



PHASE 2: COMMUNITY STRATEGIC PLAN

Submitted by Market Street Services Inc.
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March 2019

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STEERING COMMITTEE

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Grey Watson (chair)	Sentara Halifax Regional Hospital
Dennis Witt (chair)	Halifax County Board of Supervisors
Lezlie Bryant	Realty Resource
Virginia Byrd	Southern Virginia Higher Education Center
Petrina Carter	Tri-County Community Action
Rev. Kevin Chandler	Trinity Missionary Baptist Church
Ryland Clark	ABB
Mattie Cowan	Retired
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Blair Hall	Waller Brothers Farms
Earl Howerton	Southside Outreach
Stanley Jeffress	Jeffress Funeral Home
Kristy Johnson	Industrial Development Authority of Halifax County
Adam Layman	Staunton River State Park
Bradford Lee	Presto Products
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Mitzi McCormick	Halifax County Chamber of Commerce
Tom Raab	Town of South Boston
Scott Simpson	Halifax County
Dan Sleeper	Halifax County
Phyllis Smith	Retired
Jason Studley	Sentara Halifax Regional Hospital
Angela Yancey	The Prizery

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The three-phase research and strategic planning process will last approximately nine months, concluding in March 2019. A diverse Steering Committee comprised of representatives from the public, private, and non-profit sectors will guide this process and ensure that it lays a foundation that allows people and businesses to thrive and wealth to accumulate.

Phase 1: Community Assessment

In today's competitive economic climate, it is important to begin with an honest appraisal of current trends affecting a community's success and prosperity. The Community Assessment provided a detailed evaluation of Halifax County as a place to live, work, and do business. The phase began with a Stakeholder Engagement process. This entailed reaching out to people who live and/or work in Halifax County via an online survey, individual interviews, and focus groups to help identify the community's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges. This input process took place in October and November 2018. Market Street complemented the input received from stakeholders in Halifax County with analysis of demographic, economic, socioeconomic, and quality of life data trends. The Community Assessment wove together the qualitative feedback and quantitative findings into a series of "stories" that provide a concise narrative of the opportunities and challenges the community will face as it seeks to raise levels of prosperity and improve quality of life for all of its current and future residents. This phase concluded in December 2018.

Phase 2: Community Strategic Plan

This Community Strategic Plan represents the culmination of all the quantitative and qualitative research findings and strategic implications. It will guide the collective actions of local partners and will be geared toward addressing challenges and capitalizing on opportunities. The plan will be holistic, actionable, and measurable. Examples of best-practice programs, policies, and initiatives from around the country have been included when relevant and appropriate to help form strategic recommendations and their subsequent implementation. This phase concluded in March 2019.

Phase 3: Implementation Plan

A plan, no matter how visionary, is only valuable when it is implemented. The Implementation Plan represents a work plan for Halifax County and its implementation partners to ensure that the Community Strategic Plan is activated and sustained for the next five years and beyond. The Plan will formalize timelines for phasing in the Community Strategic Plan's multiple actions, identify lead and support entities to implement each aspect of the Community Strategic Plan, determine existing and necessary financial and personal capacity to drive implementation, propose optimal staffing and governance operations, and confirm performance metrics to track implementation progress and success. This phase concluded in March 2019.

SUMMARY: COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT

The Community Assessment represented the first step in the Halifax County Community Strategic Plan development process. The Assessment examined the competitive issues Halifax County faces by evaluating them through the prism of what Market Street believes to be the three critical aspects of a community: its people, their prosperity, and the quality of the place. It was based on in-depth data analysis covering demographic, socioeconomic, economic, and quality of life trends as well as extensive public input gathered through focus groups, interviews, and an online survey that received 1,579 responses from community stakeholders. Key findings from research and public input were incorporated into a narrative consisting of nine key stories that help explain the community's current realities, key successes, and remaining challenges. These nine stories are as follows:

1. Introduction: Reinvention and Renewal in the Rural South
2. Population Decline: The Loss of Children, Families, and Prime Workers
3. Public Education: Mixed Outcomes Hampered by Struggling Facilities and Perceptions
4. Higher Education and Workforce Preparedness: Return on Investment
5. Prosperity and Outcomes: Additional Employment Opportunities are Needed
6. Economic Growth and Diversification: Market Access Presents an Additional Challenge
7. Motorsports: Nurturing an Economic and Cultural Identity
8. Quality of Life and Place: Opportunities to Improve Community Attachment
9. Conclusion: Consensus and Commitment

The next two pages highlight some of the key strengths and opportunities and key challenges and threats that emerged from research and input and that are woven into the nine stories of the Community Assessment.

KEY STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES

- ∠ Long-term growth in educational attainment: While educational attainment rates lag behind, the community has demonstrated growth over the long run. Between 2000 and 2016, the proportion of Halifax County residents with at least a bachelor's degree grew by 6.4 percentage points, 0.5 percentage points better than the national average.
- ∠ SVHEC is a major asset for workforce development and economic growth: The Southern Virginia Higher Education Center (SVHEC) emerged as one of the community's top strengths. Moreover, stakeholders said its growth and success are a testament to what is possible when the community works together toward common goals.
- ∠ Manufacturing employment has stabilized after a lengthy decline: Like many similar communities, Halifax County's manufacturing base eroded for much of the early 21st century. But manufacturing employment has stabilized, and the community added 100 jobs between 2011 and 2017.
- ∠ The community is well-positioned to attract smaller, cost-sensitive manufacturers: Halifax County has a strong value proposition for small manufacturing firms seeking a cost-competitive location.
- ∠ A special asset base for the motorsports industry: Halifax County has a compelling competitive advantage for firms in the motorsports sector, due in large part to the VIRginia International Raceway (VIR), a special facility with few equals throughout the nation.
- ∠ An agricultural legacy that could support new opportunities: Halifax County was once home to a thriving tobacco industry that collapsed in recent decades due to a confluence of factors. But the region is well-suited to grow a newly legalized crop – industrial hemp – that could have significant potential to spur economic growth.
- ∠ Downtowns have the potential to deliver quality of place improvements: Input participants praised the addition of new restaurants and small businesses in Downtown Halifax and Downtown South Boston as well as the conversion of several former tobacco warehouses and other historic buildings into loft apartments.

KEY CHALLENGES AND THREATS

- ∠ A declining population and unfavorable age dynamics: Halifax County lost population in all but three years between 1995 and 2017. During this time period, the community's population declined by more than 3,000 residents. The community's population is also aging relative to the nation, with 21.8 percent of residents aged 65 or older compared to the national average of 14.5 percent.
- ∠ Out-migration of families, children, and prime-age workers: Between 2011 and 2016, Halifax County experienced population loss in every major age group except for the 65-and-over category. This and other data reveal that the community is losing residents – especially prime-age workers and families – to other communities.
- ∠ Far fewer HCHS graduates are going on to college: While graduation rates and test scores are up within Halifax County Public Schools, the proportion of Halifax County High School (HCHS) graduates enrolling in a two- or four-year college within 16 months of graduation has plummeted in recent years while the state average has declined only slightly.
- ∠ High school facilities lag far behind: One of the most prominent themes to emerge from public input was the physical state of HCHS facilities. According to a wide variety of input participants with first-hand knowledge of the nearly 40-year-old facility, the high school has a litany of issues that impact everything from its curb appeal to the learning environment for students.
- ∠ Not enough high-quality jobs: Noting the community's population loss, input participants said that more abundant and higher quality job opportunities are an absolute necessity if the community is to retain its young people.
- ∠ Workforce constraints and other barriers limit the potential for large projects: Though Halifax County likely has some "hidden" workforce strength due to a net outflow of workers who commute outside of the community for work, the community is still relatively small and less well-integrated into road transportation networks than other markets. Accordingly, Halifax County is likely to be at a competitive disadvantage for large economic development projects or manufacturers within "just-in-time" supply chains.
- ∠ Poor overall perceptions about quality of life and quality of place: Public input reveals that while some positives exist, stakeholders have relatively poor perceptions about certain aspects of quality of life and quality of place. In particular, input participants lamented a lack of restaurants, shops, and other opportunities to socialize.
- ∠ Rural broadband and transportation issues limit opportunities for many residents: Among the most consistent concerns that residents cited during the public input process were rural transportation and rural broadband. Stakeholders noted that efforts are underway to address these issues and said they would like to see them supported and expanded if possible.

THE COMMUNITY STRATEGIC PLAN

Public, private, and non-profit leaders have come together around a comprehensive community and economic development initiative that will help Halifax County achieve a more prosperous and successful future. This process has resulted in a Community Strategic Plan that will guide the community's collective actions for the next five years. This consensus blueprint establishes what Halifax County must do to achieve a more prosperous and successful future. The remainder of this section describes how this Strategic Plan was developed and outlines its structure.

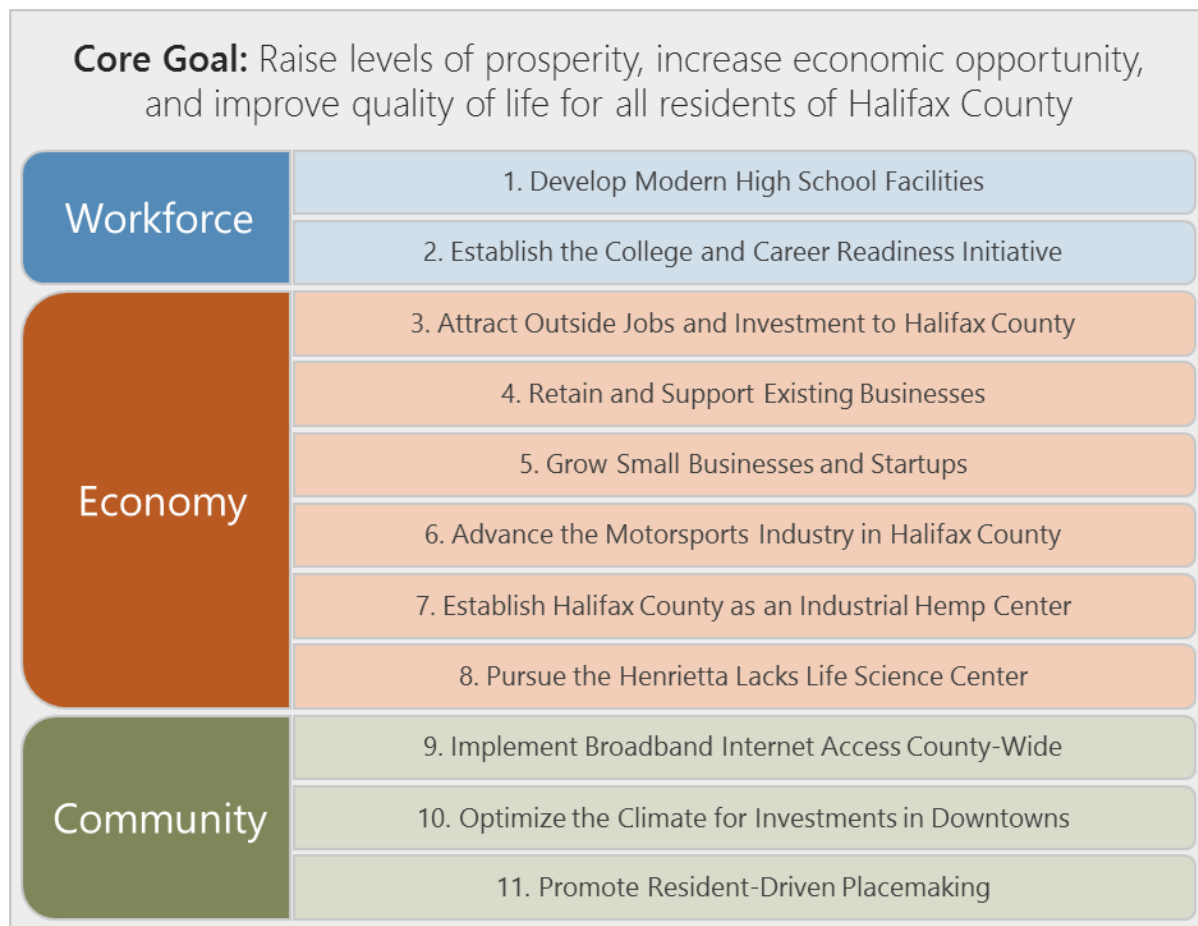
HOW THE STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK WAS DEVELOPED

The strategic planning process began with the development of the Community Assessment, a foundational research document that analyzed Halifax County as a place to live, work, and do business. The key findings from the Assessment are summarized in the preceding section. Several key findings were of particular importance, however, when it came to determining the type of strategic framework that Halifax County should pursue. Simply put, Halifax County faces numerous challenges that threaten the community's future prosperity and success. The community is not alone; many rural areas and small regions around the United States are confronted with a similar set of issues. But the implication is clear: stakeholders in Halifax County must take bold action if they are to achieve a brighter future. Anything less will be insufficient. The community must develop a consensus plan and fully commit to making significant investments in its future. Best-practice communities embrace a holistic approach to economic development. That said, leaders in Halifax County understand that the community has limited resources to devote to its community and economic development efforts. Accordingly, it makes sense for the community to focus on a limited set of initiatives that can be realistically advanced within the next five years and that have a high likelihood of producing a return on investment.

The full range of strategic implications identified through research, public input, and the Steering Committee's guidance about the desired strategic direction for Halifax County directly informed the creation of this strategic framework presented on the next page.

THE STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

The research, public input, and Steering Committee feedback summarized on the preceding pages led to the determination of a strategic framework that organizes the efforts that Halifax County will advance in the coming years. Central to this framework is a Core Goal: “Raise levels of prosperity, increase economic opportunity, and improve quality of life for all residents of Halifax County.” This statement is consistent with the reality that community and economic development is fundamentally about building wealth and raising standards of living. Individually and collectively, the components of this Community Strategic Plan seek to improve the lives of all current and future residents of Halifax County. This Core Goal can be activated by pursuing 11 high-impact Key Initiatives grouped into one of three Focus Areas that reflect a holistic approach to community and economic development. These are workforce development, economic development, and community development or, alternatively, Workforce, Economy, and Community. Finally, underneath each Key Initiative are Tactical Recommendations that correlate to a specific action or program that will help advance the initiative and move Halifax County toward its Core Goal. The Core Goal, Focus Areas, and Key Initiatives are summarized in the following graphic.



The remainder of this Community Strategic Plan describes this framework in greater detail. Each Focus Area is introduced with a brief introduction that summarizes its contents and connections to high-level findings from research and input. Key Initiatives are then described in greater detail. Each section includes a brief justification and overview of the Initiative followed by a summary of the Tactical Recommendations that will be required to activate it. For the purposes of clarity and organization, each Key Initiative and Tactical Recommendation is numbered. While some needs clearly stood out as priorities in research and public input, the order of this framework is not intended to convey hierarchy. In fact, no single element of the Community Strategic Plan can, in isolation, advance Halifax County toward a more prosperous and successful future.

It should also be noted that like every community that engages in a holistic community and economic development process, Halifax County will be “jumping on a moving train.” There is already a great deal of work underway to raise levels of prosperity and competitiveness and improve quality of life in Halifax County. But more can always be done with additional resources, committed leadership, and a spirit of cooperation. The ultimate goal is to effectively incorporate existing, enhanced, and new activities under a coordinated implementation framework.

While some Key Initiatives and Tactical Recommendations reference specific organizations or briefly touch on how a given program or initiative might take shape, this document is not intended to determine how things will be done or who might do them. Those issues will also be addressed with the development of the Implementation Plan. This Community Strategic Plan is intended instead to determine what Halifax County could do in order to become a more prosperous and successful place.

Workforce

A skilled and educated workforce is the most important factor influencing a community's economic competitiveness. Any holistic approach to community and economic development must consider talent. And for a community such as Halifax County that is not a net attractor of new residents, this means focusing on the institutions and systems that produce “homegrown” talent. With the Southern Virginia Higher Education Center (SVHEC), Halifax County has seen firsthand how investments in the local talent pipeline can deliver positive returns. This Focus Area contains two Key Initiatives that address major challenge and threats that emerged from research and public input. The first involves a major capital investment – a modern Halifax County High School – while the second focuses on enhanced collaboration and programming to connect residents to opportunities for postsecondary education and training.

KEY FINDINGS FROM RESEARCH AND INPUT:

- ∠ Test scores and the graduation rate in Halifax County Public Schools are improving relative to the Commonwealth average. This is impressive given the fact that HCPS has a larger proportion of students from economically disadvantaged households.
- ∠ However, the proportion of Halifax County High School graduates who are enrolling in higher education institutions within 16 months of graduation has plummeted in recent years. This could threaten the community's ability to build on its long-term gains in educational attainment – a critical factor in workforce competitiveness.
- ∠ Among online survey respondents, roughly 45 percent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “Children in this district receive a high-quality education” compared to 31 percent who disagreed or strongly disagreed. These responses are decidedly less positive than those from other recent Market Street client communities where the same question was asked via an online survey.
- ∠ By far the biggest issue with respect to public education to emerge from the input process was the quality of school facilities – namely the state of Halifax County High School. Overall, there is broad agreement among stakeholders in Halifax County that the high school facility has significant problems that must be addressed in some way. But the public input process revealed a lack of consensus on what should be done to address them or how to fund improvements and the future operating costs to maintain them.
- ∠ In Market Street's experience, Halifax County must work proactively to address this issue. For a community struggling to retain families with children and attract employers providing high-quality jobs, perceptions that schools or school facilities are substandard could be a critical blow.

1. DEVELOP MODERN HIGH SCHOOL FACILITIES

As discussed in the Community Assessment, the quality of Halifax County High School facilities severely hampers the community's competitiveness as a place to live and do business. On the online survey, 885 respondents indicated that they or their children had attended Halifax County Public Schools (HCPS) in the past five years. Approximately 63 percent of these individuals disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement "School facilities in this district are modern and competitive with nearby districts." Fewer than one in five respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. A facility needs assessment commissioned by HCPS identified numerous major problems with the high school facility, and feedback from stakeholders confirmed these issues. While there is broad agreement in the community that something must be done, there is a lack of consensus on what to do or how to pay for it. In Market Street's experience, however, Halifax County must address this issue if it is to become a more prosperous and successful place. Quality school facilities are of course important to student learning, but they also play a big role in establishing a community's "curb appeal." A substandard facility can be a critical blow for a community struggling to retain families and attract employers. This Key Initiative focuses on building consensus and support in the community for a modern high school facility and carrying out necessary advocacy work to secure the funding required for upgrades. It also incorporates a Tactical Recommendation that would seek to create joint-use agreements to open up upgraded athletic facilities to the community for recreational use, thereby addressing another significant issue to emerge from public input.

TACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS:

1.1 Build community consensus around a plan for modern high school facilities

- ∟ Convene stakeholders to determine whether existing facilities studies and plans provide a sufficient basis for decision-making; if necessary, commission additional research as soon as possible
- ∟ Build upon previous efforts to inform the public about the need for modern facilities by inviting stakeholders to experience the facility firsthand; conduct a series of guided tours of key public, private, and non-profit leaders; hold an open house for the general public with a series of "stations" highlighting issues and challenges (e.g. ADA accessibility and aging systems)
- ∟ Conduct a large scale process to gather stakeholder feedback about the current high school facility and build consensus around a desired alternative; outreach techniques could include public meetings, charrettes, information kiosks, and input exercises at school and/or public events, online surveys, advertisements, etc.
- ∟ Ensure that the input process engages current and recent administrators, teachers, students, and parents to identify how existing facilities impact individual experiences
- ∟ Consider retaining a firm skilled in education facilities planning or similar public infrastructure projects to guide the outreach process

1.2 Launch a local advocacy campaign to build support for funding needed improvements

- ∠ With a consensus alternative identified (see Tactical Recommendation 1.1), design and carry out an advocacy campaign for raising the local revenue required for modernizing Halifax County High School (see Tactical Recommendation 1.3); the campaign could include a website, social media, op-eds, a speakers' bureau, outdoor and traditional media advertisements
- ∠ Research and develop materials highlighting modern high school facilities in Southern Virginia and other comparable communities, including costs and funding mechanisms
- ∠ Enlist a wide range of community partners to conduct advocacy work on behalf of the campaign; for 501(c)(3) non-profits that cannot engage in political advocacy, develop specialized messaging that seeks to educate and inform voters on the issues
- ∠ Engage parents in the campaign and seek public endorsements from key individuals, organizations, and groups
- ∠ If deemed necessary and appropriate, consider additional advocacy at the state level for future education facilities funding measures; ensure efforts are aligned with overall advocacy efforts (see Tactical Recommendation 3.4)

BEST PRACTICE #1: Yes for Missoula Schools (Missoula County, MT)

1.3 Consider shared-use agreements to allow upgraded sports facilities to serve as a community amenity

- ∠ In the course of modernizing Halifax County High School facilities, seek to develop sports fields and other recreational facilities that could be utilized by the broader community outside of school hours
- ∠ Work with HCPS, local elected and appointed officials, and legal experts to assess relevant state and local regulations relating to the recreational use of school facilities during non-school hours
- ∠ As needed, develop "shared-use" agreements between HCPS and local parks and recreation departments and/or non-profit organizations to open up school facilities, including those at a modern Halifax County High School, for recreational and community uses outside of school hours or events; ensure that shared-use agreements outline specifics for staffing, maintenance, security, and liability

2. ESTABLISH THE COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS INITIATIVE

Talent is the key driver of economic success and prosperity in the modern economy. The availability of a skilled and educated workforce is a top factor influencing location decisions across a variety of business sectors, even traditionally “blue collar” fields such as manufacturing. For communities such as Halifax County that are experiencing net out-migration of residents, the ability to produce and retain “homegrown” talent is vital to future success. Halifax County has many components of a strong “talent pipeline.” In particular, SVHEC enables residents to access a variety of postsecondary education and training opportunities without leaving the county, a luxury not found in many rural communities. But stakeholder input revealed that there is a need for improved collaboration and coordination among talent pipeline partners in Halifax County. And while the community has achieved long-term gains in adult educational attainment, the share of Halifax County High School graduates enrolling in college soon after graduation has fallen precipitously in recent years, thereby threatening future growth. This Key Initiative seeks to bring together partners in an initiative dedicated to enhancing college and career readiness. This entails connecting students, recent school graduates, and adults to education and training opportunities and making a long-term investment in a stronger workforce and improved individual outcomes by seeking to expand programs and services for young children and families. Partners would work collectively with professional staff support to align efforts and identify ways in which services can be added or improved. The ultimate goals of the initiative are to boost skill levels, increase educational attainment, and improve workforce competitiveness.

TACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS:

2.1 Convene community partners around a formal initiative for college and career readiness

- ∟ Bring together a wide range of partners into a volunteer initiative focused on college and career readiness; the initiative should incorporate all organizations and entities that play a role in the local “talent pipeline,” including but not necessarily limited to HCPS, SVHEC, the Halifax County Chamber of Commerce and the business community, non-profits and social service providers, etc.; ensure that Halifax County’s diversity – racial and ethnic, geographic, and otherwise – is reflected in membership
- ∟ These entities would form a “core group” dedicated to optimizing programs and services that connect recent high school graduates and adults to education, training, and career opportunities
 - Note: this core group could be a component of a broader volunteer framework dedicated to the implementation of the full Community Strategic Plan; this volunteer structure will be discussed in further detail in the Implementation Plan
- ∟ Develop a “pledge of support” for partners to signify their commitment to working collaboratively through the initiative to strengthen Halifax County’s workforce
- ∟ Task the group with ensuring that its actions are aligned with and complementary of regional and state workforce efforts, e.g. programs to emerge from GO Virginia sector councils

2.2 Work collaboratively to design and implement programming that strengthens the “talent pipeline”

- ∠ As a critical first step, task the core group of volunteers established in Tactical Recommendation 2.1 with inventorying existing programs and services focused on college and career readiness to determine what is working well and identify gaps
- ∠ Interview a cross-section of recent Halifax County High School graduates and families to identify barriers to postsecondary enrollment following graduation
- ∠ With an inventory of existing programs and services and other research complete, task the core group with seeking opportunities for improved alignments or enhanced offerings; based on findings from research and public input, an initial set of new programs or efforts could reasonably include the following:
 - Emulate the successful financial aid submission assistance models in which volunteers proactively reach out to students and families to help navigate the federal financial aid process which can be a major barrier for many households (see Best Practice #2)
 - Encourage businesses to expand internship opportunities available to students and recent graduates in order to “attach” educated residents to the community; encourage companies to make internships paid and part-time and to connect internships to “career ladders” or opportunities for future advancement for high-performing interns; work with businesses, HCPS, and SVHEC to publicize the availability of internships, potentially through a custom website; expand and connect internship and externship opportunities for high school students to the career-planning component of the graduation requirements outlined in the Profile of a Virginia Graduate (see Best Practice #3)
 - Work with SVHEC and other partners to evaluate options to provide education and training courses at “satellite” locations in Halifax County, particularly in areas of northern Halifax County that are far from existing offerings; such an approach would lower burdens of mobility for households without access to a car and complement efforts to expand rural transit (see Tactical Recommendation 2.5)
 - Encourage local governments and employers to adopt “ban-the-box” policies that remove questions about criminal histories on job applications to help individuals with previous convictions to have a better chance at finding employment
- ∠ If desired, create action-oriented “work groups” underneath the core group of volunteers to advance one or more areas of enhanced or expanded programming; if implemented, work groups should be chaired by one or more members of the core group to ensure connectivity

BEST PRACTICE #2: Financial Aid Saturdays (Austin, TX)

BEST PRACTICE #3: Greater Grads (Oklahoma City, OK)

2.3 Invest in long-term outcomes by enhancing opportunities for young children and families

- ∠ Under the core group established in Tactical Recommendation 2.1, convene HCPS, social service providers and no-profits, faith-based organizations, and other relevant organizations to inventory existing programs and “wraparound services” for young children and families and identify gaps
- ∠ Seek to increase the number of Pre-K, Head Start, and Early Head Start enrollment slots in Halifax County by pursuing a multi-pronged approach to resource development; advocate at the state level for additional funds for early childhood education (see Tactical Recommendation 3.4), pursue competitive grants from the federal government and national foundations, and work locally to identify opportunities for efficiencies or new funding sources that could expand offerings
- ∠ Pursue options to expand child care availability to help prepare children for a lifetime of learning and to ease barriers for adults to enter the workforce and/or education and training programs; pursue a similar resource development approach as described above; support the “Phase 2” development of a child care center at Poplar Creek (see Tactical Recommendation 10.3)
- ∠ Work with all relevant partners to ensure that “wraparound services” such as education for new and expectant parents and childhood literacy efforts are efficient, effective, and well-networked

2.4 Develop performance metrics and a data program that safeguards student privacy

- ∠ Develop a set of accountability metrics to determine whether actions are leading to improved outcomes and to guide future decision-making
- ∠ Design and launch a student-level data program that can provide robust information about the effectiveness of programs and interventions while protecting the privacy of students and families; could work with a national collective impact network such as StriveTogether to develop data collection and dissemination guidelines¹
- ∠ Publicize metrics through an online “data dashboard” and communicate progress to partners, investors, and the general public through annual reports

2.5 Continue to enhance rural transit connectivity to education, training, and employment opportunities

- ∠ Support the implementation of the SoVA Regional Transportation Project to enhance the connectivity for rural residents in Halifax County and the Southern Virginia region with education, training, and employment opportunities and other amenities
- ∠ Launch an internal awareness campaign and work with social service providers and non-profits to engage individuals who could benefit from the service; work with employers to align individual work schedules around transit timetables whenever possible

¹ http://www.strivetogether.org/sites/default/files/StriveTogether_Student_Data_Privacy_Best_Practices.pdf

Economy

For decades many communities and their economic development organizations have exclusively associated “economic development” with “business recruitment.” While the recruitment of new companies is an important component of an economic development program, it is only “one leg of the stool.” In fact, employment growth is overwhelmingly driven by the other two legs – existing businesses and entrepreneurs and small businesses. The first three Key Initiatives in this Focus Area outline what best-practice business recruitment, retention, and development programs should look like in Halifax County. Additional Key Initiatives discuss three specific opportunities for economic growth: motorsports, industrial hemp, and the proposed Henrietta Lacks Life Science Center.

KEY FINDINGS FROM RESEARCH AND INPUT:

- ∠ Another major theme to emerge from the public input process was a desire among Halifax County residents for economic diversification and a greater range of job opportunities. Between 2006 and 2016, the number of jobs in the community fell by 6.2 percent compared to 5.0 percent increase nationally.
- ∠ There is evidence that prosperity in Halifax County is indeed hampered by a lack of employment opportunities. While per capita income has risen faster than the national average, an increasingly large share of this income is derived from government benefits such as Medicare and Social Security as opposed to wage income from jobs.
- ∠ As local stakeholders know well, Halifax County underwent a massive economic shift in recent decades when the legacy industries of tobacco and textiles declined. Like many small communities, government and health care are now the two largest business sectors in the county.
- ∠ That said, the community’s manufacturing sector has stabilized, adding nearly 100 jobs between 2012 and 2017 following a long period of decline. Halifax County has a strong value proposition for smaller manufacturing firms that are more sensitive to costs (e.g. labor, energy, land) than the ability to fit into a “just-in-time” production process that requires access to transportation networks and large labor markets.
- ∠ Halifax County also has a special asset base that could support growth in the motorsports industry to complement the community’s long history of motorsports events. Public input also revealed that newly legalized industrial hemp production could bring new wealth into the community.

3. ATTRACT OUTSIDE JOBS AND INVESTMENT TO HALIFAX COUNTY

Though existing businesses and new startups account for the bulk of job creation within local economies, business attraction remains an integral component of a balanced approach to economic development. The most important factor influencing a community's ability to attract new businesses is its "product" – that is, its workforce, location and connectivity to other markets, sites and buildings, place-based assets, and so on. Other Key Initiatives are focused on making improvements related to these fundamental issues such as workforce quality. Many communities also engage in economic development marketing activities. But these efforts can be expensive and standing out in a crowded marketplace is difficult. For small communities such as Halifax County, certain economic development marketing activities are unlikely to produce an acceptable return on investment. Instead, these communities can have success by developing close working relationships with the professional staffs of organizations that have large marketing budgets and "funnel" potential projects to local communities – namely state and regional economic development entities and large utilities or utility consortiums. This Key Initiative focuses on what a best-practice business attraction effort should look like for a community of Halifax County's size and type.

TACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS:

3.1 Position Halifax County to attract new jobs and investment

- ∠ Through the Industrial Development Authority (IDA), build and maintain strong working relationships with all relevant state and regional economic development partners, including project managers and other staff at the Virginia Economic Development Partnership (VEDP), the Southern Virginia Regional Alliance, and Invest Southern Virginia; also develop relationships with other key economic development stakeholders such as utilities, trade organizations, brokers and real estate development professionals, property owners, and key industry contacts
- ∠ Make regular trips to Richmond for face-to-face meetings with state level partners and seek opportunities to play host to economic development partners and key industry contacts as opportunities allow
- ∠ Leverage the staff capacity and marketing budgets for resource-intensive economic development services such as lead generation and marketing; focus local economic development resources on product development activities (See Tactical Recommendation 3.2), such as project management and existing business care (see Key Initiative 4), and limited marketing activities (e.g. building contacts related to special opportunities such as motorsports or industrial hemp)
- ∠ Continue to ensure that economic development websites and other marketing materials (e.g. limited print collateral) are attractive and regularly updated (see Best Practice #4); highlight Halifax County's available sites and buildings (both publicly and privately owned) and available incentives
- ∠ Leverage IDA staff capacity, contacts, and resources to pursue opportunities related to motorsports, industrial hemp, and the proposed Henrietta Lacks Life Science Center (see Key Initiatives 6, 7, and 8)

- ∠ Work with GO Virginia and other regional partners to pursue opportunities to enhance competitiveness for the region's targeted sectors: business services/IT data centers, advanced manufacturing and materials, high-value natural resource products, and health care

BEST PRACTICE #4: AugustaVABusiness.com (Augusta County, VA)

3.2 Seek opportunities to enhance economic development sites and buildings in Halifax County

- ∠ Ensure that the community's inventory of existing economic development sites and buildings is current and complete; determine whether existing sites and buildings are capable of quickly accommodating new development and/or end users; examine planning/zoning and other regulatory conditions, water/sewer and utility service, site access, environmental conditions, building condition, etc.
- ∠ With any needed inventory updates complete, work with state and regional economic development partners and key local stakeholders to determine whether it would be in Halifax County's interest to prepare additional "ready-to-go" development sites that would increase the community's competitiveness for economic development projects, especially the types of smaller, cost-sensitive operations for which the community is best suited
- ∠ Continue to pursue a regional industrial facility authority (RIFA) to provide water service needed to enhance the potential of development sites at the Virginia International Raceway (VIR) (see Tactical Recommendation 6.2)
- ∠ Continue to pursue the development of an IDA-owned shell building capable of quickly accommodating end users

3.3 Communicate economic development needs and return on investment to Halifax County stakeholders

- ∠ Maintain regular communication between IDA staff, elected officials, local government staff, and other key partners such as the Chamber and key local businesses; engage all relevant partners to help address barriers to business attraction and coordinate unified responses when an opportunity for a business location emerges
- ∠ Work with all relevant partners to communicate the return on investment (e.g. job growth and fiscal impact) of economic development activities to taxpayers, investors, etc. (Note: the Implementation Plan will address topics such as internal communications and metrics to measure progress and success in greater detail)

3.4 Advocate for policies that support economic development and other Key Initiatives

- ∠ Continue to convene public, private, and non-profit leaders to ensure that policy and advocacy agendas address community and economic development needs, including but not limited to those issues identified in plan (see Tactical Recommendation 1.3)
- ∠ Continue to work with GO Virginia, nearby jurisdictions, and other regional partners to explore possibilities to work collaboratively on common economic development and advocacy issues (see Tactical Recommendations 6.2 and 9.2)

4. RETAIN AND SUPPORT EXISTING BUSINESSES

Communities of all types engage in business retention and expansion (BRE) programs aimed at helping existing businesses grow and thrive. This Key Initiative is focused on assessing the community's existing BRE program and ensuring that it is aligned with national best practices. BRE is about more than conducting regular visits and maintaining positive relationships with key local employers. A successful approach requires a formal, collaborative program. No single organization can by itself address the needs and challenges of a business. Effective BRE must leverage the staff expertise and resources of multiple organizations and partners that can influence the business climate. A BRE program should seek to understand the challenges and opportunities that existing businesses face, alleviate barriers to competitiveness, identify and support businesses with plans or potential to expand, prevent existing businesses from relocation elsewhere, and identify opportunities for business recruitment based on relationships with local firms. If applicable, a community's BRE program should in no way be tied to member recruitment efforts for an organization supporting economic and business development.

TACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS:

4.1 Help local firms thrive through a best-practice business retention and expansion (BRE) program

- ∟ With the IDA and its partners, assess current existing business outreach methods to ensure that they follow best-practice standards of a professionally staffed business retention and expansion (BRE) program built around
- ∟ Continue to conduct regular in-person interviews with key local employers; seek to contact all private firms with at least 50 employees at least once in a calendar year; develop and utilize a set of questions to guide discussions and ensure that key information is collected in a standardized manner
- ∟ Utilize specialized software (such as Synchronist or ExecutivePulse) to track BRE activities and assign and manage follow-up tasks for partners; as tracking capabilities improve, work with economic development partners to identify and address consistent themes, challenges, etc. that emerge from BRE activities (see Tactical Recommendation 4.2)
- ∟ Develop and promote an annual online survey for all Halifax County businesses with fewer than 50 employees to understand the needs of small businesses that cannot be reasonably contacted through in-person interviews

4.2 Work collaboratively to address challenges and opportunities that emerge from BRE activities

- ∠ Assemble a core collaborative team including the IDA, elected and appointed officials, the Chamber and the business community, and others to address opportunities and challenges identified through BRE activities
- ∠ With the core collaborative team, establish protocols for sharing information and responding to challenges and threats, including assisting firms that are in danger of closing, downsizing, or relocating and identify specific ways in which community, economic, and workforce development partners can help employers increase their competitive positions and remove barriers to growth
- ∠ Work with all relevant partners to communicate opportunities and challenges identified through BRE work to the general public

4.3 Leverage BRE findings to identify opportunities for expansions and business attraction

- ∠ Complement economic development project activity generated by state and regional economic development partners (see Tactical Recommendation 3.1) by seeking to identify opportunities for business expansions and/or locations through BRE work
- ∠ Identify and assist existing firms that are considering adding jobs or making capital investments in Halifax County; connect firms to all applicable resources (e.g. workforce training providers, incentive programs, etc.)
- ∠ Using the relationships established through BRE activities, enlist executives, plant managers, and other key representatives from existing businesses to support business attraction efforts (e.g. through meetings during site visits); work with existing businesses to determine whether suppliers or other connected firms could benefit from locating in Halifax County

5. GROW SMALL BUSINESSES AND STARTUPS

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to supporting small businesses and startups. Large communities with deep talent and capital pools and assets such as major research universities seek to create dynamic “entrepreneurial ecosystems” that encourage export-oriented startups with high growth potential. Small communities with relatively limited resources often choose to focus on providing personalized services to individuals who wish to start and grow a wide variety of business ventures. This can include export-oriented firms with growth potential but also businesses that are likely to remain small and primarily serve local residents that can nevertheless build wealth and enhance the vitality of a community. Stakeholders in Halifax County have seen this concept in action with the SoBo Startup! program that helped launch several businesses in 2017, several of which were “lifestyle” businesses such as a café and boutique. The community has several other existing resources that can be leveraged to promote entrepreneurship and small business growth. These include a branch of the Longwood Small Business Development Center (SBDC) and the Research & Development Center for Advanced Manufacturing & Energy Efficiency (R&D CAMEE), both of which are co-located with the SVHEC. This Key Initiative entails a multifaceted approach to assisting small businesses and startups by maximizing the visibility and impact of these existing resources and potentially developing new, complementary capacity.

TACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS:

5.1 Ensure that resources for entrepreneurs and small businesses are highly visible and accessible

- ∠ Establish a website to create a “virtual front door” for prospective entrepreneurs and small business owners to access entrepreneurial and small business support services
- ∠ Promote the community’s resources and the “virtual front door” through social media and search engine optimization and leverage groups such as Halifax Young Professionals and Entrepreneurs (HYPE) for word-of-mouth marketing
- ∠ Evaluate whether additional entrepreneurial resources – i.e. the South Boston branch of the SBDC – could be co-located with R&D CAMEE and the proposed makerspace to create a single “physical front door” for entrepreneurial and small business support services in Halifax County

5.2 Co-locate a “makerspace” with the R&D CAMEE facility

- ∠ Convene public, private, and non-profit community partners, including local governments, SVHEC, the Chamber, and others to create a makerspace at the new R&D CAMEE facility at Imperial Lofts to support enterprising residents interested in turning their new product into a sustainable business
- ∠ Create a development plan for a makerspace; the development plan should: assess physical space and resource needs; identify a desired business model and corporate structure; establish desired initial programming and opportunities for potential expansion; develop an initial budget; and determine partner commitments and create a resource development strategy
- ∠ Work with VIR and other relevant stakeholders to determine how the makerspace (or R&D CAMEE more broadly) could support a stronger motorsports industry in Halifax County (see Key Initiative 6)

- ∠ Pursue outside grants and evaluate the viability of enhanced local support, such as corporate sponsorships; work with local businesses to create a program to donate depreciated or surplus equipment such as laser cutters, sign cutters, and milling machines to the facility

BEST PRACTICE #5: SparkMacon (Macon, GA)

5.3 Evaluate the feasibility of establishing a revolving load fund (RLF) to expand access to capital

- ∠ Bring together economic development and entrepreneurship professionals, local financial institutions, foundations, and other potential funding partners to identify options to establish, capitalize, and manage a fund to expand access to capital for prospective entrepreneurs who are unable to receive bank financing
- ∠ The RLF would complement existing resources such as 504 loans and traditional bank financing by assisting individuals with little or no savings or credit history and/or individuals with established ideas and business models that have yet to generate revenue
- ∠ Establish criteria and loan terms, define acceptable uses of monies, and establish a loan review committee; require companies that receive funding to seek guidance from the region's small business and entrepreneurial assistance services
- ∠ Ensure that the availability of funds is well-publicized throughout the region

5.4 Seek outside partnerships and funding to enhance services for entrepreneurs and small businesses

- ∠ Continue to seek competitive grants such as the one that funded SoBo Startup! to enhance entrepreneurial programming and aid new business formation (see Tactical Recommendation 10.4)
- ∠ Seek opportunities to work with regional partners to enhance support for entrepreneurs and small businesses throughout Southern Virginia as discussed in the GO Virginia Region 3 Growth & Development Plan

6. ADVANCE THE MOTORSPORTS INDUSTRY IN HALIFAX COUNTY

As discussed in the Community Assessment, motorsports provide Halifax County with a special and realistic opportunity to pursue economic growth. The community is home or proximate to multiple assets that give it a strong value proposition in this field, namely the South Boston Speedway (SoBo) and VIRginia International Raceway (VIR), the VIRginia Motorsport Technology Park and its specialized infrastructure, and the region's workforce development resources. Halifax County has long benefitted from playing host to motorsports events at SoBo and VIR, and partners could continue to seek to maximize revenues from visitors to the community. But Halifax County can also seek to develop a stronger motorsports industry in a rapidly evolving sector where firms are engaged in a diverse array of highly specialized activities that influence safety, reliability, efficiency, and other performance factors. In particular, VIR and its Motorsports Technology Park are differentiating assets that can offer development sites and buildings, access to a road track for performance testing, and co-location with several onsite research facilities. This Key Initiative seeks to position Halifax County as a destination for motorsports – not just visitors to events but also for firms engaged in a variety of research and development and manufacturing activities. It should be noted that by pursuing a stronger motorsports industry, Halifax County would not be foregoing opportunities to pursue other types of economic development projects; Key Initiative 4 establishes an approach to better positioning the community for a variety of potential projects. Instead, this Key Initiative seeks to leverage a special opportunity for growth afforded by a truly differentiating asset base.

TACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS:

6.1 Communicate Halifax County's value proposition for motorsports enterprises

- ∟ Work collaboratively with VIR, the IDA, and other partners to develop a clear, concise explanation of the community's value proposition for motorsports firms
- ∟ Develop a website and limited print marketing collateral (e.g. "leave behind" one-pagers) to highlight supportive assets in the county, including VIR, the VIRginia Motorsports Technology Park, and facilities such as the onsite Virginia Tech-affiliated Global Center for Automotive Performance Simulation (GCAPS)
- ∟ Ensure that relevant workforce and training programs are also featured in marketing materials (see Tactical Recommendation 6.3)
- ∟ Bring together VIR, the IDA, and other economic development partners to develop relationships with site selectors and other industry influencers that can connect prospective motorsports firms to opportunities in Halifax County; consider working with a third-party group to generate introductions if needed
- ∟ Develop a highly targeted approach to "outbound" marketing to promote Halifax County and VIR to industry professionals, e.g. through attendance at industry events and trade shows; conduct an annual evaluation of marketing activities to ensure an acceptable return on investment is being realized

6.2 Continue to pursue a regional industrial facility authority (RIFA) to provide needed infrastructure to VIR

- ∠ Continue to work with the City of Danville and Pittsylvania County to finalize a Regional Industrial Facilities Authority (RIFA) to upgrade water and sewer systems at VIR; secure commitments from local governments to fund local components of needed improvements
- ∠ Leverage local funds developed through a collaborative regional partnership to apply for a GO Virginia grant to cover remaining infrastructure costs and catalyze economic growth and diversification in Region 3

6.3 Promote and expand workforce and training resources that support the motorsports industry

- ∠ Continue to support existing education and training programs in the region that are supportive of a motorsports industry, including engineering, welding, and other programs at SVHEC, the mechatronics program at the SVHEC Career Tech Academy, and the HCPS Motorsports Academy
- ∠ Engage local motorsports firms, and other industry professionals to determine what, if any, additional education and training programs could be implemented to further support growth in motorsports

6.4 Enhance efforts to promote Halifax County as a destination for motorsports events

- ∠ Promote Halifax County as a destination for motorsports events; work with VIR, SoBo, and the Halifax County Department of Tourism to seek additional opportunities to host races, shows, and other gatherings that can increase the economic impact of motorsports in Halifax County
- ∠ Through the Department of Tourism and other partners, develop complementary event programming around events at SoBo and VIR to encourage overnight stays and tourism spending in Halifax County; develop a campaign consisting of social media, outdoor advertisements, etc. to encourage visitors to VIR to “head east” to South Boston for accommodations, dining, etc.

7. ESTABLISH HALIFAX COUNTY AS AN INDUSTRIAL HEMP CENTER

For decades, the large-scale production of industrial hemp – a fast-growing plant with a variety of commercial uses – was effectively illegal in the United States. Even in recent years as regulations began to loosen, production was still tightly controlled. In Virginia, would-be growers needed to enter into a formal partnership with a research university before applying for a license from the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. On December 20, 2018, however, the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (popularly known as the 2018 Farm Bill) was signed into law. Among other things, the bill paves the way for nationwide legalization of industrial hemp but delegates to states the broad authority to regulate the production and sale of hemp products within their borders.² Given the newness of this regulatory change, the implications for the hemp industry and the use of products containing cannabidiol (CBD) are still unclear. However, according to stakeholders, the industrial hemp industry could be an excellent opportunity for agriculture in Halifax County. Input participants said the land and growing conditions that made Southern Virginia a hub of tobacco production throughout much of its history are also well-suited to growing hemp, and some suggested that the crop could be a boom to local farmers. That said, stakeholders also noted that other states are well ahead of Virginia in exploration of industrial hemp opportunities, creating a sense of urgency to capitalize on this opportunity before the industry can flourish elsewhere. This Key Initiative is focused on establishing the community as a center for industrial hemp cultivation and processing.

TACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS:

7.1 Work collaboratively to promote industrial hemp cultivation and development in Virginia

- ∟ Convene stakeholders including the Halifax County Farm Bureau, state officials, and advocacy groups such as the Virginia Industrial Hemp Coalition to understand existing industrial hemp policies and identify any changes needed to better compete with other states and maximize the economic impact of production; advocate for policy changes as necessary (see Tactical Recommendation 3.4)
- ∟ Work with state economic development partners and other stakeholders to explore the possibility for marketing activities that would position Virginia as a destination for value-added manufacturing operations that would benefit from locating in close proximity to industrial hemp producers (see Tactical Recommendation 7.3)
- ∟ Consistent with the emphasis on high-value natural resource products in the GO Virginia Region 3 Growth & Diversification Plan, seek opportunities to partner with nearby jurisdictions on regional efforts to increase the competitiveness of Southern Virginia as a center for industrial hemp production and related economic activities

7.2 Develop resources to assist Halifax County farmers interested in cultivating industrial hemp

² “What Does the 2018 Farm Bill Mean for the Hemp and CBD Businesses?” Perkins Coie LLP. December 31, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.perkinscoie.com/en/news-insights/what-does-the-2018-farm-bill-mean-for-the-hemp-and-cbd-businesses.html>

- ∠ Develop an informational campaign and website to help prospective growers navigate the regulatory process related to industrial hemp production; consider funding subsidized legal services to help growers with initial compliance
- ∠ Continue to support the Industrial Hemp Summit in Danville; work with organizers to explore opportunities to expand the Summit into a premier industry event capable of raising the profile of Southern Virginia as a destination for firms utilizing industrial hemp

7.3 Pursue value-added manufacturers and other facilities that benefit from proximity to hemp production

- ∠ As industrial hemp production ramps up in Halifax County and its surroundings, work through the IDA and state and regional economic development partners to identify and attract businesses that would benefit from proximity to industrial hemp growers (e.g. value-added manufacturing operations where industrial hemp is a primary input)
- ∠ Pursue opportunities to develop an industrial hemp processing facility and/or related infrastructure that would support the cultivation of industrial hemp in and around Halifax County; consider incentivizing infrastructure that would deliver a return on investment by “jumpstarting” the cultivation of industrial hemp and related economic development activity

8. PURSUE THE HENRIETTA LACKS LIFE SCIENCE CENTER

In 1951, an African-American woman named Henrietta Lacks – who lived and was laid to rest in Clover – sought treatment for cervical cancer at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. When doctors took tissue samples from her body – without her or her family’s knowledge or consent – they made a remarkable discovery. Unlike cells from other individuals, Lacks’ cells lived and multiplied outside the body. These “immortal” cells, known as “HeLa” cells drawing from the first two letters of her first and last names, became one of the most important discoveries in medical history, and they are still in use in biomedical research labs today.³ In 2018, Virginia created the Henrietta Lacks Commission, a public body tasked with overseeing the development of the Henrietta Lacks Life Science Center, envisioned as a \$50 million, 200,000 square-foot, state-of-the-art medical research and treatment facility in Halifax County.⁴ This Key Initiative is premised on supporting the work of the Commission to bring this potentially transformative development to Halifax County and honor the memory of Lacks.

TACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS:

8.1 Support the work of the Henrietta Lacks Commission to resource and develop the Center

- ∟ Continue the work of the Henrietta Lacks Commission to plan and develop public, private, institutional, and philanthropic resources for the construction and operation of a biomedical cancer research and treatment center in Halifax County
- ∟ Work with Commission members to identify opportunities for the community to support development efforts, such as through a workforce development plan (see Tactical Recommendation 8.2)

8.2 Develop a conceptual framework for talent attraction and development to support the Center’s needs

- ∟ Work with Commission members, potential funding partners, and other medical research and health services professionals to determine the potential workforce needs of the Center
- ∟ Task the group focused on college and career readiness (see Tactical Recommendation 2.1) with assessing existing workforce conditions within a broader region around Halifax County to identify potential talent gaps; consider a research geography that would include portions of the Raleigh-Durham region within a reasonable commute of Halifax County
- ∟ Work with the SVHEC, HCPS, and their partners to develop plans for any needed new training programs that could be quickly activated as the Center progresses toward reality; connect to career pathways established by GO Virginia sector partnerships if relevant

³ “Henrietta Lacks Legacy Week.” Virginia Department of Health. 2018. Retrieved from: <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/health-equity/henrietta-lacks-legacy-week/>

⁴ “Henrietta Lacks Commission comes to South Boston.” The News & Record. September 27, 2018. Retrieved from: http://www.sovanow.com/index.php?/news/article/henrietta_lacks_commission_comes_to_south_boston/

- ∠ For highly specialized occupations with significant education and training requirements (e.g. research scientists), seek ways to leverage the region's proximity to one of the nation's most prominent life sciences clusters in and around the Research Triangle Park in the Raleigh-Durham region
- ∠ Work with partners such as GO Virginia and the Virginia Tobacco Region Revitalization Commission on potential incentive programs that could support the attraction of individuals with in-demand skills to Halifax County (e.g. student loan forgiveness, relocation grants, etc.)
- ∠ Include conceptual talent development plans as part of Commission's pitch to potential funders to show community commitment to supporting the facility

Community

As discussed in the Community Assessment, if Halifax County is to slow its population decline and secure a more prosperous and successful future, it must seek to better retain its existing residents who already have roots in the community. The other two Focus Areas address critical factors related to talent retention, including school facilities and efforts to grow high-quality job opportunities. But there are numerous other factors that influence the location decisions of individuals and households, and many of them are tied to quality of life and quality of place. This Focus Area is premised on making place-based improvements in Halifax County. It includes a Key Initiative related to an important community priority that emerged from public input: rural broadband. Given the expense associated with many place-based investments, it also includes Key Initiatives focused on optimizing the climate investment and pursuing resident-driven improvements that can make a big impact at a relatively low cost.

KEY FINDINGS FROM RESEARCH AND INPUT:

- ∟ Rural broadband emerged as a significant place-based concern. Input participants said that broadband speeds in more rural portions of the county are not comparable to those that are available in urbanized areas. Input participants viewed the lack of broadband as a significant hurdle for economic development.
- ∟ Stakeholders in Halifax County praised some aspects of the community's quality of life and quality of place, including the community's natural beauty and amenities such as The Prizery. But input participants expressed a desire for more opportunities for dining, shopping, and everyday socialization in their community.
- ∟ The place-based assets with the best chance to deliver quality of place enhancements are the downtown districts of Halifax and South Boston. Input participants praised the addition of new restaurants and small businesses in both districts as well as the conversion of several former tobacco warehouses and other historic buildings into loft apartments. Stakeholders also expressed support for additional potential or proposed redevelopments, such as the conversion of a historic building on Main Street into a boutique hotel.
- ∟ Stakeholders in Halifax County also noted an important link between the community's historic downtowns and entrepreneurship and small business development.

9. IMPLEMENT BROADBAND INTERNET ACCESS COUNTY-WIDE

A significant theme with respect to quality of place to emerge from research and input was the relative lack of broadband internet access in Halifax County, particularly in rural areas. According to a 2016 survey by the state's Center for Innovative Technology, 30 percent of Halifax County residents have no internet access at all and another 62 percent have insufficient service.⁵ This is consistent with feedback from the public input process, when many stakeholders said that rural portions of the county do not have access to broadband or have connection speeds that are slower than those available in more urbanized areas. Input participants were concerned that a lack of broadband access hampers the community's economic development. In particular, stakeholders said it puts high school students from low-income and/or rural households at a disadvantage, as these individuals are unable to make full use of their school-issued laptops at home. Leaders in Halifax County understand that rural broadband access is a competitive challenge and have pursued multiple potential remedies. In 2017, Halifax and Pittsylvania counties entered into agreements with SCS Broadband Internet Services for delivering affordable high-speed broadband, and the Mecklenburg Electric Cooperative (MEC) is also adding fiber in the community. In July 2018, Virginia also announced a new broadband initiative intended to serve all Virginians within 10 years.⁶ This Key Initiative reaffirms rural broadband access as a key community priority that can make Halifax County a more competitive place to live and do businesses.

TACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS:

9.1 Work with regional, state, and private-sector partners on efforts to expand rural broadband

- ∠ Support ongoing efforts of Mid-Atlantic Broadband (MBC), Mecklenburg Electric Cooperative (MEC), SCS Broadband Internet Services, and others to expand broadband access in Halifax County; continue to advance existing partnerships and, if appropriate, pursue options for expansion
- ∠ Continue to work with elected and appointed officials at the state level, including the Virginia Telecommunication Initiative (VATI) to identify funding sources for needed infrastructure
- ∠ With GO Virginia and regional partners, develop a regional approach to broadband expansion; engage MBC and Internet service providers (ISPs) to further define expansion plans and potential funding models; participate in additional studies and working groups
- ∠ Through the GO Virginia framework, evaluate and adopt incentives designed to induce ISPs to leverage MBC fiber and provide "last-mile" service; options could include "tax incentives, expedited access to easements and rights of way, and fee waivers" as prescribed in the Region 3 Growth and Diversification Strategy; adopt a regional approach to incentives

⁵ Demmitt, Jacob. "Halifax County tired of 'bandwidth exhaustion.'" The Roanoke Times. November 11, 2017. Retrieved from: https://www.roanoke.com/business/news/halifax-county-tired-of-bandwidth-exhaustion/article_13746706-c660-11e7-81b7-bfef9933c997.html

⁶ Hodge, Ashley. "Govern touts rural internet initiative, appoints two to council." The Gazette-Virginian. July 4, 2018. Retrieved from: http://www.yourgv.com/business/local_business/governor-touts-rural-internet-initiative-appoints-two-to-council/article_21bd8f84-7ef4-11e8-a25d-0b6798c225be.html

9.2 Pursue opportunities to assist low-income households with internet access

- ∠ Engage GO Virginia and regional partners to identify and implement incentives for ISPs to provide reduced or subsidized home broadband for low-income families with school-aged children; support a study to evaluate wireless broadband alternatives for school children from low-income households
- ∠ Seek to identify competitive private grants and other funds to help offset costs for low-income households; evaluate the feasibility of capitalizing a small grant fund to help cover last-mile installation costs

9.3 Leverage libraries and other facilities to provide “interim access points”

- ∠ As work to deliver broadband access to homes is underway, identify and promote existing facilities that can allow Halifax County residents to access broadband Internet connections
- ∠ Facilities could include branches of the Halifax County South Boston Public Library System as well as other public and private facilities that are open to the general public; ensure that one or more such access points is accessible to residents in northern Halifax County
- ∠ Develop an internal communications strategy to promote the availability of access points; work with HCPS, non-profits and social service providers, local businesses, and other stakeholders to disseminate information

10. OPTIMIZE THE CLIMATE FOR INVESTMENT IN DOWNTOWNS

During the public input process, stakeholders in Halifax County praised recent progress in the community's historic downtowns, including new restaurants, small businesses, and loft conversions. Residents said they would like to see continued progress in these areas to help address quality of place concerns such as a need for more everyday places to shop, dine, and socialize. Historic downtowns throughout the country have revitalized in recent decades, and while much of this phenomenon can be attributed to shifting market preferences, many successful communities have engaged in proactive, organized, and professional downtown revitalization campaigns. In Halifax County, Destination Downtown South Boston (DDSB) is a non-profit organization that participates in Virginia's Main Street Organization program that seeks to revitalize downtowns. Local officials have also taken an active role in working with prospective private investors interested in downtown projects to identify potential incentives, navigate grant and tax credit programs, and ensure progress of projects. Input participants said the Imperial Lofts project, in particular, could not have become a reality without the Town of South Boston providing a portion of the financing. This Key Initiative focuses primarily on continuing to provide excellent service and assistance to private investors interested in investing in Downtown Halifax and/or Downtown South Boston. This will allow the community to take advantage of potential opportunities that emerge and establish a reputation as a good and profitable place to invest.

TACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS:

10.1 Communicate opportunities for downtown development to internal and external audiences

- ∠ Operate and regularly update “one-stop” websites for Downtown Halifax and Downtown South Boston to highlight incentive offerings, available sites and buildings, and a clear point of contact for development inquiries
- ∠ Develop an inventory of development and redevelopment opportunities in Downtown Halifax and Downtown South Boston
- ∠ Task professional staff from Town governments, DDSB, and the IDA with collaborating to develop relationships with downtown property owners and real estate development professionals both inside and outside the community, especially those with extensive experience working in small communities and/or on historic redevelopment projects
- ∠ Work with stakeholders in the Town of Halifax to determine whether the community's downtown should be represented by a non-profit organization participating in Virginia's Main Street Organization program

10.2 Ensure that incentives are optimized to promote downtown development

- ∠ Evaluate existing incentives for downtown development and redevelopment to determine whether adjustments or enhancements are needed
- ∠ Assess the feasibility and desirability of establishing a tax increment financing (TIF) district to utilize in the event that the community has an opportunity to attract a major “game changer” private capital investment (e.g. a major employer that would like to locate in a small downtown district)

10.3 Promote additional housing options in and near downtown districts

- ∠ Seek to engage private investors and developers who could be interested in creating new housing units in downtown districts, either through new construction or the repurposing of an existing building; when appropriate, consider leveraging public incentives to catalyze projects and generate a return on investment for residents
- ∠ As part of the inventory of development and redevelopment opportunities proposed in Tactical Recommendation 10.2, catalogue “second-floor” spaces (primarily in Downtown South Boston) that could be converted into housing units; work to identify potential investors and developers and connect interested parties to all incentive opportunities, including historic tax credits, etc.
- ∠ Continue to pursue the development of Poplar Creek Homes, which could add up to 25 housing units for low- and moderate income households near Downtown South Boston; continue to support the Town of South Boston, Southside Outreach, and other state and local partners in pursuing “Phase 2” options to offer child care and workforce training at the site
- ∠ Work with all jurisdictions in Halifax County to pursue competitive grants and similar programmatic offerings from the Virginia Community Development Corporation (VCDC), the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD), etc. to expand the supply of high-quality housing for seniors and low- and middle-income households; evaluate the feasibility of participating in DHCD’s Acquire, Renovate, Sell (ARS) program to improve existing housing stock to benefit low- to moderate-income first-time homebuyers and improve quality of place in Halifax County
- ∠ Support the efforts of the Southside Outreach Group, the Town of South Boston, Southern Virginia Higher Education Center and Tri-County Community Action Agency to advance a 30-unit low- and moderate-income development in close proximity to Downtown South Boston; pursue opportunities to co-locate a childcare facility at the development

10.4 Continue to promote small “lifestyle” businesses in downtown districts

- ∠ Build upon the success of SoBo Startup! and promote the development of small “lifestyle” businesses to enhance the vibrancy of its downtowns
- ∠ Leverage the small business support resources described in Key Initiative 5 and continue to pursue competitive grants and other resources to assist entrepreneurs and business owners with training and startup costs
- ∠ Promote downtown small businesses to internal and external audiences through organizations such as DDSB, the Chamber, and the Halifax County Department of Tourism

11. PROMOTE RESIDENT-DRIVEN PLACE IMPROVEMENTS

The public input process revealed that Halifax County residents desire numerous quality of place improvements in their community. In addition to the desired downtown development discussed in Key Initiative 9, stakeholders said they would like to see enhanced parks and recreation activities, better activation of public spaces, beautification efforts to counteract blight and litter, and so on. As previously referenced, however, local government resources in Halifax County are limited and the community has several urgent needs for capital investment (notably with respect to Halifax County High School and rural broadband). But enhancing quality of place does not necessarily require major expenditures. In fact, this Key Initiative identifies numerous “resident-driven” ways to improve quality of place in Halifax County. For instance, the community could seek to enhance volunteer cleanup initiatives and embrace a do-it-yourself or “DIY” approach to improving the public realm. This is often carried out by using low-cost, temporary measures such as art installations, pop-up shops, creative street furniture installations, low-cost “complete streets” improvements, and so on.⁷ These efforts could be complemented by seeking to identify a limited number of permanent, high-impact place enhancements and seeking private, philanthropic, or other outside resources to implement them. Finally, this Key Initiative includes a recommendation focused on making Halifax County an “age-friendly” community. Halifax County has an aging population. More than one in five residents are aged 65 over and an additional 29 percent of the community’s population will reach retirement age in the next two decades. There are numerous ways in which communities can work to address the needs of aging populations, and many are tied to quality of place – e.g. housing, transportation, walkability, activities, etc. Fortunately, the AARP offers a program, the Network of Age-Friendly Communities, that residents can pursue – in partnership with local governments and service providers – to address these and other issues.

TACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS:

11.1 Create a volunteer group to plan and carry out resident-driven quality of place enhancements

- ∟ Convene stakeholders to form a volunteer group dedicated to finding creative, low-cost and/or mostly privately funded solutions to improving quality of place in Halifax County; members could include stakeholders from the public sector, creative professionals (e.g. architects and designers), representatives from the business community, and other interested and enthusiastic citizens.
 - Note: this partnership could be a component of a broader volunteer framework dedicated to the implementation of the full Community Strategic Plan; this volunteer structure will be discussed in further detail in the Implementation Plan
- ∟ Task the group with managing the additional Tactical Recommendations in this Key Initiative and identifying other creative approaches to improving quality of place in Halifax County; complement the group’s efforts with professional staff support to assist with meeting planning, volunteer and program coordination, etc.

⁷ Pfeifer, Laura. “The Planner’s Guide to Tactical Urbanism.” McGill School of Urban Planning. 2013. Retrieved from: <https://reginaurbanecology.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/tuguide1.pdf>

11.2 Establish an ongoing “community cleanup” initiative to beautify Halifax County

- ∠ Promote regular volunteer cleanup efforts aimed at beautifying Halifax County; this could entail increasing the publicity for and/or expanding the scope of ongoing cleanup efforts organized by the Halifax County Improvement Council (HCIC)
- ∠ Encourage private businesses, non-profits, service and faith-based organizations, public agencies, and others to form volunteer teams to participate in beautification efforts
- ∠ Identify an initial set of high-profile areas that would benefit from cleanup efforts, such as the “Riverside” area and key “crossroads” areas throughout Halifax County; could coordinate cleanup efforts in conjunction with “DIY” place-based improvements (see Tactical Recommendation 11.3)
- ∠ Promote cleanup efforts and successes through traditional and social media, word of mouth, and participating organizations with volunteer teams

11.3 Utilize a “DIY” approach to developing temporary, low-cost quality of place improvements

- ∠ Pursue low-cost, temporary quality of place enhancements in Halifax County by adopting a do-it-yourself or “DIY” model; engage the Better Block Foundation or a similar organization to develop a toolkit for implementing improvements
- ∠ Pursue enhancements such as pop-up businesses, enhanced lighting, art installations, café seating, temporary bike lanes, wider sidewalks, and so on; target improvements to highly visible and/or denser areas of the community such as Downtown Halifax, Downtown South Boston, and key rural “crossroads” areas

BEST PRACTICE #6: Better Block Program (New Kensington, PA)

11.4 Identify and privately resource a limited number of permanent quality of place projects

- ∠ Through the volunteer group in Tactical Recommendation 11.1, convene key public, private, and non-profit stakeholder to identify, prioritize, resource, and pursue a limited number of “major” quality of place improvements
- ∠ Engage elected and appointed officials and public-sector staff when necessary to advance a project (e.g. upgrading a sports field in a public park)
- ∠ Potential projects that emerged from the public input process include enhancing youth sports fields and promoting permanent art installations, wayfinding signage, and other “public realm” improvements to Downtown Halifax and Downtown South Boston
- ∠ Ensure that the number of projects is manageable for volunteers and supporting staff to effectively advance; this would likely entail selecting one project to complete within a given 12-24 month timeframe

- ∠ Seek out competitive grants, private donations, and other monies to fund improvements; leverage the expertise and assistance of local foundations and non-profits to help apply for grants and/or conduct a fundraising process

11.5 Seek to designate Halifax County as an “age-friendly community”

- ∠ Pursue membership in the AARP Network of Age-Friendly Communities in order to “advance efforts to help people live easily and comfortably in their homes and communities as they age”
- ∠ Designate a working group under the volunteer framework established in Tactical Recommendation 11.1 to facilitate the work; this would require partnering with the public sector, the local AARP chapter, and other relevant partners
- ∠ Assess the community’s needs based on AARP guidelines and begin completing steps to join the Network; the first step entails completing a membership application and obtaining a written pledge from the community’s executive
- ∠ Work with all relevant stakeholders to address specific needs identified through the needs assessment; ensure that any issues related to quality of place are connected to the other recommendations in this and other Key Initiatives

BEST PRACTICE #7: AARP Network of Age-Friendly Communities (nationwide)

CONCLUSION

Leaders in Halifax County have developed a bold yet focused strategic framework that will guide the community's collective actions in the years to come. The Community Strategic Plan represents a consensus blueprint through which Halifax County will act to raise levels of prosperity, increase economic opportunity, and improve quality of life for all current and future residents. It also represents an opportunity for the community to shape its own future. As author and Harvard Business School professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter once wrote, "Change is disturbing when it is done to us, exhilarating when it is done by us." Long-time residents of Halifax County have seen firsthand the challenges and hardships that were brought about by fundamental shifts in the global economy. But in recent years, the community has also worked proactively and collaboratively to effect positive change. This Community Strategic Plan will allow this work to continue into the future. But even the best strategy requires a plan to ensure its successful activation. Upon Steering Committee approval of this near-final document, the process will formally move into its final phase – the development of an Implementation Plan that will outline how the community will put these ideas into action.

APPENDIX: BEST PRACTICES

#1: YES FOR MISSOULA SCHOOLS (MISSOULA COUNTY, MT)

In Missoula County (population 116,130), critical facility maintenance at the county's public schools had been put off for decades, and its school buildings were in desperate need of modernization and repair. The average age of the county's school buildings was 57 years, and many had been built more than 100 years ago. In response, two school bonds were put on the November 2015 ballot. The bonds would generate a total of \$158 million to pay for the necessary building improvements and technology infrastructure upgrades at each of the 17 schools in the county.

In order to get enough support for the bonds and voters voting yes, an organized campaign was launched and a top PR firm was hired. The Citizens Committee, Invest in Missoula Schools, led the effort and organized hundreds of resident volunteers to spread the word and secure votes. The two bonds also received endorsements from key groups such as the Missoula Area Chamber of Commerce, the Missoula Organization of Realtors, and all of the local unions, among others. Overall, there was a broad coalition of supporters which included more than 500 community leaders, business owners, and elected officials that publicly endorsed the bonds and donated time and financial support to ensure that all voters were properly informed about the school facility needs.

The Chamber was vocal in its support and its Board of Directors voted unanimously to support both bonds while also encouraging its members to give their endorsement for the bonds. The Chamber's advocacy center website listed a rundown of school facility needs and other literature to educate individuals about the bonds. The Board Chair and past Board Chair also co-wrote a guest column in the local newspaper titled, "High-quality schools help drive local economy: It's time to invest in our schools." In it, they called on voters to invest in the community, its children, and its future. They also underscored the importance that quality schools have on the economy both from the standpoint of a skilled workforce and in terms of talent attraction stating that many professionals assess the public schools before deciding to relocate their children to Missoula.

In November 2015, local voters passed the \$70 million high school bond and \$88 million elementary school bond, and Missoula County Public Schools secured the necessary funds to pay for local school maintenance, renovations, remodelling, technology upgrades, and security updates.

#2 FINANCIAL AID SATURDAYS (AUSTIN, TX)

austinchamber.com/education-talent/college-ready-now/financial-aid-saturdays

The Austin Chamber recognized that much of the region's highly educated population was the result of immigration for high-technology sector jobs and University of Texas–Austin enrollment. In addition, while higher education enrollment increases were keeping pace with overall population growth in the Austin metro, degree attainment would need to be double in order to fill current and future demands for educated workers. With the support of three local school districts, six higher education institutions, and 12 community organizations and companies, the Austin Chamber developed the 20,010 by 2010 program to boost local higher education

enrollment by 30 percent over 48 months. The goal was to grow total regional enrollment in institutions of higher education by 20,010 by 2010.

Financial Aid Saturdays continued the legacy of the 20,010 program by providing free assistance to Central Texas high school seniors, prospective and current college students, and parents and guardians needing help to complete federal and state financial aid applications. The Chamber organized and trained volunteers to make calls, answer questions, and walk students and their families through the process of applying for financial aid in face-to-face events held on Saturday. In the first phase of the program, the Chamber's more than 200 volunteers assisted over 500 families in filing FAFSA applications. A series of Financial Aid Saturdays events are now held annually during the college-application season.

Due to the success of Financial Aid Saturdays, the Austin Chamber created the Direct-To-College Achievement plan, a multi-chamber, multi-school district, and multi-business compact that sought to enroll 70 percent of Central Texas' Class of 2016 directly in a higher education institution. The Chamber estimates that approximately 88 percent of the student body enrolled in nine school districts participating in the program will need to submit a financial aid application in order to achieve their goal.

#3: GREATER GRADS (OKLAHOMA, OK)

[*greatergrads.com*](http://greatergrads.com)

Greater Grads is an initiative of the Greater Oklahoma City Chamber's Education and Workforce Development division. It launched in 2006 to build Oklahoma City's talent base by connecting Oklahoma graduates – a vital component of the City's future workforce – with employers in the Oklahoma City region. These connections will help Oklahoma City's flourishing economy, creating even more opportunities in the years to come. Upon recognizing that the Oklahoma City region was experiencing brain drain and that it is home to over 120,000 college students every year – with regional higher education enrollment as large as Boston or Philadelphia – the Chamber launched a targeted effort necessary to focus those students on opportunities available to the locally. The program consists of three parts:

- ∠ InternOKC Summer Program: Interns can be enrolled in this four-week series that includes a kick-off session and four lunch sessions that highlight the benefits of living and working in the Oklahoma City region. This fosters peer networking and provides resources to help students transition from college to career.
- ∠ Greater Grads Career Fair: The career fair is held each spring with more than 100 recruiters from local companies. A link on the Greater Grads website provides attendees with resume and interviewing tips to maximize their success and efficiently utilize the time of participating employers.
- ∠ Website for graduates and employers: This website focuses on promoting Oklahoma City to recent college graduates and young professionals and connecting them with jobs available at local businesses.

In just the first six months of the site's launch, traffic increased by 300 percent. Site data shows that the average length of stay is 10 minutes, which is 400 percent above Greater Grad's goal of two minutes (generally

considered the standard benchmark for successful sites). Ten internships were posted on GreaterGrads.com at its launch; now the website features over 100 during peak intern hiring periods. A year after Greater Grads' debut, a partnership was formed with the Alliance of Emerging Professionals (AEP), Oklahoma City's young professionals group. These recent college graduates returned to their campuses to promote the Greater Grads program and website to college students during monthly AEP social events. Greater Grads is one of the primary programs of the Greater Oklahoma City Chamber's Education and Workforce Development department and a direct tactic of the Chamber's economic development strategy. It is staffed by a full-time manager of education and outreach programs.

#4: AUGUSTAVABUSINESS.COM (AUGUSTA COUNTY, VA)

augustaVAbusiness.com

Augusta County's 2016 redesign of its economic development website is a living extension of the County's economic development efforts. The site offers real-time accessibility for industrial prospects, site selection consultants, existing or new businesses looking to build or expand, small business, and entrepreneurs. Augusta County's growth, agricultural foundation, workforce, location and access, and speed-to-market as well as educational and healthcare systems all influence the positioning statement – "Augusta County, VA: where industrial growth meets exceptionally beautiful living."

Augusta County Economic Development won a Gold Excellence in Economic Development Award for its website, augustaVAbusiness.com, a project in the category of General Purpose Website of the International Economic Development Council (IEDC) in 2017. The website provides all of the necessary information on starting, locating, and expanding a business in the county, such as sites and buildings, incentives, demographics, and small business resources. Additionally, there is information on quality of life and target industries. Its resources include downloadable infographics, overviews, and reports with relevant information on the workforce, target sectors, transportation, and overall key indicators. Users are also able to make customized reports that compile the requested information into one seamless PDF.

WHY AUGUSTA COUNTY



HAPPY & TALENTED WORKFORCE

Our skilled workforce enjoys exceptional livability



AGRICULTURE

We are the second largest agriculture producer in VA with a vertical linkage between suppliers and buyers



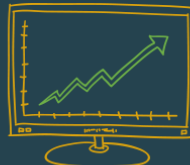
SPEED-TO-MARKET

Speed-to-market can be measured in days, not months



LOCATION & ACCESS

Mid-Atlantic location in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, where I-81 and I-64 converge



GROWTH

\$200+ million in investment in the past three years



LOW COST OF DOING BUSINESS

Low tax rates and labor costs below the national average

#5: SPARKMACON (MACON, GA)

sparkmacon.com

In 2014, the Middle Georgia Regional Commission brought together public and private leaders to create a makerspace that would be the first of its kind in Central Georgia. A makerspace is a physical space dedicated to enabling users to affordably utilize design software, 3-D printers, and other production-oriented tools to create and enhance commercial products and artworks for market or as a hobby. SparkMacon was launched in November 2014 following a grant from the Georgia Technology Authority (utilizing stimulus funds) and a successful online crowdfunding campaign. It seeks to engage freelancers, startups, and entrepreneurs by meeting “every stage of entrepreneurship, from ideation to prototyping to manufacturing.” SparkMacon works on a membership basis, with levels as low as \$20 per month, and also offers classes and hosts events to allow access to the facility. The space began on Cherry Street in Downtown Macon but is in the process of a second crowdfunding campaign to launch “SparkMacon 2.0” in a new space in the Macon-Bibb Industrial Park.

#6: BETTER BLOCK PROGRAM (NEW KENSINGTON, PA)

betterblock.org

Borrowing from core principles developed by the Better Block Foundation, community residents of New Kensington held their first Better Block event in May 2015. The inaugural event hosted a wide array of activities including live entertainment, pop-up shops, food and street vendors, and special events in existing commercial space. According to Better Block New Kensington, approximately 2,000 individuals visited the downtown area of New Kensington during the inaugural event. While the event is held on a single day of the year, Better Block New Kensington has had a lasting impact on the city's downtown area. Since its first event in 2015, 10 new businesses have opened in downtown storefronts, attracted by the renewed excitement and attention that downtown New Kensington received due to the Better Block program.

The Better Block Foundation is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to educating, equipping, and empowering communities and their leaders to reshape and reactivate built environments in order to promote healthy and vibrant neighborhoods.