



## *House of Representatives Rural Development Council*

### **2024 Overview and Recommendations**

**Co-chairman Gerald Greene**  
Representative, 154<sup>th</sup> District

**Co-chairman Mack Jackson**  
Representative, 128<sup>th</sup> District

Vice-Chairman John Corbett  
Representative, 174<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Rick Jasperse  
Representative, 11<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Darlene Taylor  
Representative, 173<sup>rd</sup> District

The Honorable Leesa Hagan  
Representative, 156<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Patty Marie Stinson  
Representative, 150<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Clay Pirkle  
Representative, 169<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Steven Meeks  
Representative, 178<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Jason Ridley  
Representative, 6<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Steven Tarvin  
Representative, 2<sup>nd</sup> District

The Honorable Bill Werkheiser  
Representative, 157<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Noel Williams  
Representative, 148<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Al Williams  
Representative, 168<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Bill Yearta  
Representative, 152<sup>nd</sup> District

**Ex-officio Members:**

The Honorable Shaw Blackmon  
Representative, 146<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Kasey Carpenter  
Representative, 4<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Robert Dickey  
Representative, 145<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Matt Hatchett  
Representative, 155<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Penny Houston  
Representative, 170<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Butch Parrish  
Representative, 158<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Alan Powell  
Representative, 33<sup>rd</sup> District

The Honorable Trey Rhodes  
Representative, 124<sup>th</sup> District

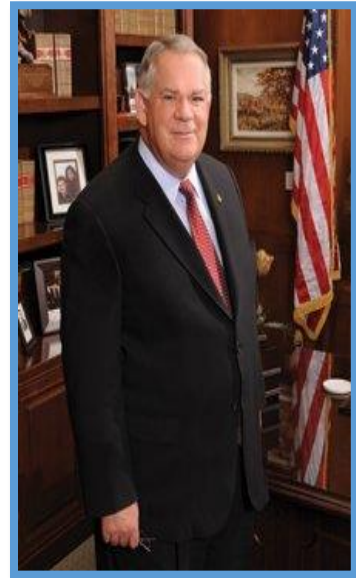
The Honorable Lynn Smith  
Representative, 70<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Ron Stephens  
Representative, 164<sup>th</sup> District

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House Budget and Research Office

## Executive Summary

The House Rural Development Council (RDC) was created in 2017 to work with rural communities to discover ways to encourage economic growth and job creation. In 2017, Speaker David Ralston said, “Georgia is a growing and prosperous state, and we are thankful for that, but that prosperity isn’t being felt in every community across Georgia. Some of our rural areas are still struggling, and we must do everything we can to help private businesses grow jobs in every corner of our state.” Speaker David Ralston created the initiative to improve rural Georgia with a thorough and systematic study of these communities' surrounding issues. During the 2023 Legislative Session, the council was renewed for the current term through the unanimous adoption of [House Resolution 488](#).



The Georgia House Rural Development Council convened its 2024 meetings, chaired by State Representatives Gerald Greene and Mack Jackson, to address significant challenges and opportunities within rural communities. Meetings emphasized the impacts of Hurricanes Helene and Milton on Georgia’s natural resources which highlighted the need to prioritize relief and recovery efforts for those affected by the storms. State leaders emphasized the importance of maternal health, infant health, and school-based health centers. Council members also heard presentations on collaborative approaches for educational resource distribution across counties and strategies to foster economic growth.

For those interested, meetings are public and live-streamed, and each session is dedicated to addressing various issues impacting rural Georgia. In 2024, the House Rural Development Council held four meetings in Rome (Berry College), Thomson (Thomson Depot), Americus (Georgia Southwestern State University), and Statesboro (Georgia Southern University). This report serves to identify challenges/solutions developed from the House Rural Development Council meetings. Please visit the following link for more information or to find the presentations given: <https://www.house.ga.gov/Committees/en-US/HouseRuralDevelopmentCouncil.aspx>

## Introduction

The 2024 House Rural Development Council initiated its first meeting at Berry College, remembering the legacy of Martha Berry, who shared a strong sentiment in helping rural Georgia. Martha Berry believed rural people were one of Georgia's greatest natural resources but was dissatisfied by rural poverty and grinding dysfunction. President Stephen R. Briggs of Berry College reported to the council that in the 1900s, less than 10% of the state had a high school diploma. However, with the effort of Martha Berry's residential schools, over 10,000 students were able to obtain higher education.



Berry College informed Council members about its expanding campus. The college's largest majors, including animal science, nursing, business, and creative technology, are not just poised but are certain to make a significant impact. Dr. Stephen Briggs also highlighted the diverse opportunities for Georgia students to contribute to rural areas, including city government, accounting, graphic design, event planning, network operations, IT support, plumbing and electrical, landscaping and grounds work, masonry, and meat processing. Expanding these industries can help rural communities survive. However, the urbanization of the south is resulting in population, opportunity, and economic growth continuing to decline in rural towns.

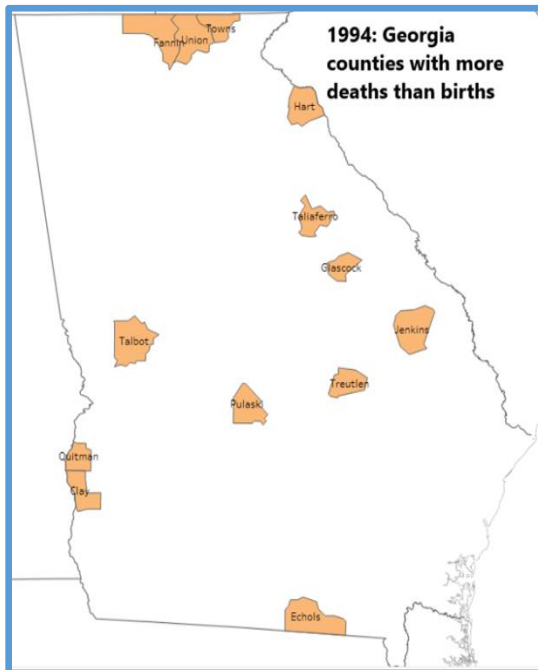
Investing in the development of the local workforce is crucial for fostering economic growth in rural areas. When more Georgians are involved in their communities, they are more likely to reinvest in them. By promoting career awareness early on, the state can introduce rural students to different career paths. Improving rural infrastructure is essential for connecting workers in these areas with available jobs, thereby addressing employment barriers. Additionally, incentivizing local hiring can enhance job quality and retention within specific communities. By focusing on these initiatives, leaders can create a sustainable pipeline of local talent, ensuring that job positions are filled by individuals dedicated to the long-term success of Georgia's rural communities.

## Background Information and Context

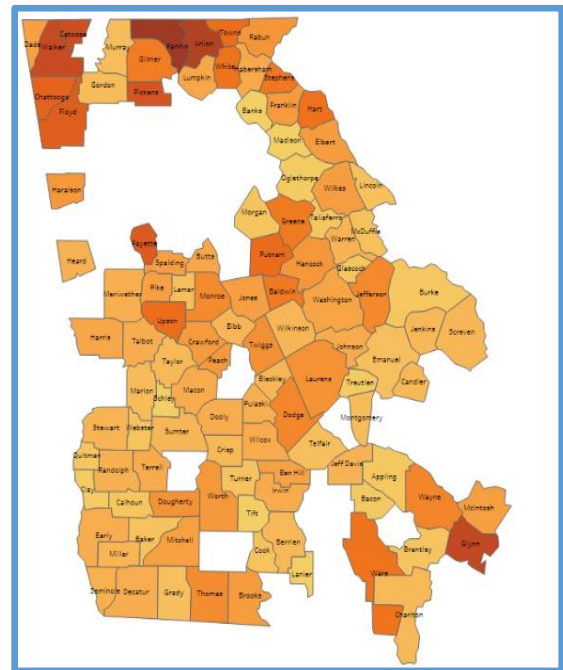
Lack of employment and education opportunities creates rural-to-urban migration, which can deplete rural communities of their young and skilled population. These regions, often characterized by lower population density, limited access to resources, and higher poverty rates, face a significant disparity.



Dr. David C. Bridges, Director of Georgia’s Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation informed the House Rural Development Council that in 1994, only 13 counties in Georgia had more deaths than births as shown in Figure 1. In 2022, the Georgia Department of Public Health reported 116 counties had more deaths than births (see Figure 2).



**Fig. 1 Georgia Department of Public Health OASIS System (1994)**



**Fig. 2 Georgia Department of Public Health OASIS System (2022)**

Rural development requires a multi-dimensional approach with a right mix of policies and investments. Inconsistent policy implementation and lack of coordination among government agencies can impede rural development efforts. Rural areas often lack adequate healthcare and educational facilities, resulting in lower health outcomes and educational attainment. Fostering partnerships between state government, the private sector, and local communities will be essential to rural communities.

Rural development is a vital focus, with the primary goal of enhancing the quality of life and economic well-being of those residing in rural areas. The Georgia Municipal Association confirms that 69% of Georgia’s jobs are spread across 537 cities, which only comprise 9% of Georgia’s land area. In contrast, 44% of Georgia’s population resides in cities. Despite this, state support has played a crucial role in sustaining Georgia cities, as these municipal areas produce 91% of Georgia’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The importance of rural development in bridging this gap between rural and urban areas cannot be overstated.

Roads, electricity, water supply, and internet connectivity are not just amenities but essential for rural development. Improved infrastructure can facilitate access to markets, healthcare, and education which is the key to unlocking the potential for economic growth. Limited revenue options in rural areas continue to be the cause for prosperity slipping away in these communities. Mr. Larry Hanson, CEO and Executive Director of the Georgia Municipal Association, reports that rural cities have approximately \$18 billion worth of needs across the state. The top three needs of rural cities are transportation, water and sewer upgrades, and public safety, which can increase economic development in rural areas where strategic investments make a significant difference. Most state investments are currently focused on replacing depleting infrastructure that is over fifty years old.

These financial challenges underscore the need for regionalization and functional consolidation, which have been discussed for several years. Mr. Dave Wills, Executive Director for the Association County Commissioners of Georgia (ACCG), confirmed that most counties operate within their means but realize their constraints and cannot provide the level of services in other jurisdictions. County governments provide what is mandated or what the county residents are demanding and willing to pay for. Every county is viable and can raise millage rates, but county residents do not want increases as inflation and economic hardships further stress rural incomes. However, for political and local reasons, counties have yet to have the will to consolidate government resources. The potential loss of authority or local control is preventing regionalization.



Georgia's Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation supports the use of city hub models. ACCG also encourages regional partnership as it allows two or three counties to pool resources and hire strong candidates as county managers with decent salaries.



The success of either model hinges on efficient human resource management and financial management. The flexibility of these models is evident in the fact that any contract or intergovernmental agreement can extend from county to county or county to city. It's important to stress that audits for smaller governments are not just essential, but they play a pivotal role in development and loan applications, increasing repayment success.



The University of Georgia, Carl Vinson Institute of Government, is a resource for quality educational programming and data-driven research. Mr. Greg Wilson, Associate Director for Workforce and Economic Development, illustrated the technical assistance provided to elected and appointed officials designed to inform decision-making. Whether consolidation occurs or not, it's clear that continuing education credits are a necessity for county commissioners.

leaders understand options for redevelopment opportunities. Many states require county commissioners to complete annual training or earn continuing education credits to stay updated on legal, financial, and governance responsibilities.

## Challenges Faced in Rural Areas

### Challenges in Rural Education and Innovation

Rural areas face distinct challenges in education and innovation due to socio-economic, infrastructure, and demographic factors. Dr. Bronwyn Ragan-Martin, Deputy Superintendent for the Georgia Department of Education Office of Rural Education and Innovation (REI), reported to the House Rural Development Council that 19.4% of rural Georgia lives in poverty, compared to 13.2% of its urban counterparts. Poverty has a profound impact on rural education, often leading students to difficulties in focusing and completing classwork as some arrive to school hungry or worried about their living conditions. Students from low-income families face challenges such as hunger, inability to afford school supplies, and pressure to drop out for work.

Nearly one-fourth of the rural population is illiterate, and these rural communities continue to struggle. Rural students often travel longer distances to reach schools, leading to absenteeism and fatigue. A significant contributing factor to these challenges is the lack of broadband access in approximately 25% of Georgian homes, with higher percentages in rural counties. Poor broadband connectivity limits access to online resources and educational technologies. Many rural schools lack computers, tablets, or modern classrooms, limiting virtual participation and reducing exposure to modern learning methods. Addressing these issues can help these communities overcome the persistent challenges of lack of exposure and poverty.

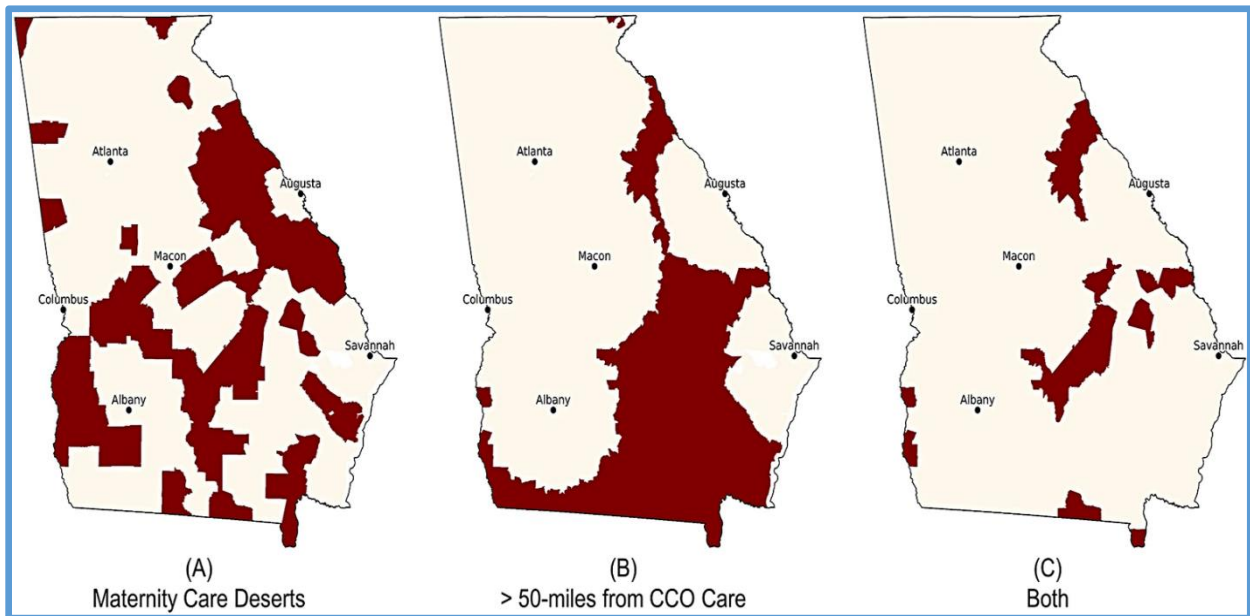
Rural school districts often need help attracting and retaining qualified teachers due to lower salaries, geographic isolation, and limited professional development opportunities. This underscores the need for infrastructure development to attract, retain, and grow quality teachers and leaders in rural areas. Innovation requires funding for research, which is often scarce in rural areas. Rural regions often rely on government grants, which may need to be more consistent or sufficient. Educators, policymakers, and community leaders agree that the Georgia General Assembly's support is crucial in addressing these challenges. Georgia's influence can encourage rural communities to embrace new technologies and ideas, fostering diverse perspectives and networks that can stimulate creativity and collaborative innovation in vocational training programs and advanced education facilities in rural areas.

## Challenges in Rural Healthcare

The Mercer School of Medicine has identified 10 challenges facing rural Georgia, each requiring a collaborative effort to overcome: 1. Maternal and Child Health 2. Physician and Health Workforce Shortage 3. Health Literacy 4. Strategic Health Care Availability and Access 5. Social Determinants of Health 6. Mental Health 7. Substance Abuse 8. Health Care Infrastructure 9. Rural Occupational Health and 10. Aging Populations.



The Georgia Department of Public Health reports that 106 counties are without Obstetrician-gynecologists (OB/GYN) units. The lack of access to risk-appropriate maternity services in rural areas is the leading contributor to disparities in maternal morbidity and mortality. Policies focusing on reducing distance to critical care obstetric services alone are not aligned with risk-appropriate care for most pregnancies, revealing the need for new measures of geographic access to high-quality, risk-appropriate care that can be used as targets for policy intervention. The Georgia Rural Health Innovation Center presented results which indicate that out of the 1,910,308 reproductive-aged women in Georgia, 104,158 (5.5%) live in maternity care deserts, and 150,563 (7.9%) live further than 50 miles from coordinated care services (see Figure 3).



**Fig. 3 Georgia Rural Health Innovation Center at Mercer University School of Medicine**

Dr. Jean R. Sumner, Dean of Mercer University School of Medicine, reported to the Council that the physician-to-patient ratio in Georgia is 23% worse than the national average and a staggering 67% worse in pediatric critical care. In 2030, Georgia will face a significant doctor shortage of 8,012, with a primary care shortfall of 2,099. The lack of nursing supply is also a critical issue, with many counties in Georgia having bed capacity but no attending nursing capacity. The situation is further compounded by the fact that 142 out of 159 counties are designated Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSA), with 3,500 or more patients for every provider in these rural communities. Georgia's healthcare workforce shortage underscores the need for equitable distribution of resources, ensuring that all areas, regardless of their population density, have access to adequate healthcare and mental health services.

According to the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities, the suicide death rate in rural Georgia counties increased by 7% between 2017 and 2021. Suicide death rates in rural areas of Georgia are 26% higher than in suburban/urban areas. The escalating mental health issues, with higher rates of rural Georgians reaching out for crisis help than in urban areas, underline the gravity of the situation and the need for collaboration in addressing these challenges. The Georgia Board of Healthcare Workforce projects in 2024, 735 medical school graduates will enroll in graduate medical education (GME) programs in the state, and 230 (31%) will remain in the state for all specialties. Mr. Chet Bhasin, Executive Director for the Georgia Board of Healthcare Workforce, highlights that more medical graduates will be needed as the population of 65 years and older is expected to grow nearly six times faster than Georgia's overall population over the next 5 years.

Financial evidences already indicate a potential 8-10 more rural hospital closures as indigent care and patients in prison strain healthcare resources. Capital insufficiencies and slow payments further exacerbate depriving healthcare outcomes, underscoring the critical importance of timely federal and state payments. In November 2024, Wellpath filed for bankruptcy after being unable to meet debt commitments which has impacted commercial and prison payments being interrupted due to denials. Indigent care should not be denied, but no payments lead to a hospital's financial default. Each hospital closure not only halts immediate growth, as seen in the case of the Husqvarna plant in McRae, Georgia but also creates a dead economic development environment.

Insufficient rural hospital CEO succession plans will lead to hospital closure due to insufficient leadership and the loss of locally trained claims and reimbursement specialists that can produce cash flow from health care services rendered. The importance of leadership succession planning cannot be overstated in this context. Hospital patient care can be successful and come to an end, but operating expenses for a medical facility can extend a very long time while requiring ongoing debt satisfaction. Financial instability will lead to private equities' bankruptcy and insolvency for not-for-profit hospitals. These financial burdens erode the taxing capability of the taxing entity, such as the county government.

The closure of eight rural hospitals within the last 10 years has led to regional disparities in healthcare. Mr. Jimmy Lewis, CEO of HomeTown Health, explains that the consequential burden to the state for these rural hospital closures can be a significant tax burden that draws economic wealth away from the state elsewhere. Insolvency is linked to a county commission's responsibilities to a hospital's debt and ongoing operating expenses. Because insolvency can be linked to the taxing authority of a community, rural hospital closures create long-term economic devastation for large parts of the state's economic geography. Wheeler County, Charlton County, and Stewart County hospital closures result from bankruptcy or insolvency equal to hospital closure.

## Challenges in Rural Agriculture

Georgia Department of Agriculture Commissioner Tyler Harper celebrated the significant milestone of the department's 150<sup>th</sup> year, highlighting the longstanding tradition of promoting the Georgia National Fair and the state's forestry industry. During the meeting in Americus, Commissioner Harper informed council members about



the Georgia Hurricane Relief Fund, which can be accessed through “Support Georgia Farmers” ([supportgeorgiafarmers.org](http://supportgeorgiafarmers.org)) and the Georgia Farm Bureau ([GFB.org](http://GFB.org)). All funds raised will be sent to impacted farm families.

Commissioner Harper addressed several critical issues facing Georgia agriculture, including:

1. Labor shortages
2. National security concerns
3. Unfair competition
4. The Farm Bill and agriculture policy
5. Declining retail revenue
6. Inflation
7. Increased input costs
8. Low commodity prices
9. Mental health challenges
10. Loss of viable agricultural land

Georgia Senator Russ Goodman was invited to speak to the House Rural Development Council. Senator Goodman identified three challenges in Georgia's agriculture industry that threaten family-owned farms: corporate consolidation, overregulation, and unfair trade practices. Corporate consolidation has grown exponentially over the last 40 years. Today, every sector a farmer buys from and sells to is consolidated to the point that less than five corporations own 85% of the corn and seed market. Soy bean seed (76%), agrochemical industry (80%), and beef processing (85%) are also owned by four corporations with two located outside of the United States. 38 states combined have less GDP than the top four beef processing firms.

Overregulation in agriculture has seen an increase of 22% over the last two years in guest working programs. Farmers must compete with other countries that pay less for labor to work and live in other countries temporarily. Emissions regulation, frost protection and tractor equipment costs continue to impede as farmers struggle to make a living. As a result, rural young people are not returning to family farms. In Georgia, there are more farmers today over the age of 65 than there are under. These issues make the country dependent on other nations for its food supply.

In the past five years, one-sided global trade policies have led to the loss of 144,000 farms in Georgia. Farm safety nets are diminishing and require additional funding, as agricultural trade deficits in the United States are projected to reach nearly \$40 billion by 2025. Banks are unlikely

to provide financing for the financial losses caused by the 2024 storms, and production loans will be fully utilized, with most farmers currently carrying 65% debt. Georgia farmers were already facing challenges before Hurricanes Helene and Milton struck. Rural economies rely heavily on exports, yet Georgia imports more finished cotton goods than it produces.

The Georgia Bankers Association shared with council members that federal recovery efforts can take 12 to 18 months. Georgia banks reported that farmland real estate loans in Georgia total \$2.4 billion, with small business loans secured by farmland at approximately \$825 million. Organizations such as the Georgia Forestry Association, Georgia Farm Bureau, and Georgia Agribusiness Council support disaster relief funds to expedite recovery after the 2024 hurricane season. Following Hurricane Michael, a \$200 million restoration tax credit was established, and the Georgia Forestry Association suggests a similar credit for 2025 recovery efforts.

## Challenges in Georgia Forestry

The Georgia Forestry Association has emphasized that for over a decade, Georgia has been a leader in various forestry areas. Georgia's standards include:

- Most privately owned timberland;
- Highest annual tree planting rates;
- Significant harvest volumes; and
- Top pulp, paper, and paperboard product exporter.

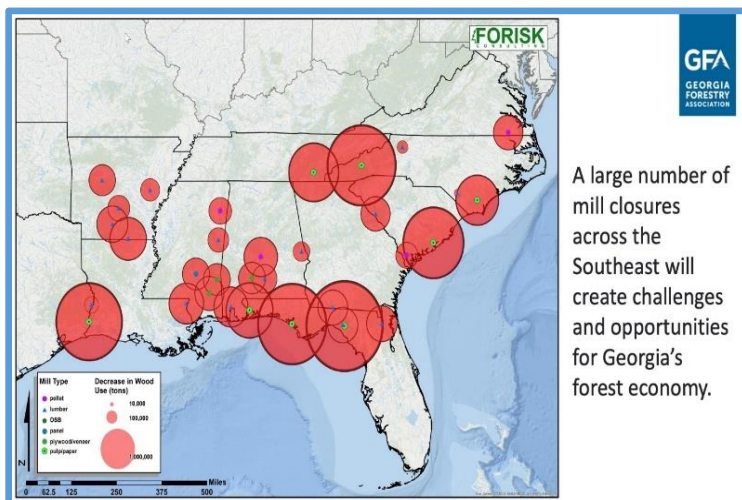


Fig. 4 Georgia Forestry Association

The forestry industry in Georgia contributes \$706 million in state tax revenue and supports 143,000 jobs. With an annual economic impact of \$42.3 billion, Georgia's forestry sector has seen a 48% increase in the volume of trees harvested. However, the forestry industry faces challenges due to numerous mill closures across the Southeast (see Figure 4).

Mr. Tim Lowrimore, President and CEO of the Georgia Forestry Association, informed members that recent mill curtailments will continue until conditions in the forestry market improve. Sawmills in cities such as Meldrum, Savannah, and Thomasville have reduced production due to changes in the demand for wood products. To revitalize Georgia's forestry industry, particularly with mass timber projects, an increase in outlets and uses for wood is necessary.



The impacts of Hurricane Helene have affected 92% of nonindustrial private forest landowners in the state. Mr. John Morris, a landowner from Jeff Davis County, reported that approximately 500 to 600 acres have been lost to forest fires over the past 30 years. According to a damage assessment by the Georgia Forestry Association, 1.47 million acres sustained significant timber damage from the storm. Mr. Russ Yeoman, a landowner from Emanuel County, shared the challenging situation faced by state forest landowners and expressed hope that the state could provide incentives for landowners to replant trees and maintain their forest land.

### Challenges in Rural Climate Vulnerability

Rural areas, with their potential to contribute significantly to the economy, are particularly vulnerable to natural disasters. These impacts can have far-reaching consequences, severely affecting agriculture, water resources, and livelihoods. Many rural communities depend on agriculture and forestry which are highly sensitive to droughts, floods, fires and temperature fluctuations. Crop yields decline due to unpredictable growing seasons, increasing the risk of food insecurity. As a result of Hurricane Helene, Congress was asked to approve \$98.4 billion in emergency spending to bolster the federal government's response and recovery efforts following a series of natural disasters, including Hurricanes Helene and Milton, that devastated Georgia.



## Challenges in Rural Natural Gas Deficiency

Rural areas often face significant challenges related to natural gas deficiency, which impacts economic development, energy security, and overall quality of life. Natural gas pipelines often bypass rural areas due to low population density, making it economically unfeasible to extend infrastructure (see Figure 5). Due to limited natural gas capacity, the counties of Ben Hill, Coffee, Dougherty, Irwin, Tift, Turner, and Worth face additional economic development recruitment challenges. Douglas-Coffee County is at the end of the natural gas line and recently depleted the last of its natural gas capacity. Their economic growth is limited by the natural gas deficit to recruit manufacturing.

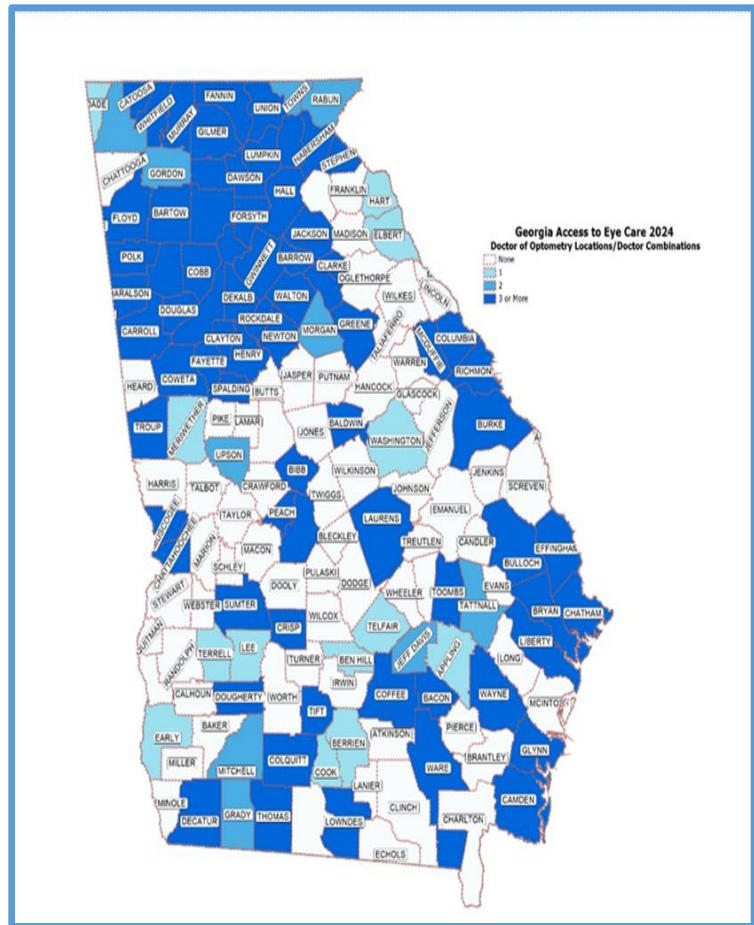


*Fig. 5 Douglas-Coffee County Economic Development Authority*

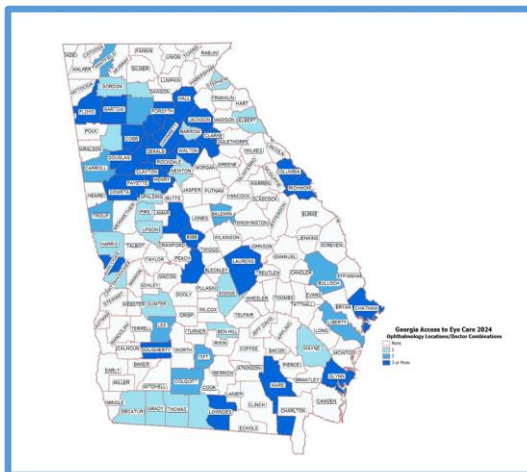
Energy poverty is a significant issue in rural areas, with residents often spending a large portion of their income on energy. Setting up local distribution networks is a costly and complex task, even when pipelines are nearby. The high initial costs for investment in storage facilities, transportation systems, and conversion equipment are often beyond the means of small rural communities. This leaves rural residents with no choice but to rely on more expensive and inefficient energy sources such as propane, wood, or electricity. To improve this situation, it is essential that local governments and businesses in rural areas receive more resources to invest in natural gas projects.

## Challenges in Rural Optometry

The Georgia State Board of Optometry states that 1,687 active optometry licenses exist. However, it is estimated that only 1,164 of these optometrists are currently practicing in Georgia. There is a significant concentration of practitioners in North Georgia, especially in metropolitan Atlanta, while the number of optometrists working in rural regions has decreased (see Figure 6). The Hays Center at Southern College of Optometry suggests that the ideal ratio of optometrists to the population is one optometrist for every 6,000 to 10,000 residents. In contrast, among the counties in Southwestern Georgia, the current ratio is one optometrist for every 23,000 residents.



**Fig. 6 Georgia Access to Eye Care 2024 (Map of Optometrist)**



**Fig. 7 Georgia Access to Eye Care 2024 (Map of Ophthalmologist)**

The Georgia Optometric Association has noted a significant number of optometrists practicing within the state. Many of these professionals prefer to work in metropolitan Atlanta, while there are fewer optometrists and ophthalmologists in rural areas (see Figure 7). For example, Albany, GA, currently has five fewer optometrists than it did in 2021. Additionally, there are four optometrists in the state who are over the age of 70. Georgia needs to explore strategies to attract more optometrists to practice in rural areas.

## Final Recommendation for Enhancing Rural Development

### CENTER FOR RURAL PROSPERITY AND INNOVATION

*The House Rural Development Council commends the innovative efforts and dedication of the Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation. The employees at the Center, established under the guidance of the Council, work diligently to improve the lives of all Georgians, especially those impacted by the distinct challenges faced in rural areas. Georgia's Rural Center has prepared the following recommendations for improving rural prosperity and innovation:*

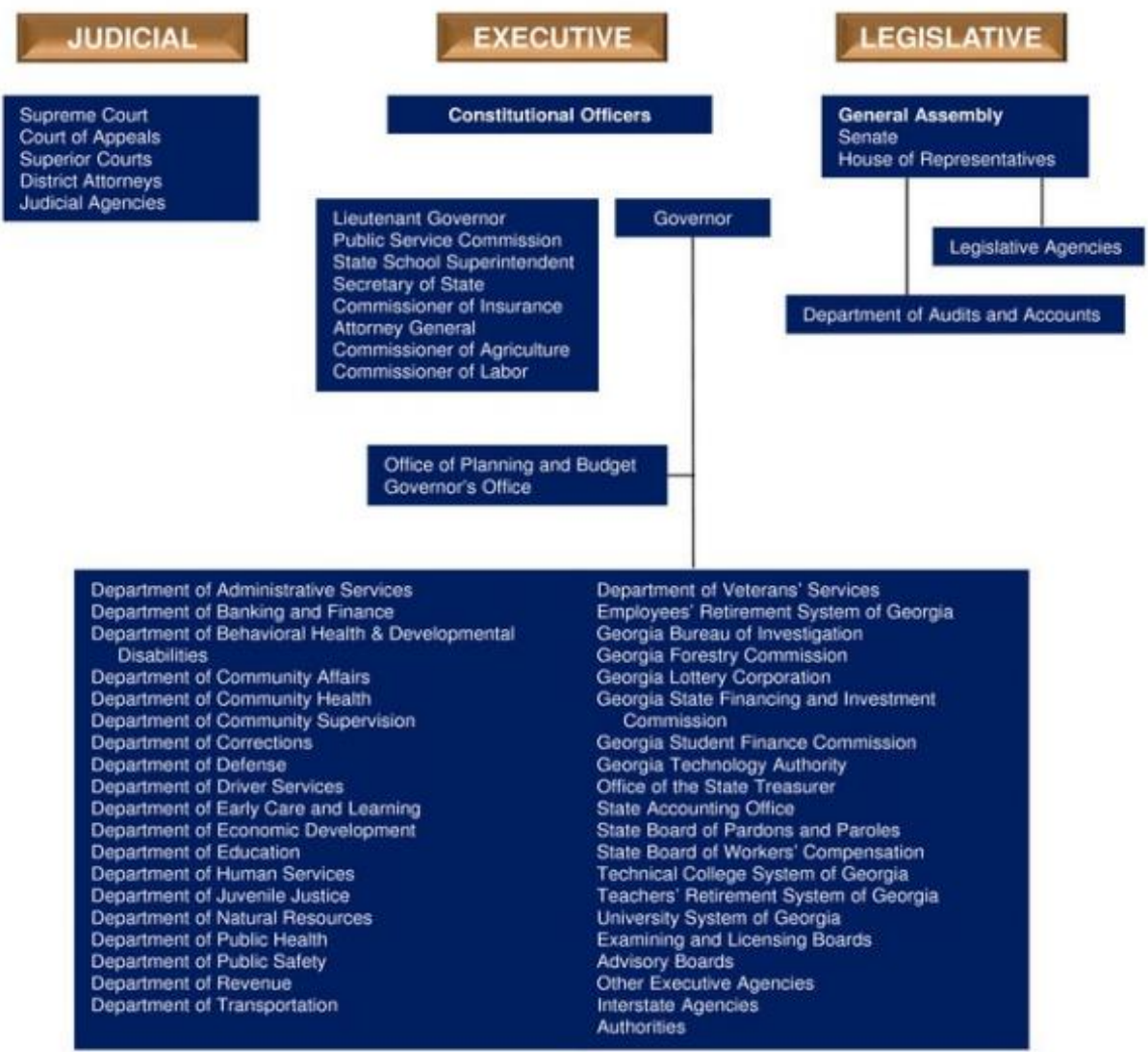
Recommendations to HRDC – December 2024

1. **Legislation to address financial reporting requirements.** In consultation with Mr. Greg Griffin, Georgia Department of Audits and Accounts, legislative counsel, and other appropriate officials, consider legislation that can reduce the accounting and audit burden on municipalities, counties, and/or certain authorities whose total expenditures fall below a to-be-established threshold.
  - a. Benefits that could accrue from such changes include increasing the number of entities that are compliant with state accounting and audit requirements included in, but not limited to § 36-60-8, § 36-81-3, and § 36-81-7.
  - b. Risks should be minimum, depending on the threshold value established and with careful monitoring of future reporting under the new state requirement.
  
2. **Rural infrastructure study.** Authorize and fund a two-phase statewide assessment of conditions, capacity, and deferred maintenance related to municipal water and sewer systems in the state's 53 counties having a 2020 U.S. Census population of less than 15,000. A 2023 study conducted by the Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation showed that the gap between revenue and cost to maintain infrastructure widened from 1991 to 2021. Because of hyperinflation over the past 24 to 36 months, these communities are severely challenged in their ability to maintain and upgrade infrastructure. State investment is required if these communities are to remain viable.

Phase I would consist of communities self-reporting data on parameters (to be established by those conducting the study) that would allow for an initial assemblage of the accrued need in these counties. The work product from Phase I will be a report that provides a rubric for scoring, ranking, and establishing priorities to be used in conducting Phase II, which would contract for professional services (engineers) to determine the potential costs for maintenance.

- a. Benefits that will accrue from the study will be information that is critical to state investment in infrastructure in rural communities. The study will identify crisis situations, can be used to direct investment to communities that are likely candidates for future economic expansion and provide much-needed information on how to best deal with infrastructure that is reaching end of life cycle.

- b. Risks of financial failure, inability to sustain existing business, and inability to support future economic growth will occur without state investment. Without such a study, state investment will result in ineffective and inefficient use of resources which will not likely lead to the desired economic impact on the recipient communities.
3. **Backup power for rural communities with hospitals.** The state's experience with hurricanes, tornadoes, and other inclement weather has revealed a serious problem - the number of communities having critical access hospitals that do not have backup power generators on their community wells. Hospitals facing an influx of patients during these crises are severely hampered when they don't have water. The General Assembly should direct the appropriate state agencies to identify communities in which hospitals are located that do not have backup power and provide funds through a proactive grant program to install backup generators.
4. **Sewer/water pilot project.** Authorize the Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation to undertake a pilot or proof-of-concept project to bundle state/federal resources across county lines (thus communities) for the purpose of improved efficiency and effectiveness and achieving economy of scale.
  - a. Benefits will accrue by bundling several small grants into a single award that can be managed, engineered, bid on, and performed in aggregate. This will overcome some of the personnel and professional services inadequacies that occur in very small communities. A cross-county study may also reveal benefits of working across county lines, i.e. regional cooperation.
  - b. Risks. Failure to do so will mean that numerous small awards will continue, which are often too small to have meaningful impact, and which are inefficiently and ineffectively implemented by many communities.
5. **Joint Office of Rural Affairs.** State government agencies and House of Representatives and Senate committees are organized thematically and/or functionally (See APPENDIX 1 AND 2). As such, both executive branch agencies and legislative committees typically function in response to internal and external forces related to their area of responsibility. Furthermore, by nature, they often become operationally focused rather than strategically focused. The challenges that face rural Georgia cut across these functional areas. In fact, this is precisely why Speaker Ralston created the House Rural Development Council (HRDC). He assumed that by creating a council that included representatives from across rural Georgia and the chairpersons of key Georgia House committees, the Council could address the needs of rural Georgia in a more holistic way.



**Appendix 1. Georgia Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation**

**Appendix 2. Legislative Committee Structure, State of Georgia**

**House Committees**

- Agriculture and Consumer Affairs Committee
- Appropriations Committee
- Banks and Banking Committee
- Budget and Fiscal Affairs Oversight Committee
- Code Revision Committee
- Creative Arts and Entertainment Committee
- Defense and Veterans Affairs Committee
- Economic Development and Tourism Committee
- Education Committee
- Energy, Utilities and Telecommunications Committee
- Ethics Committee
- Game, Fish, and Parks Committee
- Governmental Affairs Committee
- Health Committee
- Higher Education Committee
- Human Relations and Aging Committee
- Industry and Labor Committee
- Information and Audits Committee
- Insurance Committee
- Interstate Cooperation Committee
- Intragovernmental Coordination Committee
- Judiciary Committee
- Judiciary Non-Civil Committee
- Juvenile Justice Committee
- Motor Vehicles Committee
- Natural Resources and Environment Committee
- Public Health Committee
- Public Safety and Homeland Security Committee
- Reapportionment and Redistricting Committee
- Regulated Industries Committee
- Retirement Committee
- Rules Committee
- Small Business Development Committee
- Special Committee on Healthcare
- Special Rules Committee
- State Planning and Community Affairs Committee
- State Properties Committee
- Technology and Infrastructure Innovation
- Transportation Committee
- Urban Affairs Committee
- Ways and Means Committee

## Senate committees

- Administrative Affairs Committee
- Agriculture and Consumer Affairs Committee
- Appropriations Committee
- Assignments Committee
- Banking and Financial Institutions Committee
- Children and Families Committee
- Economic Development and Tourism Committee
- Education and Youth Committee
- Ethics Committee
- Finance Committee
- Government Oversight Committee
- Health and Human Services Committee
- Higher Education Committee
- Insurance and Labor Committee
- Interstate Cooperation Committee
- Judiciary Committee
- Natural Resources and the Environment Committee
- Public Safety Committee
- Reapportionment and Redistricting Committee
- Regulated Industries and Utilities Committee
- Retirement Committee
- Rules Committee
- Science and Technology Committee
- State and Local Governmental Operations Committee
- State Institutions and Property Committee
- Transportation Committee
- Urban Affairs Committee
- Veterans, Military and Homeland Security Committee

## Joint Legislative Committees and Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Overview Committee (MARTOC)

Among the conclusions reached by the HRDC in 2017 was that the state needed a focus on issues facing rural Georgia. Among the HRDC's resolutions and recommendations for the 2018 session was passage of legislation to create an entity that would be able to focus its attention on rural Georgia. Hence the passage of HB 951 that created the Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation called for a position in the Department of Economic Development to focus on rural Georgia and called for cooperation among agencies with the Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation to the benefit of the state.

The fact is that rural Georgia faces unique challenges – politically, financially, educationally..... More importantly, rural Georgia is home to agriculture and forestry. Agriculture in the number one business in the State of Georgia, and Georgia is the number one forestry state in the union. As go agriculture and forestry, so goes the state!

The State of Georgia desperately needs agencies, committees, and initiatives focused on the sustainability of rural Georgia, but the State of Georgia also desperately needs legislative focus on these matters. Engendering executive branch agencies and legislative committees to work collectively with purpose on behalf of rural Georgia has proven very challenging.

Proposal. The accomplishments of the Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation over the past six years point to the potential when mission, strategy, tactics, and effort are directed at outcome. Programs are essential tools of government, but they often become tools of bureaucracy, with focus on program operation and lack of focus on outcome. As effective as the Center has been, its accomplishments are inhibited by limited budget, situation within the USG, and lack of access to funding and cooperation with agencies. Increasing the Center’s budget will allow it to accomplish much more, but what is really needed is a new focus on rural Georgia.

Use the House Rural Development Council and the knowledge and findings that have emerged from its work over the past eight years as a vehicle to establish a Joint Legislative Office of Rural Affairs that can work with and under the direction of the House and the Senate. Standing committees in the House and Senate can be established, and these committees would be dedicated to rural affairs and would oversee the joint office. In the event that establishment of new standalone committees on rural affairs is not desired, an existing committee in both bodies could have this duty added to their purview.

A Joint Legislative Office of Rural Affairs could assist both House and Senate leadership in focusing their efforts on legislation, policy, appropriations, and agency oversight that could drive change.

6. **Rural Hospitals.** Rural hospitals across the state are stressed. Payor mixes, recruitment/retention challenges, low population densities, aged or aging facilities, and post-pandemic effects will continue to cause operational challenges, including additional hospital closures. The HRDC should be a strong advocate for legislation, agency policy, tax credits, and appropriations to improve the financial position of rural hospitals. We encourage changes to make the Georgia Rural Hospital Tax Credit program even more effective. This would include increasing the cap. We also encourage a review and reconsideration for funding the Rural Hospital Stabilization Program.

7. **Rural Maternal and Infant Health Centers of Excellence.** The House Rural Development Council should recommend that the General Assembly take immediate action to increase access to obstetrical, labor, and delivery services in currently underserved areas of the state, by creating and funding Rural Maternal and Infant Health Centers of Excellence across the state. The essence of the project would involve:
  - a. Providing stop gap funding to a limited number of hospitals that currently provide labor and delivery services, but which are doing so at a loss and are therefore at risk of ceasing services.
  - b. Providing incentives, financial and otherwise, to rural hospitals that do not offer labor and delivery services and physician communities serving those hospitals to partner with nearby hospitals that do offer labor and delivery.

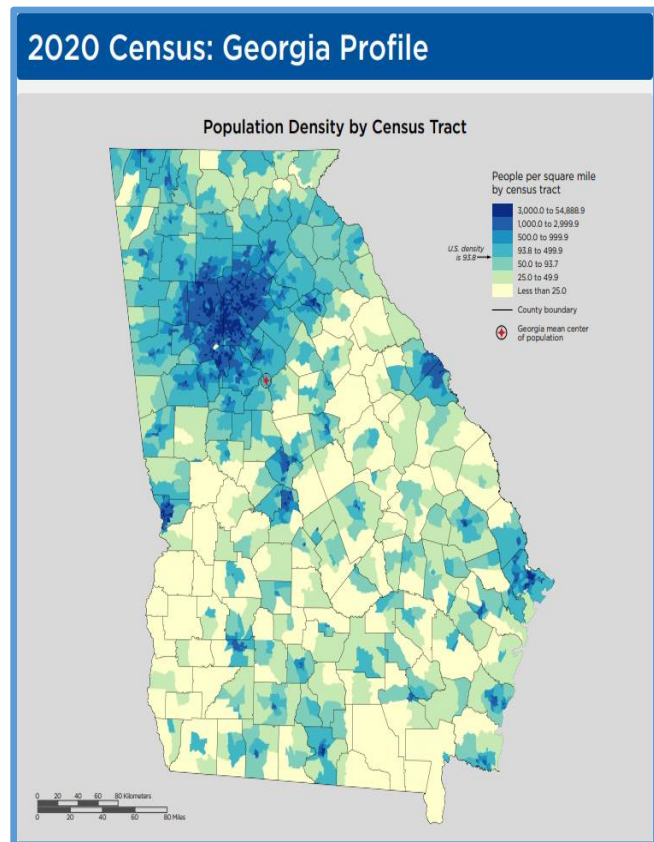
## HOUSE RURAL DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL RECOMMENDATIONS

*The following recommendations pertain to the presentations at the 2024 House Rural Development Council meetings.*

### Support for the creation of Rural Hub City Model:

The rural hub city model serves as a central point for financing that generates revenue for surrounding rural communities. By leveraging existing infrastructure and prior investments, a rural hub can thrive. However, comprehensive strategic assistance and funding are essential for these hub cities to succeed and function cohesively. While success cannot be guaranteed for everyone, a long-term commitment can lead to advancements in complex areas such as finance, education, infrastructure, and healthcare. In some instances, structural changes in city and county government may be necessary, but with determination, these changes can foster regional progress.

Rural hub cities have the potential to lower costs associated with service delivery in education, healthcare, and public services. Public funds can be strategically combined with federal and private funding to achieve timely and measurable returns on investment. By making targeted and focused investments, resources can be efficiently allocated to enhance rural infrastructure. Improved transportation assets can support industrial growth and reduce commute times for residents traveling to and from nearby communities. Additionally, a rural hub city can quickly assess local needs and conditions by implementing a comprehensive multi-year growth plan effectively and promptly.



The rural hub city model is a strategic concept that emphasizes the importance of intermediate points where transportation, supply, and information networks converge. It efficiently addresses the economic need for minimal investment of time and effort. The Georgia Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation outlines the following criteria for the rural hub city model:

### **Healthcare**

- Hospital services.
- Primary care, specializations, OB/GYN + and dental services.

### **Transportation**

- 4-lane or interstate highway access.
- Rail service.
- General aviation airport.

### **Education**

- Public Pk-12.
- School Choice option(s).
- Post-secondary – Technical College System of Georgia, University System of Georgia, or private college/university.

### **Leadership Input**

- Municipal government.
- School staff.
- Business leaders.

### **Infrastructure to support modest growth**

- Utilities
- Housing

As of 2023, the United States Census Bureau estimates Georgia's population at 11,029,227. Rural cities with populations under 40,000 include Rome (37,621), Evans (37,456), Tucker (36,994), Douglasville (35,252), Woodstock (35,171), Hinesville (34,732), and Dalton (34,358).

## Support for Rural Healthcare:

### *Rural Hospitals*

- Increase the Rural Hospital Tax Credit to \$150 million annually to infuse funds into rural hospitals' operating systems. This investment will help adopt technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI) and provide higher wages for staff.
- Increase funding for the State Office of Rural Health's Rural Hospital Stabilization Grant in addition to previous funding.

### *Rural Physicians*

- Create a Physician-Friendly State:
  - Credentialing typically takes between 90 to 100 days on average. The insurance industry should consider the unique challenges faced by rural Georgia in expediting this process. In some cases, rural doctors can take up to six months to verify their credentials, which is necessary to ensure they are qualified to provide care.
  - The state should continue exploring tort reform considerations in the medical field.
- Create an annual stipend of \$50,000 for all physicians who practice full-time in rural communities with populations of 35,000 or less, or provide a \$50,000 tax credit for those working in hospitals.
- Focus on current graduate medical education (GME) sites that exceed their Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) cap and provide the number of trainees in programs approved by the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education. This approach can significantly enhance the number of residents in these programs, leading to a more robust healthcare system in Georgia. It can also help retain more medical graduates from Georgia, inspiring and motivating all stakeholders in the healthcare system.
- Support the Future of Georgia's Student Doctors:
  - Focus on Georgia-only applicants.
  - Recruit qualified students from rural Georgia.
  - Create educational and interactive pathways to medical doctor (MD) programs.
- Long-term startup grants for new GME Native sites with specific end dates and minimum requirements for Georgia undergraduate medical education (UME) graduates.

- Focus on primary care specialties: obstetrician-gynecologists (OB/GYN), evaluation and management (EM), general surgery (GS), internal medicine (IM), facilities management (FM), pediatrics (PEDS), and psychology (PSYCH) only.

### *Maternal Health*

- The Rural Health Innovation Center analysis reveals that Georgia needs at least 56 new obstetric care facilities, representing a 67% increase, to eliminate maternity care deserts across the state. By expanding eight existing facilities, Georgia can ensure that all women have access to essential obstetric services within a 50-mile radius.
- Fund 12 to 14 OB units at \$1 million annually to offset financial losses:
  - Units that have been closed to offset their losses and provide economic development returns on investment for affected counties.
  - Rural county units need funding to prevent closure; an additional 8-10 also require funding.
- Establish a pilot program with Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) to provide comprehensive maternal wraparound services for prenatal care.
- Optimize the weight and health of pregnant mothers by utilizing resources from Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHC).
- Virtual Support for Maternal Care Services.
- Increase the number of residency slots for primary care and obstetrics/gynecology (OB/GYN) services.
- Establish scholarships specifically for obstetrics and gynecology (OB/GYN) to support healthcare services in rural areas.
- Primary care for preconception and dual reimbursement for maternal and child health care.
- Full tuition reimbursement should be available for participation in the Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC).
- Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) should consider forming affiliations or partnerships with established rural hospitals.
- Streamlined enrollment process for pregnant women to access Medicaid.
- Enhance maternal services by establishing "Maternal Health Navigators," similar to the perinatal patient navigators from Morehouse Maternal Health.

### *Rural Emergency Medical Services*

- The last adjustment to EMS Medicaid codes occurred in FY 2002. A thorough review is necessary.
- Develop legislation or a rule to recognize a High-Quality Emergency Medical Services System (EMS). Continue to seek ways to improve the EMS Education System.
- Establish legislative requirements mandating a specific number of ambulances available in each county.
- Improve the healthcare payment system to tackle the issue of providing timely rural services that connect the right patient to the right hospital.
- Emergency Medical Services (EMS) should have the first 10 miles of patient transportation fully funded.
- Establish funding for the payment of EMS transports for indigent individuals.
- The state should consider funding programs to train and support new medics and implementing an updated work design to reduce downtime. Currently, training typically relies on local services, which creates challenges. Georgia has fewer licensed medics due to fatigue, inadequate salaries, and the elimination of programs at many technical colleges.

### *Medical Scope and Telehealth*

- Georgia should explore how adopting artificial intelligence can help address the shortage of jobs in the healthcare sector.
- To ensure continued access to care, it is important to maintain the reimbursement levels for telemedicine established during the 2020 pandemic. Additionally, reimbursement rates should continue to be increased to cover associated costs adequately.
- Consider expanding the current specialties and scope of practice for Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetists (CRNAs), Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs), Registered Nurses (RNs), Advanced Practice Registered Nurses (APRNs), and Certified Nursing Assistants (CNAs).

### *Rural Optometrist/Ophthalmologists*

- Optometry schools in Georgia need to be established. The nearest schools are in Birmingham, Alabama, and Memphis, Tennessee. Establishing an optometry school in Georgia would help to increase the number of practitioners in the state. Students often remain in the state where they completed their education.

- Georgia offers grants through the Southern Regional Educational Board (SREB) to cover the difference between in-state and out-of-state tuition costs. Currently, there are 24 state-contracted seats at the Southern College of Optometry (SCO) in Memphis and 8 contracted seats at the University of Alabama Birmingham. Consider increasing the available seats, with the condition that additional seats must involve clinical practice in rural settings.
- Expanding ophthalmology residency programs, enhancing the roles of optometrists and other eye care professionals, and adopting innovative care delivery models to address the anticipated shortfall.
- Other medical professionals have access to service-cancellable loans. One possible requirement could be that those who accept these loans must practice in a rural area for a certain period before their loans are forgiven.
- Enhanced Access to Care: Granting optometrists the authority to prescribe medications has enabled them to treat eye diseases directly. This change has reduced the need for referrals to ophthalmologists, thereby improving patient access to eye care services. States that expanded optometrists' ability to prescribe therapeutic pharmaceutical agents (TPAs) experienced a 12% reduction in vision impairment over 15 years following the policy change.
- Expanding optometrists' scope of practice can help them fully utilize their training, resulting in improved public eye health outcomes and more efficient healthcare delivery.

#### Support for Rural Education:

##### *Rural Education Infrastructure*

- Increase funding for rural schools, emphasizing teacher training, educational materials, and school infrastructure.
- Consider a more significant weight for Full-Time Equivalent values assigned to categories or programs used to determine state funding for educational programs in rural and small economically disadvantaged districts.
- Georgia should continue to find ways to provide access to rural areas, including expanding fiber in remote locations. Consider allocating a line item for technology in rural school districts.

- Provide funding and capacity-building support for universal screeners, personalized learning, professional learning, literacy coaches, and necessary materials. Recognize that struggling readers exist beyond 3rd grade.
- Promote vocational and technical training programs that align with the skill needs of local economies.
- Create accessible Career, Technical, and Agricultural Education (CTAE), College and Career Academies (CCAs), and college preparatory courses that align with local employment needs, including those from the Technical College System of Georgia, local colleges, and apprenticeship programs.
- Support local universities in developing leaders for rural areas. Offer incentives and fair compensation to attract and keep strong leaders in rural districts.
- Allow dropouts aged 16 and 17 to be served by Georgia’s completion schools without going through their local education agency. This change aligns with the state dropout age. It also allows homeschooled students to enroll in completion programs.

#### *Rural Education Workforce Development*

- Consider a study on housing for teachers across the state. A strong and stable educator workforce improves student education and fosters overall economic growth in rural areas.
- Ensure funding for workforce readiness initiatives, such as internships and transportation support.
- Identify the business and industry needs in rural areas and focus on credentials.
- Emphasize the importance of fostering innovative partnerships with post-secondary institutions, businesses, and industries.

#### *Rural Education Funding*

- Consider funding initiatives focusing on rural districts to expand opportunities for rural students. When creating mandates, take into account the limited capacity many districts have.
- Consider funding upgrades for leadership certification for educators unable to support leadership programs. Provide professional learning for rural leaders to address rural needs.

#### Strengthen Climate Resilience and Energy Sustainability:

- Utilize Georgia’s core competitive advantages, such as its vertically integrated and regulated market structure. Long-term integrated resource planning and joint ownership of

power plant assets will ensure that electricity remains essential rather than merely a market commodity. Potential solutions include:

- Encouraging public-private partnerships to fund infrastructure projects.
- The development of natural gas micro-grid systems explicitly designed for small communities.
- Implementing subsidies or tax incentives to reduce costs for consumers in rural areas.
- As the economy becomes more electrified, the state should consider installing modular reactors to meet the rising energy demand. Additionally, the state must explore proposals and policies that transition Georgia from fossil fuels and structure the economy and power grid around decarbonization goals.
- Continue planning for additional natural gas capacity as the share of electric power generated from coal resources in Georgia declines below thirteen percent. Natural gas steadily increases to nearly fifty percent of Georgia’s electric power profile.
- Consider legislation aimed to enable the Georgia Environmental Finance Authority (GEFA) to make natural gas projects eligible for its low-interest infrastructure loans.
- The Douglas-Coffee County Economic Development Authority urges the legislature to establish a regional gas authority for the affected counties to plan and direct infrastructure investment strategically.

Support Agricultural Technology and Support Services:

- Enhance support for rural communities through tailored services like workshops, classes, consultations, certifications, camps, and extension resources.
- Offer extension services to farmers to enhance their knowledge and skills, especially in sustainable practices and climate-resilient crops.
- Increase access to Individual Quick Freezing (IQF). IQF is a method that freezes food items individually rather than in bulk. This technology minimizes the formation of large ice crystals, which can damage food cell walls and lead to spoilage during storage and transport.

### Enhance Rural Infrastructure:

- Expand rural road networks to improve market access and reduce transportation costs for rural producers.
- Remove the sunset clause regarding truck weights.
- Focus on funding electrification and renewable energy projects to ensure reliable power for rural areas.
- Enhance digital infrastructure to connect rural communities and facilitate e-commerce, online education, and telemedicine.
- Increase the continuing education credit to 12 hours for county commissioners and raise the per diem to \$200 per day or 10% of the county commission salary.
- The House Rural Development Council recommends the establishment of a Railroad Siding Tax Credit to assist railroads in Georgia with costs associated with building sidings for industrial sites in rural areas. Georgia's railroads have proven valuable partners in economic development by investing millions of dollars in essential infrastructure. The Railroad Siding Tax Credit would incentivize businesses to invest in the construction or rehabilitation of railroad sidings, which are auxiliary tracks used for loading, unloading, or storage. This tax credit would apply to qualifying expenses, encourage the use of rail for freight transportation, and help reduce highway congestion.
- The Georgia Municipal Association requests continued support for revolving loan programs through statewide downtown lending, which is managed by the Georgia Department of Community Affairs and the Georgia Cities Foundation.

### Promote Rural Entrepreneurship and Access to Finance:

- Create incentives for private investment in rural enterprises, including agri-business, tourism, and small manufacturing.
- Facilitate access to microfinance and credit for rural entrepreneurs.
- Support the development of cooperatives and small-scale industries to generate local employment.

### Support for Workforce and Residential Infrastructure Districts:

Workforce and Residential Infrastructure Districts (WRIDs) finance and maintain public infrastructure. They are special-purpose units of local government that encourage planned community development to address infrastructure needs. WRIDs are dedicated to the City/County or local public utility facilities as agreed upon by all parties or as required. These specialized districts can levy non-ad valorem special assessments on properties within their boundaries. These assessments repay bonds and cover annual operating and maintenance costs. The assessments are treated equally with city or county taxes, and a county tax commissioner may collect them.

Workforce and Residential Infrastructure Districts can provide maintenance for infrastructure, including:

- Designing, engineering, and permitting costs to infrastructure.
- Roadways, sidewalks, lighting, and landscaping.
- Parks, recreational facilities, and civic sites.
- Stormwater management facilities.
- Water, wastewater, and reclaimed facilities (for ownership or dedication to the City/County/Governmental Utility)
- Conservation and preserves.
- A development order or other governmental agreement requires off-site improvements.

Workforce and Residential Infrastructure Districts have operating requirements similar to those of cities and counties, including:

- Board members subject to election by property owners.
- Public bidding and contract award processes.
- Open, noticed meetings.
- Open, public records.

Workforce and Residential Infrastructure Districts are not authorized to:

- Take action inconsistent with city/county comprehensive plans, ordinances, and regulations.

- Must comply with all applicable city/county rules, regulations, and policies.
- District must comply with all requirements of local utility providers; cannot usurp utility providers.
- Adopt its own comprehensive plan, building code, or land development code.
  - Cannot provide any services or facilities that will be incompatible with the capacity and uses of existing services and facilities.
- No debt issued can constitute a burden on the city/county.
  - Special assessments and debt may not in any way be tied to, impacted by, or reliant upon the local tax digest or the full faith and credit of the city/county.

Workforce and Residential Infrastructure Districts must fulfill governmental record keeping and reporting requirements:

- Maintain official records.
- Establish and administer internal accounting controls.
- Report and file financial information.
- Prepare and distribute agendas and minutes.

Protections for City/County:

- District construction funds held in trust account.
- District debt entirely separate from city/county.
- City/county retains all zoning, permitting, and development approval authority.
- No administrative costs to the city/county.
- No property outside the boundaries of the district will ever be assessed by the district.
- All assessments disclosed to prospective consumers.

Protections for Workforce and Residential Infrastructure Districts:

- Notices and disclosures recorded in property records.
  - Notice of establishment.
  - Notice of assessment lien.
  - Disclosure of public financing.
  - Websites with contact information and copies of important documents.

- Disclosures required in bold in retail sales contracts.
- District provides brochure explaining District functions and assessments.

Workforce and Residential Infrastructure Districts are responsible for maintaining improvements that have yet to be transferred to the local public utilities of the city or county. In 2008, Georgia voters rejected a constitutional amendment to create special infrastructure development districts for underserved areas, with 51.6% voting "NO" and 48.4% voting "YES." Members of the House Rural Development Council believe this constitutional amendment's outcome was influenced by the economic effects of the "Great Recession."

## Conclusion

This report emphasizes the urgent need for targeted investments and policies to support the growth and sustainability of rural communities. Key factors such as quality education, meaningful employment, and recreational opportunities significantly influence families' decisions about where to live. By addressing challenges like inadequate infrastructure, gaps in workforce development, and limited access to healthcare and broadband, Georgia can cultivate vibrant, resilient, and economically sustainable rural communities that contribute to the state's overall prosperity. Collaborative efforts among government officials, private sector stakeholders, and community leaders will be essential for effectively implementing these recommendations. The House Rural Development Council stresses the importance of ongoing monitoring, stakeholder engagement, and periodic reassessment of priorities to ensure that the proposed initiatives remain responsive to the evolving needs of rural populations.

