



SOUTHERN GEORGIA  
REGIONAL COMMISSION



# 2022-2026 Southern Georgia Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy

Annual Update • December 2025

Atkinson - Bacon - Ben Hill - Berrien  
Brantley - Brooks - Charlton - Clinch - Coffee - Cook - Echols - Irwin - Lanier - Lowndes  
Pierce - Tift - Turner - Ware Counties



# Southern Georgia CEDS Annual Update - December 2025

The 2025 Annual Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) Update for the Southern Georgia Economic Development District (EDD) is provided to the Economic Development Administration (EDA) for the Southern Georgia Regional Commission (SGRC) under EDA Investment Number ED22ATL3020014. This update covers the activity period from January 1, 2025, through December 2025, a phase marked by the SGRC EDD's continued efforts and resilience in rebuilding after the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Twelve of the SGRC's eighteen counties (66.7%) are areas of persistent poverty (more than 20% of a county's population lives below the poverty threshold), causing a slight increase in the SGRC EDD's overall poverty rate.

According to the 2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates, the average Per Capita Income (PCI) in the region is a mere \$25,812, up only slightly from the 2022 ACS 5-Year Estimates reported at \$24,448. This dismal number is in stark contrast to the United States' PCI of \$45,256 and the state of Georgia's PCI of \$41,996. A further indication of economic distress is the region's average Median Household Income (MHI) of \$49,721, which is significantly less than that of Georgia's at \$79,991 and the United States at \$81,604.

Despite experiencing some growth, persistent poverty, underemployment, and unemployment continue to plague the area. As a performance-based plan, the District's CEDS plays a critical role in adapting to global economic conditions by fully utilizing the region's unique advantages to maximize economic opportunity for its residents by attracting private investment that creates jobs. This plan sets forth the goals and objectives necessary to solve the economic development problems of the Southern Georgia region and clearly defines the measures of success.

The COVID-19 pandemic, paired with unprecedented natural disasters, caused significant injury to the already struggling SGRC region. The Southern Georgia EDD remains dedicated to supporting local governments, businesses, and community partners as they work toward economic recovery and resilience.



# Southern Georgia CEDS Annual Update

## December 2025

During the period covered by this update, the Economic Development Division (EDD) staff participated in in planning meetings for several economic development projects throughout the region. Staff has continued grant administration and implementation activities for two EDA grant awards in Ben Hill County and the City of Douglas, which will result in the creation of 124 jobs and private investment of 58 million.

During the Southern Georgia Regional Commission's Fiscal Year that ended on June 30, 2025, the Lending Department closed five loans totaling \$14,545,956. Through these loans, 121 jobs were created or retained—strengthening the workforce and economic resilience of the South Georgia region.

Although the District is seeing economic improvements in several areas, Southern Georgia must continue to identify ways to reverse negative trends, withstand economic shifts, and move the region forward through coordinated initiatives aimed at fostering economic development. Implementing the CEDS will play a vital role in achieving these goals. Enacting the CEDS Action Plan will strengthen the regional economy in the areas of job creation, wages, tax revenue, and private investment—ultimately supporting sustainable economic growth and diversification across the region.





# CEDS Strategy Committee

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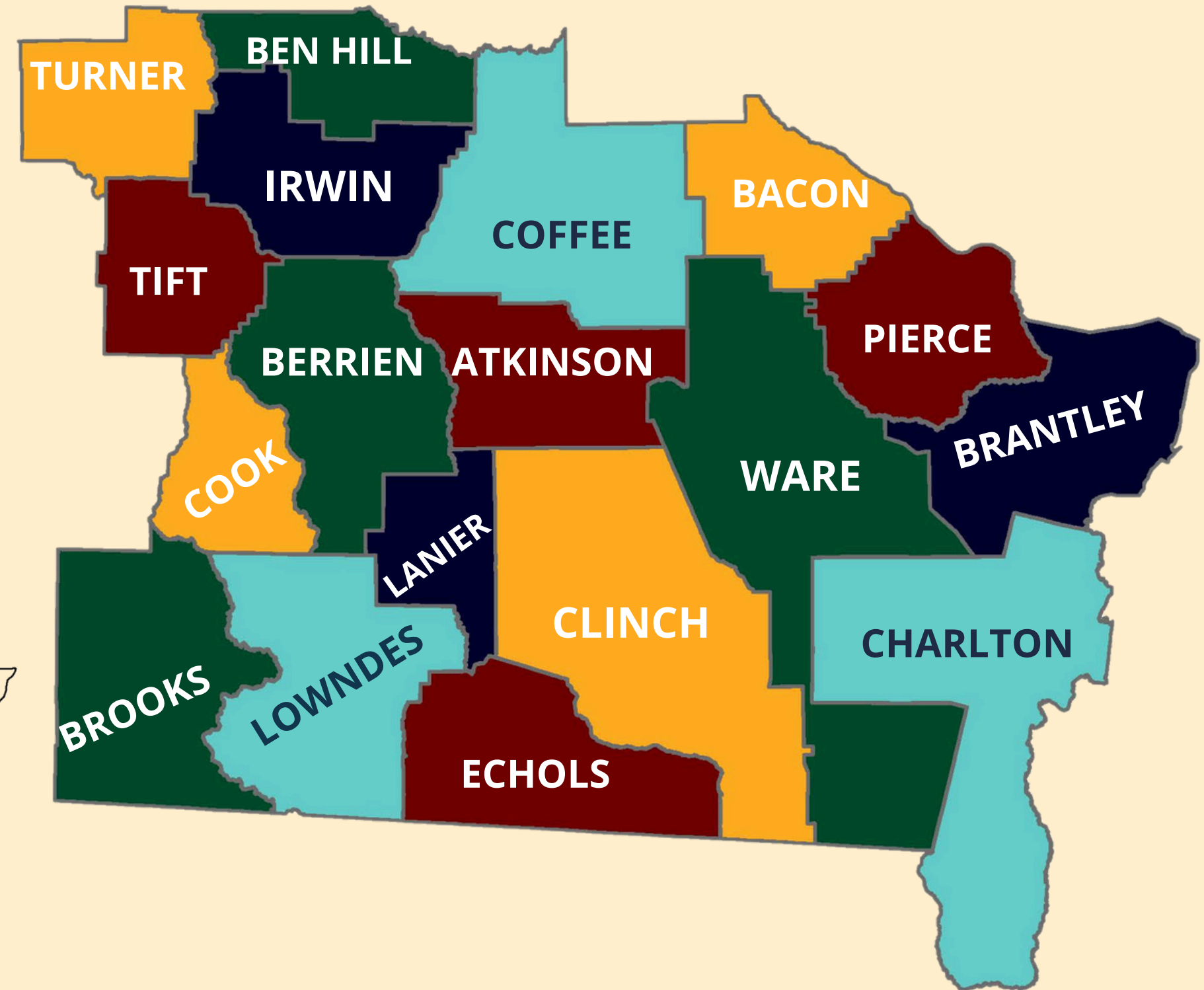
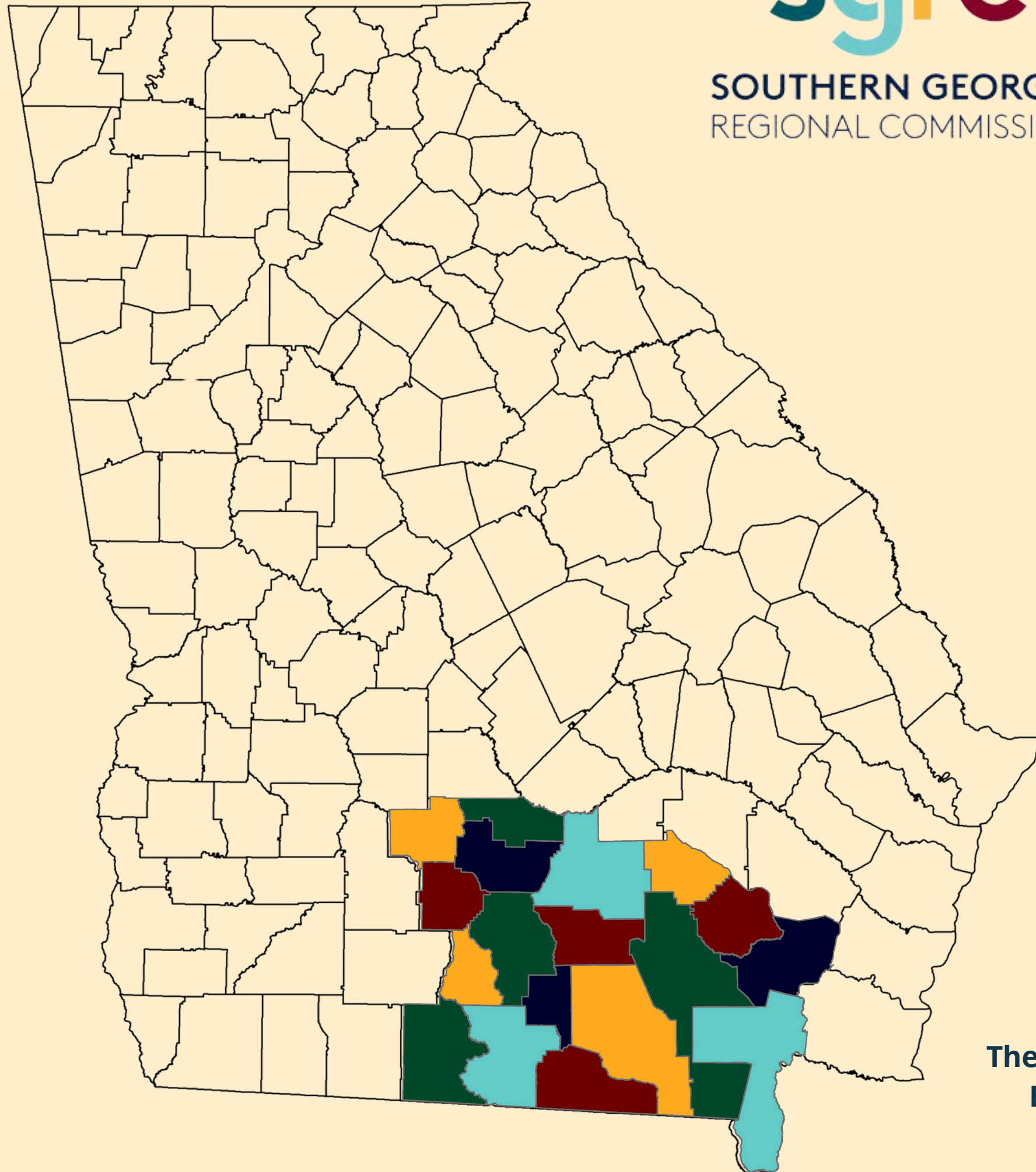
**Bethany Strickland**  
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**SOUTHERN GEORGIA**  
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The Southern Georgia region includes Atkinson, Bacon, Ben Hill, Berrien, Brantley, Brooks, Charlton, Clinch, Coffee, Cook, Echols, Irwin, Lanier, Lowndes, Pierce, Tift, Turner, and Ware Counties.



SGRC staff members developed a Word Cloud from commonly repeated phrases during the CEDS Strategy Committee's June meeting. Those phrases served as the basis for the CEDS Vision Statement:

*Making Southern  
Georgia a vibrant  
region to live, work,  
grow, and thrive.*

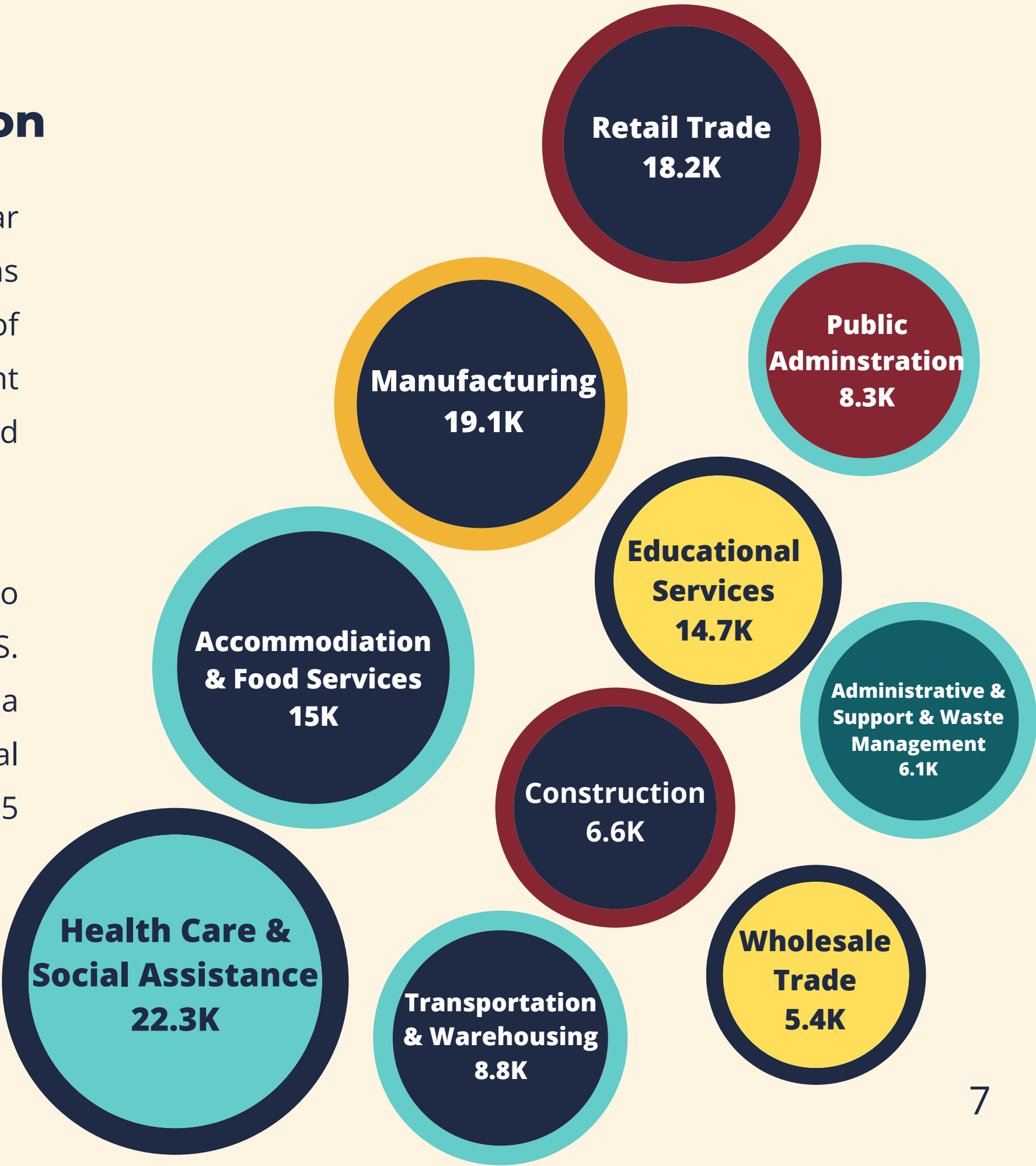


# Top Industry Concentrations

## Based on Average Employment in the Region

A cluster is a regional concentration of related industries in a particular location. Clusters are a striking feature of economies, making regions uniquely competitive for jobs and private investment. They consist of companies, suppliers, and service providers, as well as government agencies and other institutions that provide specialized training and education, information, research, and technical support.

Locating and analyzing the region's economic clusters was crucial to developing the strategic focus areas and, therefore, the region's CEDS. The wide array of economic clusters in the 18-county Southern Georgia EDD region illustrates the diversity of the district's economy and a critical component of the region's economic resilience. Currently, there are 15 strongly traded clusters in Southern Georgia.





# Strategic Focus Areas

1. State of the Regional Economy

2. Transportation, Community Facilities,  
Infrastructure and Broadband

3. Education and Workforce  
Development

4. Population and Housing





# Strategic Focus Area # 1

## State of the Regional Economy

GOALS	ACTION PLAN
Create regional groups (authorities) to take ownership of existing, underdeveloped industrial parks to build out infrastructure for industry	Identify existing industrial parks that could be considered regional; Identify a funding source for infrastructure and ongoing maintenance; Establish community collaboration or MOU for revenue sharing
Implement programs to foster entrepreneurship growth	Teach value of entrepreneurship at primary and elementary levels; Have communities develop entrepreneurial strategies of identifying assets; Connect with community network
Recruit/encourage value-added food processing (agribusiness)	Identify commodities for value added products; develop product infrastructure for food processing; Partner with agriculture community
Infrastructure Assessment	Analyze infrastructure age, capacity, and availability
Adequate Staffing for Industries	Seek out resources to assist employers in filling positions
Land availability for new growth	Identify 3 to 5 regional megasites



# Strategic Focus Area 1: Implementation Update

**The SGRC EDD is diligently pursuing opportunities to strengthen the region's economic foundation and foster long-term growth by attracting and retaining industry and promoting a more resilient, competitive regional economy.**

- The SGRC Lending Division closed five loans totaling \$14,545,956. As a result, a total of 121 jobs were created or retained. Industries assisted include a daycare, grocery store, merchant wholesaler, insurance agency, and restaurant.
- The Waycross-Ware County Development Authority and the Brantley County Development Authority are currently pursuing Survey and Due Diligence grant funds through the Georgia Department of Community Affairs. This grant offers a pathway to GRAD certification for communities that may have monetary constraints. If selected, the site must commit to GRAD certification within three years.
- Four Development of Regional Impact (DRI) reviews were completed: two for Lowndes County—a 7-Eleven truck stop and a racetrack—and two for the City of Valdosta for a Circle K development and a water plan.
- Two Plan First applications—one for Cook County and one for the City of Douglas—were prepared and submitted to the Georgia Department of Community Affairs.
- The SGRC Planning Division completed three Comprehensive Plan Updates for Charlton, Cook, and Echols Counties. In addition, seven Comprehensive Plan Updates are currently underway for Ben Hill, Brantley, Clinch, Lanier, Lowndes, Turner, and Ware Counties. A Comprehensive Plan Amendment was also completed for the City of Nicholls.





# Strategic Focus Area # 2

## Transportation, Community Facilities, Infrastructure, and Broadband

GOALS
Expand Natural Gas Service
Develop more family event venues
Pass T-SPLOST (TIA-2)
EV Stations
Create better connectivity between I-75 and I-95
Provide broadband to all unserved and underserved people throughout the region

ACTION PLAN
Pursue funding to improve existing infrastructure
Work with GDECD tourism to develop regional strategy for local community venues to attract tourism dollars
Submit regionally significant transportation projects
Expand the network of charging stations in the region
Widen corridors that have a positive regional impact
Pursue funding to increase broadband availability



# Strategic Focus Area 2: Implementation Update

**Through strategic planning, partnerships, and funding, SGRC EDD continues to advance initiatives that promote tourism and industry, improve broadband access, strengthen regional transportation connectivity, and support infrastructure upgrades to enhance the region's competitiveness and quality of life.**

- The SGRC Community and Economic Development Division assisted in securing six Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) for the Cities of Nahunta and Nicholls and the Counties of Coffee, Cook, Irwin, and Ware. These grants provided a total of \$5,856,499 to support water system upgrades and street paving and drainage improvements benefiting 654 beneficiaries. Together, the six projects amount to \$8,017,872 in total project costs.
- Six Hazard Mitigation Plans were adopted for Atkinson County (including the Cities of Pearson and Willacoochee); Berrien County (Cities of Alapaha, Enigma, Nashville, and Ray City); Brooks County (Cities of Barwick, Morven, Pavo, and Quitman); Coffee County (Cities of Ambrose, Broxton, Douglas, and Nicholls); Cook County (Cities of Adel, Cecil, Lenox, and Sparks); and Lanier County (City of Lakeland). In addition, three Hazard Mitigation Plans are currently underway for Ben Hill County (including the City of Fitzgerald); Clinch County (Cities of Argyle, Dupont, Fargo, and Homerville); and Echols County.
- As the federally designated Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for the Valdosta Urbanized Area, the Transportation Division prepared the FY2025 Valdosta–Lowndes MPO Crash Report, the FY2025 Valdosta–Lowndes MPO Unified Planning Work Program, the FY2025 Valdosta–Lowndes Annual Report, and the Horizon Year 2050 Metropolitan Transportation Plan. In addition, the Regional Transit Development Plan was completed.





# Strategic Focus Area # 3

## Education and Workforce Development

GOALS
Start Career Education earlier in school system
Strong, official partnership between school system, technical college, & industries to address skills currently in demand and for future needs
Increase labor force participation rate
Improve the quality of the workforce
Increase accessibility to high-demand technical curriculum and programs

ACTION PLAN
Recruit high school graduates for jobs with local industries; Educate middle school students about the importance of careers in home community
Identify responsible agency for facilitating and holding accountable the partnership; Incentivize industry participation
Better skills training
Target skills training to meet business and industry needs
Expand high-demand career education on high school and technical college campuses



# Strategic Focus Area 3: Implementation Update

**The Southern Georgia Area WDB continues to partner with educational institutions to ensure community members have access to a range of in-demand training programs to meet the specific needs of the region and create well-paying, quality jobs.**

- The Workforce Development Division served 546 participants—311 adults, 110 dislocated workers, and 125 youth.
- The top five training occupations in the region include Licensed Practical Nurses (124 participants), Registered Nurses (114), Heavy and Tractor-Trailer Truck Drivers (57), Nursing Assistants (49), and Radiological Technologists (17).
- The region has a civilian labor force of 184,680 with a participation rate of 55.8%. The majority of employment opportunities can be found in six of the eighteen counties—Berrien, Brantley, Coffee, Lowndes, Tift, and Ware.
- The top five industry sectors with the highest employment and total demand are Health Care and Social Assistance, Manufacturing, Retail Trade, Accommodation and Food Services, and Educational Services.





Population and Housing

GOALS	ACTION PLAN
Regional Housing Studies and Cooperation	Determine where the commuters are traveling from and whether or not there is a demand
Regional Recruitment	Better marketing of regional assets and amenities; Pool resources between the communities
Increase Housing Stock	Pursue funding for housing rehabilitation, reconstruction, and demolition in declining neighborhoods; Strengthen code enforcement; Develop incentives for construction of workforce housing
Change mindset concerning multi-family affordable housing	Educate the public about the benefits of multi-family affordable housing
Limited access to affordable, workforce housing	Identify barriers to the development of affordable housing



# Strategic Focus Area 4: Implementation Update

**Access to safe, affordable housing is vital to the SGRC EDD's economic competitiveness and resilience. The SGRC continues to partner with local governments to identify obstacles to providing safe and affordable housing to community members.**

- The SGRC Community and Economic Development Division helped secure two Rural Workforce Housing grants—one awarded to the City of Blackshear for \$2,450,000 and the other to the Douglas-Coffee County Industrial Authority for \$2,500,000. These funds will support water, sewer, street, and drainage infrastructure for new housing developments. The City of Blackshear plans to construct 43 new homes, while the Douglas-Coffee County Industrial Authority plans to build 67 new homes.
- The SGRC Community and Economic Development Division assisted the City of Douglas in securing CDBG-Housing funds (\$877,225) for the rehabilitation of six homes.
- Staff has continued grant administration and implementation activities for four CDBG-Housing grants for the Cities of Adel, Blackshear, Douglas, and Ocilla, and four CHIP grants for the Cities of Adel, Fitzgerald, Homeland, and Waycross.

