

Section 1

Extending Past Planning Efforts

It is critical that Pear River County's economic development vision and strategy build upon the most recent strategic planning efforts locally and regionally. The two most important include: 1) a *Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) for 2007-2012* completed at the regional level by the Southern Mississippi Planning and Development District, and *Building Pearl River County's Future, A Strategic Plan for Pearl River County*, administered by Partners for Pearl River County which was last updated in July, 2008.

An overview of the key goals, projects, and programs of these efforts are consolidated below.

Southern Mississippi CEDS

Completing a comprehensive economic development strategy (CEDS) is required by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Economic Development Administration (EDA) for those regions seeking federal financial assistance under EDA's Public Works or Economic Adjustment Assistance Program. Coordination with the major goals and projects identified in the region's CEDS will enhance the County's options for financing economic development efforts.

The EDA describes the program as follows:

A comprehensive economic development strategy (CEDS) is designed to bring together the public and private sectors in the creation of an economic roadmap to diversify and strengthen regional economies. The CEDS should analyze the regional economy and serve as a guide for promoting regional goals and objectives, developing and implementing a regional plan of action, and identifying investment priorities and funding sources. A CEDS integrates a region's human and physical capital planning in the service of economic development. Integrated economic development planning provides the flexibility to adapt to global economic conditions and fully utilize the region's unique advantages to maximize economic opportunity for its residents by attracting the private investment that creates jobs for the region's residents. A CEDS must be the result of a continuing economic development planning process developed with broad-based and diverse public and private sector participation, and must set forth the goals and objectives necessary to solve the economic development problems of the region and clearly define the metrics of success. Finally, a CEDS provides a useful benchmark by which a regional economy can evaluate opportunities with other regions in the national economy.

<http://www.eda.gov/PDF/CEDSFlyer081706.pdf>

The Southern Mississippi Planning and Development District (SMPDD) is an organization representing 15 counties in Southern Mississippi. The committee's analysis of economic and demographic data for the region, coupled with input from local economic development personnel defined "strategic findings" for the conditions in the region. Some of the most important findings are:

- Decreases in the population have occurred mainly in the population under 34 years old. There are indicators that show the District is losing its younger population and there should be some consideration in finding ways to retain and perhaps recruit a younger population and workforce in South Mississippi. A regional solution should be considered to address this problem and recruit or retain this working-age population.
- Local economic developers report that quality of life is the most important factor in recruiting workers, not necessarily money. They must promote quality of life and ensure that the infrastructure is in place to allow for high speed internet and other amenities that are no longer considered luxuries but instead necessities.
- Workforce participation rates are a concern of local economic developers. There appears to be a number of people who choose not to work, are not on public assistance and are not in school. Though hard to quantify, there is a population of citizens who simply are disengaged from the workforce and choose not to participate. It has been suggested that local economic developers should transition from recruiting new companies to creating new jobs or expanding existing industries based on the workforce that is available.
- There should be a focus on adult education and job training to better prepare the workforce and pull families out of poverty. The region should concentrate on attracting higher paying jobs, not just new jobs.
- There is a need to foster entrepreneurship and create support systems for new business in the District.
- The region should work together to maintain an available skilled workforce to support the clusters (see CEDS report for a discussion), improve access to venture capital, promote research and development resources that support the clusters, create a culture of entrepreneurship and innovation, consider shared training facilities and maintain a positive, supportive business climate.
- Access to broadband technology is hard for the rural communities in the region to fund, so they are somewhat at a competitive disadvantage.
- The insurance cost for both homeowners and commercial businesses has seen a shocking increase since Hurricane Katrina. The cost of doing business, therefore, has increased for local business people and citizens have less disposable income to spend in the region.

The CEDS committee accepted ideas submitted via a formal survey of community leaders and public comments on the draft CEDS posted on the SMPDD website. The following goals and objectives were defined:

Goal 1: Be recognized as a region that thinks and works together regardless of geographic boundaries.

- Act as a contingency hub that will ensure commerce continues to flow and expedite recovery in the event of natural, political or economic disasters or downturns.
- Develop an effective information dissemination system that will lessen the negative impacts that may be caused by business interruption.
- Address the lack of housing, especially affordable housing, workforce housing and rental housing in the Hurricane Katrina-impacted areas of the region.
- Encourage cities and counties to implement cooperative marketing programs that benefit the entire region, recognizing the ability of metro and micro areas to draw more interest.

Goal 2: Create and nurture a culture of entrepreneurship and innovation.

- Coordinate financial assistance programs and support systems for small business.
- Monitor and analyze the retail sector. Encourage and facilitate downtown development programs.
- Support entrepreneurship classes in the public school grades 7-12 curriculum.
- Partner with community colleges and four-year institutions to encourage new business start-ups, including the use of incubators.
- Support and develop programs that improve access to venture capital.
- Promote the research and development resources available throughout the region.

Goal 3: Create new and expand existing economic development programs that will lead to the creation of new jobs, additional wealth, higher wages and a better quality of life for the region.

- Improve the water and sewer infrastructure necessary to support business expansion and creation.
- Support the development and growth of airports and seaports in the region including access to and from by rail and truck.
- Empower short-line railroads that serve the rural communities to improve service.
- Support road and highway programs that will improve the transportation network in the region.
- Encourage Mississippi Department of Transportation to lay conduit for broadband communications in all new roads.

- Encourage county and city water associations to lay conduit for broadband communications along new sewer and water projects.
- Support the standardization of policies and regulations for the water districts in the unincorporated areas.
- Explore alternatives to landfills in the region.
- Support the expansion and recruitment of cluster industries in the region.
- Develop financially feasible industrial, technology and business parks in the region.
- Support tourism-related industries that not only bring outside dollars to the region but also serve as amenities that are important to the quality of life of area residents and potential new business.
- Promote quality of life as a regional amenity to potential workers.
- Prepare comprehensive plans, strategic plans and zoning ordinances.

Goal 4: Develop and support a long-range workforce development program that will increase workforce participation rates, encourage educational excellence and train the workforce of the future.

- Develop programs to retain and recruit a younger population to ensure a sufficient number of people of workforce age.
- Implement a parental education campaign promoting technical/vocational careers.
- Support K-12 programs that instill work ethic and a values system in the public education system in an effort to break the culture of entitlement.
- Address the engagement issue (lack of participation) that exists in current workforce training programs.
- Address cultural, language and other barriers that may exist with the in-migration of the Hispanic population into the workforce.
- Improve job training programs to reduce the potential mismatch between job skills and jobs available.

The CEDS also identified an action plan. The following are items particularly relevant to economic development in Pearl River County and the Southern Mississippi region:

- Create an environment that promotes the expansion of existing industry, the attraction of new industry and the creation of quality jobs for South Mississippi.

- Support and create a strong retail and service entrepreneurship that will foster downtown, commercial and tourism development.
- Facilitate growth and enhance public health, safety and welfare by providing the highest level of infrastructure and community services available, thereby improving overall quality of life in the region.
- Promote foreign trade opportunities by encouraging exports of local products and sponsoring expanded communication between potential markets.

By incorporating these CEDS goals and plans, Pearl River County will be in a good position to seek the assistance of SMPDD in locating and securing funding for programs the County may choose to launch.

The Pearl River County Strategic Plan and Leadership Initiative

The Pearl River County Strategic Plan and Leadership Initiative was launched in November 1999 with a goal of creating an opportunity for citizens in Pearl River County to enhance the capacity of the community, create a vision for the future and to map the navigational chart to success.

A survey of Pearl River County businesses in was completed in January 2001, and community workshops were scheduled and task force teams collected information, defined problems, developed ideal future conditions, defined goals, developed strategies and developed action plans. Teams finished the planning in November. A one week leadership retreat was held. The document summarizing this effort is *Building Pearl River County's Future: A Strategic Plan for Pearl River County*. The plan is currently be administered by Partners for Pearl River. A copy of the document's July 2008 version can be reviewed at <http://www.partners.ms/strategic%20plan.htm>

The plan is based on a process entitled, "Moving from Vision to Action." This process considers community development based upon six building blocks. The three blocks that relate to economic development are:

Physical Infrastructure - "Connect the community with distant markets, people and education options; ensure public health and safety"; **Jobs** - "Build the economic base to create larger numbers of higher quality jobs", and **People** - "Create a high-skill, high-value workforce."

The **Physical Infrastructure Task Force's** summary evaluation of the conditions in the county is reported as:

Strengths

- Natural beauty and available land for development
- Natural gas pipelines

- “Smart” schools wired for internet access
- PRCC is a virtual community college
- Highway and rail access is available
- Two airports within the county
- Subdivision regulations are in place

Weaknesses

- Lack of a unified vision and mission
- No land use plan or capital facilities plan in place
- Water lines in many rural areas are too small for fire protection
- Inadequate striping on roads create safety hazards

Threats

- Lower property values caused by uncontrolled growth
- Public not receptive to land use regulations
- Clean water regulations may cause water companies to turn over management to utilities for a fee
- Community water systems opposed to unified county system

Critical Threats

- Perception of a north/south social split in the county
- Growth and lack of planning
- Loss of ownership of large tracts and parcels of land Opportunities
- Distribution hub for region
- Telecommunication exist to meet industry needs
- Regional landfill is adequate, but need to find other alternatives
- Markets for electricity expanding due to deregulation

The **People Task Force** focused primarily on academics, but identified as a strength the PRCC Workforce Development Training Center.

The **Jobs Task Force** described the conditions in the county as:

Strengths

- Access to transportation and highway system
- Excellent schools
- Desirable place to live
- Competitive power rates

Weaknesses

- Limited financial support for economic development
- No major industrial parks
- Lack of “basic” jobs

Threats

- Lack organized economic development
- Lack of local incentives
- Attitude of status quo
- Bedroom community
- Low sense of community self-esteem

Opportunities

- Right to work state
- Strategic planning effort
- Tourism development
- Polymer based industries
- Reappraisal of property
- Collaboration between PRCD and Chambers
- Expanding to support Louisiana and Gulf Coast businesses
- PRCC provides entrepreneurial training

Following the evaluation of conditions, the three task forces developed strategies for their areas.

The **Physical Infrastructure Task Force** offered these goals:

- Promote minimum standards for buildings in Pearl River County
- Improve water and wastewater system to accommodate growth
- Improve Roads and Road Maintenance
- Create a community that is resistant to threats of Natural Disaster

The **People Task Force** provided goals and strategies for improving the educational system (student attendance, parental involvement, Early Childhood development, and adult literacy) and a goal of using Pearl River Community College (PRCC) to prepare, develop and train the workforce for current and future business and commercial entities in Pearl River County by surveying business and industry needs and marketing PRCC's Workforce Development Program. And at some point in the future, create a Workforce Training Consortium.

The **Jobs Task Force** recommended the following goals be considered:

- Develop an economic development focus best suited for Pearl River County and develop a plan and funding for implementation
- Develop a workforce alliance to analyze workforce needs for Pearl River County's economy today and those needs crucial for our future economy. The alliance will organize workforce development activities region-wide to secure that Pearl River County is positioned with an active skilled workforce for the years to come
- Establish a millage from the Pearl River County Board of Supervisors and promote fundraising activities that will not compete with currently promoted events.
- Promote Partners for Pearl River County liaison office at the Stennis Space Center to better inform and align county assets with those of Stennis.
- Develop a united economic development program that will include all organizations, including public, private and social interest groups
- Develop a Countywide Industrial park to serve the business needs of Pearl River County
- Develop a Pearl River County enterprise development center

Section 2

Program Recommendations

The current economic profile of Pearl River County can be summarized with a few key points:

- The population of the county is growing and expected to continue to increase.
- The population growth is mainly for the older populations (44 and over) and persons less likely to be a part of the work force. The county is trending toward becoming a retirement setting.
- Per capita income is 19% below the state average and 39% below the national average. Those statistics are expected to grow at a rate of only 1.49% per year over the next 5 years and average household income at a lower 1.30% per year.
- The business firms in the county are mostly small and over 90% have fewer than 20 employees.
- Job growth in the county continues and the need to commute out of county for jobs has lessened. Still over 40% of the workforce commutes out of the county. Most new jobs are in government, retail trade, accommodations and food service, and education.
- Average wages paid in the county are 27% below average Mississippi wages and 46% below the national average and Real (adjusted for inflation) average earnings per job have not significantly increased in the past 30 years.

Pearl River County, by comparison to the state and the nation, is not a prosperous county. Yet the population continues to grow. One likely reason for this continued growth is the lifestyle choices offered in Pearl River County that are attractive to a number of demographic groups.

Economic prosperity is a healthy and expanding business community, offering quality employment opportunities and generous wages and benefits, and paying local taxes to support an improving infrastructure, and without lowering the sense of place or quality of life of all citizens of the county. To improve the economic prosperity of the county, the community and its leaders should consider goals that encourage and seek coordination and cooperation between the County, local and regional organizations, and private sector. To help facilitate this coordination, the following goals and policies provide a guiding framework for the County to align with the efforts of local agencies and businesses as well as surrounding counties:

Goal 1: Create an economic development culture that encourages inclusivity, multi-scale collaboration, and outreach to other entities in the region and the state.

Implementation Activities

- Develop programs that will include all organizations in the county, including public, private and social interest groups.
- Partner with local businesses, industry groups, and neighboring counties in cooperative marketing programs.
- Maintain involvement with state and regional groups to keep abreast of programs, sources of funding, and opportunities to working together to promote the county and the region.
- Identify regional collaboration opportunities with the MS Gulfcoast Alliance, Mississippi South, Inc., and Southern Mississippi Planning and Development District.
- Coordinate with the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) 2007-2012 for joint funding/financing of economic development projects with regional scope.

Goal 2: Promote a network of services that will support the growth and prosperity of Pearl River County's existing business sector and will attract both entrepreneurs and successful established companies from outside the county.

Implementation Activities

- Develop industrial, technology and business parks in the region.
- Promote quality of life as an amenity to potential workers and business owners.
- Support a strong retail and service sector that will foster downtown, commercial and tourism development.
- Coordinate financial assistance programs and support systems for small business.
- Support local businesses by offering advantages in competitive public contracts for goods and services.
- Partner with the Chamber of Commerce and other organizations to publicize and celebrate the opening of new businesses in the county.

Goal 3: Develop the physical infrastructure required to support the growth and vitality of the region's economy.

Implementation Activities

- Improve water, wastewater systems, roads, and road maintenance to accommodate growth.
- Encourage the expansion of broadband communications to all areas in the county.
- Encourage the development of affordable workforce housing.

Goal 4: Develop and support an effective workforce program that will increase workforce job skills and wages and attract employers to the county.

Implementation Activities

- Partner with Pearl River Community College to help design and deliver an effective workforce development program.
- Seek input from the business community on workforce training needs.
- Create a method for providing information about and access to short-term training available in the county.
- Develop a workforce task force to analyze workforce needs and organize workforce development activities.

Goal 5: Expand the community services and amenities that can enhance quality of life and preserve community values in order to attract and retain business investment.

Implementation Activities

- Partner with local and regional community services organizations to identify collaborative opportunities to design new community services and amenities offerings.
- Form a working group of leaders from the local business community who are willing to focus on quality of life and community values as economic development from a strategic perspective.
- Identify the key indicators of current and future quality of life in Pearl River County so that progress can be measured.

Section 3

Implementation Management

To achieve the goals above, it is recommended that the County implement the following next steps:

Dedicated staff time – select and train a full time staff member focused on local program management and regional/state coordination is key to ensuring the consistent effort needed for success.

Economic Development Task Force – comprised of business leaders across key sectors, the Task Force will add perspective and strategic experience that can effectively guide staff efforts and provide wise counsel to the Board of Supervisors.

Once the staff resources and Task Force are in place, it is recommended that the Board of Supervisors develop an annual work plan with quarterly milestones. The staff member will be responsible for execution of workplan tasks and reporting to the Task Force and Board of Supervisors.

Section 4

Funding Programs

There are many sources of funding for well designed programs for local economic development efforts, ranging from local fundraising to state and federal programs. It is recommended that the County gain on-going and cost free funding assistance from the Southern Mississippi Planning and Development District (SMPDD) staff. SMPDD is the official liaison with the Economic Development Administration (EDA) and informs the EDA on the status of District programs, projects, activities and related needs that may qualify for EDA participation. They will review potential projects for EDA funding, facilitate the pre-application and application phase, and perform project administration on a contract basis.

The SMPDD also coordinates networking between federal, state, regional and local agencies as it relates to the funding of economic development projects and other planning activities. They will provide the Pearl River County agency or organization research on public and private funding opportunities based on county needs assessment, provide application assistance and project administration for Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program and other funding programs that may be identified, and serve as the regional clearinghouse for information concerning federal and state assistance programs.