not have sufficient employees who speak Spanish.
- ❖ Not much of revenue stays local. The deposit base of the county is not growing. Businesses often do not spend their money locally and their deposits don't go to local banks.
- ❖ Perceived lack of development opportunities and support for small business and entrepreneurs.
- ❖ Lack of consistency in the hours of operation by many downtown businesses.
- ❖ Perceived lack of local support for development or rehabilitation projects.
- ❖ Lack of a centralized vision for the area by the City, County and business community.
- ❖ Very low average income for most people in the rural areas.
- ❖ The proximity to the three major ports of Brunswick, Jacksonville, and Savannah is not taken advantage of.
- ❖ Lack of public relations and marketing of City and County projects and plans—Waycross and Ware County are both lacking a Public Information Officer or Public Relations staff to take charge of effective marketing and promotion of the area.
- ❖ Lack of convention and meeting space.

Opportunities:

- ❖ Develop a strategy/business plan to pursue increased attraction of retirees to the area.
- ❖ Pursue the development of a quality “retirement community” with diverse services, entertainment, housing and retail.

- ❖ Pursue attraction of industries that can utilize rail and research funds and opportunities to develop additional properties along rail lines.
- ❖ Increase the awareness of the fact that Waycross/Ware County has 5 direct rail lines including the location of rail in the industrial park.
- ❖ Increase the awareness that the Industrial park is located next to local airport.
- ❖ Increase promotion of the Corporate/Technology Park inside the city limits.
- ❖ Capitalize on the existing world quality tourism designation of the Okefenokee Swamp Park, and other tourism attractions in the area to increase tourism to the area.
- ❖ Develop joint tourism and business marketing opportunities between the various agencies to market the area more efficiently and effectively and encourage the promotion of existing opportunities.
- ❖ Promote the abundance of hotels and lodging.
- ❖ Increase utilization of contacts throughout the State.
- ❖ Encourage and assist local entrepreneurs to increase homegrown small businesses e.g. with an incubator program.
- ❖ Capitalize on the existing geography of Ware County with its close location to the coast, I-95, US1, Hwy 82 and Hwy 84, as well as the proximity to Jacksonville Airport and Jacksonville Port. The area is also less subject to impact by hurricanes.
- ❖ Cost of living is lower than in surrounding counties.
- ❖ The area has a great variety of retail.
- ❖ Capitalize on the timber industry to attract more alternative energy industry and increase Ware County's reputation as a "green county".
- ❖ Promote the future availability of the City Auditorium for meeting and conference space.

3. Housing:

Issues:

- ❖ Lack of quality affordable housing in the county.
- ❖ Large areas of blighted homes and neighborhoods.
- ❖ People work in Waycross, but live in surrounding counties due to better housing market and choices.
- ❖ Insufficient funds and programs to address the homeless population.

Opportunities:

- ❖ Coordinate with the many churches in Waycross/Ware County to offer and volunteer more time to help with housing/homeless population issues.
- ❖ Promote the homegrown town atmosphere with its good quality of life to attract more residents to the area.
- ❖ Increase housing opportunities in downtown including additional apartments and loft living.
- ❖ Consider programs to encourage more quality affordable housing developments with access to downtown and other job centers.

4. Cultural & Historical Resources

Issues:

- ❖ Most traffic by-passes historic downtown Waycross due to existing road network.
- ❖ Historic Downtown is not utilized to its potential. Most visitors never see or come downtown as all hotels are along US #1 and very few activities and events take place downtown.
- ❖ Historic Preservation regulations and grants are perceived to slow down redevelopment and are therefore not used.
- ❖ The Heritage Center is under-utilized and is seen as out of place geographically as being out of the way and could be better suited to a centralized downtown location.
- ❖ Historic Preservation Commission is in place but not very active.

Opportunities:

- ❖ Pursue art shows and other cultural events organized by the Heritage Center for the historic downtown.
- ❖ Pursue building up business and diversity downtown.
- ❖ Continue to maintain the inventory of historic places/areas.
- ❖ Promote the information that Waycross is a National Register Historic City.
- ❖ Encourage the Historic Preservation Commission to become more active and take more initiative.
- ❖ Pursue state and other grants to revitalize the old Ware Hotel.
- ❖ Continue to support the Community Theater.

5. Natural Resources

Issues:

- ❖ Ware County and Waycross can offer world renowned natural resources such as the Laura Walker State Park and the Okefenokee Wildlife Refuge, but currently these resources are not capitalized on and local promotion is not guaranteed.
- ❖ Ware County has a lot of wetlands that may be impacted by development.
- ❖ The Satilla River needs to be cleaned up and made more navigable for recreation purposes such as canoeing.

Opportunities:

- ❖ The Cherokee Heights neighborhood has a great diversity of plant life. The availability of this natural resource could be promoted as a tourist attraction in the form of a driving or walking tour.
- ❖ Increase the use of green technology such as the recently installed “trap” for litter in the Satilla River to attract business and industry, to provide clean energy and provide a high quality living environment.
- ❖ The Satilla River is great resource for recreation, including fishing and canoeing. Nature tourism is becoming more popular and in moderation contributes to the preservation of the natural environment.
- ❖ Research and consider the establishment of a wetlands mitigation bank or other wetlands mitigation standards to encourage development while minimizing impact on the natural environment.

6. Land Use

Issues:

- ❖ Lack of Growth Preparedness, the county and city need to increase their efforts of planning ahead.
- ❖ Lack of countywide zoning. The corridors are zoned, but the remainder of the county is not, which may result in incompatible uses locating next to each other. The airport and industrial park as well as agricultural operations are not protected from the encroachment of incompatible uses.
- ❖ Most blighted areas are located along the main thoroughfares and influence the perception of tourists and other visitors.
- ❖ There is a need for a better design ordinance for Downtown Waycross.

Opportunities:

- ❖ Encourage development of communities that are family friendly and provide diversity of uses and housing choices.
- ❖ Pursue livable communities.
- ❖ Encourage re-use of blighted development.
- ❖ Encourage infill development.
- ❖ Develop design standards for the downtown area in Waycross.
- ❖ Seek out funding sources to buy properties along the railroad in order to steer development that needs rail access into those areas.
- ❖ US 1 North has a lot of vacant land.
- ❖ Consider enacting county-wide development regulations protecting existing agricultural industry from encroachment by incompatible uses.
- ❖ Consider enacting county-wide development regulations to minimize impacts from incompatible uses on each other and to avoid co-location of such uses.
- ❖ Develop strategies to provide for affordable, high quality residential areas and job opportunities within Ware County to decrease commuting from other counties.

7. Community Facilities and Services:

Issues:

- ❖ Central water system is not available in some areas (*specify*).
- ❖ Recycling services do not exist in Ware County/Waycross.
- ❖ 5000 residents in Ware County have no home pick-up garbage collection.
- ❖ The quality of education within the Ware County School System is perceived as poor.
- ❖ The Ware County School System is in the bottom 15% in wealth of all school systems in the state.
- ❖ Enrollment in the local schools is declining based on age. The population of Ware/Waycross is getting older.
- ❖ Lack of sufficient professional paid fire protection coverage. The county is served by one paid and 10 volunteer fire stations.
- ❖ Insufficient EMS coverage: 4 EMS for a 900 square mile area.
- ❖ Lack of walking trails and a contiguous sidewalk network that can be used safely for walking.

Opportunities:

- ❖ Encourage recycling services and opportunities for the community and utilize Valdosta as a regional recycling hub, thereby keeping the costs down.
- ❖ Promote “Internet 2”. Ware County schools are only the 2nd county in the state to have this tool which creates real time partnerships globally.
- ❖ Build on the great diversity the Ware County School system.
- ❖ Utilize and promote the existing water & sewer system capacity. The system is older, but any problems are very manageable.
- ❖ Research and apply for funding and grants to be able to provide paid services for Fire and EMS services for Ware County and the City of Waycross.
- ❖ Pursue the development of a Fire Fighting training center in Waycross.
- ❖ Waycross College and Okefenokee Technical Colleges enrollments are both up and are expected to continue to rise, bringing more students to the area.
- ❖ Pursue more performing arts events to perform at the Ware County High School state of the art brand new performing arts center.
- ❖ Maintain local law enforcement great response times.
- ❖ Waycross and Ware County have high quality health care services.
- ❖ Promote the area’s Tele-Medicine center.
- ❖ Continue to utilize and promote the city and county recreation facilities. City parks stay booked year round and the new recreation complex has been received very well.

8. Transportation

Issues

- ❖ Lack of long range transportation plan for Waycross and Ware County.
- ❖ Lack of any form of public transit.
- ❖ Need for improved access to the downtown through traffic pattern improvements including better signage.
- ❖ The new Bio Fuel development in Ware County will be bringing an additional 300 trucks a day to the area. Pursue the development or identification of an appropriate truck route.
- ❖ Lack of continuous and safe bicycle trails both for the recreational and sport bicyclist.

Opportunities

- ❖ Ware County and the City of Waycross need to capitalize on the convergence of US #1, Hwy 82 and Hwy 84, as well as the proximity to Jacksonville Airport and Jacksonville Port.
- ❖ Hwy 84 needs to be four-laned all the way from Waycross to Valdosta to improve connection between the two regional centers.
- ❖ Waycross/Ware County has 5 direct rail lines including the location of rail in the industrial park.
- ❖ Promote the airport in Waycross and increase utilization.
- ❖ Expand on the proximity to the 3 major ports of Brunswick, Savannah and Jacksonville.
- ❖ Coordinate with other public and private parties to provide a public transportation system in the county.
- ❖ Develop a long range transportation plan addressing the listed issues and opportunities.

9. Intergovernmental Coordination

Issues

- ❖ Unfavorable perception of government and local elected officials through predominantly negative media coverage.
- ❖ Lack of a central marketing committee that would structure and centralize the promotion for Ware County and City of Waycross.
- ❖ Lack of community volunteers.

Opportunities

- ❖ Possible consolidation of some services between Ware County and City of Waycross.
- ❖ Maintain existing good coordination between agencies.
- ❖ Develop a common vision for the County and City to tie all the opportunities together.
- ❖ Develop joint public relations tools for use by the County and City.
- ❖ Encourage and promote public/private partnerships.