



Biennial Report Economic Development 2019-2020

**Hiawassee,
Young Harris,
and
Towns County**

JANUARY 26

**Director of Economic Development
Denise McKay**

Director's Letter

Welcome to the 2019-2020 Biennial Report. These past two years have been an adventure and have seen unprecedented challenges, especially 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis. Despite these challenging times, our community continues to build a solid foundation and prepare for a prosperous future.

I am proud of the efforts of the elected officials, community leaders, and the volunteers. Together, we have made considerable headway identifying and defining strategies that will fuel community development and spur economic growth progress for years to come.

It is a great time to be in Towns County and I am grateful for the opportunity to serve the County and cities of Hiawassee and Young Harris.

Sincerely,

Denise McKay

Denise McKay, EDFP, CPM

Director of Economic Development



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Letter from the Chairperson,

Years from now when most of us look back at 2020, some may consider this one of the most unusual years of their life. The COVID-19 virus has affected everyone and will likely go down as among the most significant events in recent history. There were, however, many good things that happened this year, especially for the Hiawassee Downtown Development Authority.

For one thing, the DDA completed its first full year of existence. We are officially a year and a half old. In and of itself that is a major accomplishment, especially given all the Covid curveballs that were encountered.

The Directors have sacrificed their personal time undergoing various training sessions and attending monthly meetings, whether in person – always with proper social distancing – or by calling in when personal attendance was impossible. They have developed and implemented work plans for the city, made countless phone calls, and even become experts in setting up vendor tents, the latter of which was admittedly not in their job description. In short, this group of initial strangers have really come together as a solid team of dedicated leaders who love our community and love working hard together to make Hiawassee all that it can be.

Nine new businesses opened or relocated to Hiawassee in 2020 and the DDA undertook two major endeavors during the year. The first was the creation of the Inaugural Night Market. Located in Town Square, on the first Friday of each month from July through November 2020, the Night Market proved a smashing success. Of course, with a blend of top-notch local vendors, food trucks and live music, how could it be anything but successful? Next year's Night Market will begin earlier in the year to take advantage of our beautiful spring weather and we are confident the market will continue to grow and become an attraction of its own right.

Our other major endeavor that began in 2020 was the Paris Business Center (PBC). The PBC is a full-service business incubator designed to attract entrepreneurial opportunities to the area. In addition to working with new businesses the PBC works with existing businesses on expansion or retention strategies. And long before the projected physical opening of the center (mid 2022) the PBC has begun working with clients and is currently working with five potential new and/or existing businesses.

Finally, it cannot be stated enough that the DDA would not be where it is today without the prior leadership of Founding Chair Herb Bruce. When I took over from Herb as Chair in July of this crazy year, I found myself surrounded by a Board comprised of clever, smart, diverse, hard-working people who love this city and had already laid most of the groundwork for me. This was a direct reflection of Herb's leadership. He has made my job easy, and for that I will be forever thankful.

Sincerely,

Steven Harper

Steven Harper
Chairperson

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Hiawassee, GA 30546
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Letter from the Director

I am very pleased to have the opportunity to talk about the Joint Development Authority of Towns County and City of Hiawassee and City of Young Harris. While 2020 has been a year fraught with unusual obstacles and frustrations, it does mark the inception of our fledgling JDA.

Our board includes a diverse group of dedicated citizens from varied backgrounds representing the cities of Hiawassee and Young Harris, as well as Towns County at large. Although much of our preliminary work revolved around initial, yet necessary, marketing and business activities such as financing, training, and website development, we are fully committed to energizing our community with profitable businesses that will provide gainful employment opportunities for our local workforce.

Over the last five months, our newly formed JDA capitalized on information vetted by the initial Economic Development Steering Committee to determine priorities and the goals we would pursue over the next few years. Our areas of concentration are Work Force Development, Workforce Housing and Attracting Light Industry to our area. We are currently in the process of finalizing our comprehensive business plan with the assistance of the Georgia Mountains Regional Commission and hope to adopt that at the beginning of the New Year.

In addition, we are working vigorously with the county to obtain ownership and management of the Industrial Park as an existing resource to attract commercial enterprises. We hope to see this come to fruition in the next few months.

We are grateful to our Mayors and County Commissioner for the confidence they have placed in our Board and look forward to a continuing and collaborative effort to address our communities' economic development goals. And finally,

we are very appreciative of our Executive Director, Denise McKay for her patience, guidance, and direction in making our JDA a success.

Sincerely,

Vicki Constantinides

Vicki Constantinides

Chairperson

50 Irene Berry Drive
Young Harris, GA 30582

Economic Development at Work – Summary of Department Formation

Economic development is implemented through a process built upon relationships, partnerships, public and private, working collectively to create better conditions for economic growth and employment generation. Having a strong foundation and clear direction is key to ensuring Towns County's future and quality of life for our residents. Before beginning to build this foundation and relationships the purpose of the Economic Development Department and its primary goal needed to be identified.

Purpose: The purpose is threefold and encompasses the goals and objectives of the City of Hiawassee, City of Young Harris, and Towns County with the unified primary purpose of the department being to promote strategic and sustainable economic development that respects and enhances the community core values.

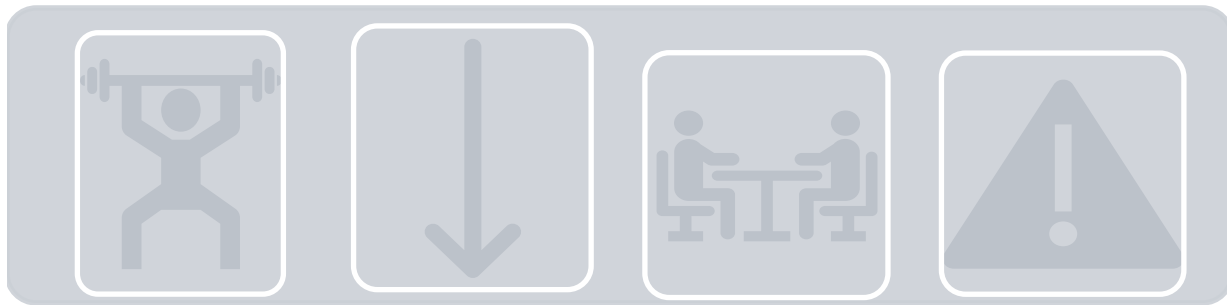
Primary Goal: It is the primary goal of the Economic Development Department to increase and diversify the tax base of The City of Hiawassee, the City of Young Harris, and Towns County by attracting new industries, manufacturing, retail, tourism, and encourage the expansion of the existing industry.

Building a strong foundation has been the focus of the Economic Development (EC) department since conception. The first step was to form a steering committee.

The Steering Committee met for approximately 10 months to assess the community and identify assets, areas of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats known as a SWOT Analysis. After completing the SWOT analysis, the committee identified areas of potential growth based upon priority. Upon completion of the SWOT analysis and identification of growth areas, the results were turned over to the North Georgia Regional Commission to assist with developing a comprehensive strategy for Economic Development. The comprehensive report is due in January of 2021.

Steering Committee Members:

Ben Lilly	Larry Kratz	Joe Ruf	Pat Malone
Noel Turner	Daniel Martin	Jim Yohe	Danny Burch
John Stewart	Ed Huges	Larry Pendleton	Paul Thompson



<p>Strengths:</p> <p>Community Events</p> <p>Sports, Music, Activities</p> <p>Environment - lake & mountains</p> <p>School system</p> <p>Health care</p> <p>Accessibility to region</p> <p>Fiber Optics</p> <p>Low Crime Rate</p> <p>Low Taxes</p> <p>Civic Organizations</p> <p>Georgia Mountain Regional Commission</p> <p>Appalachian Regional Commission</p>	<p>Weaknesses:</p> <p>Lack of Interstate and airport</p> <p>Labor Force</p> <p>Utilities</p> <p>Housing - workforce</p> <p>Transitional / part-time residents</p> <p>Low expectations: living conditions, work quality</p> <p>Drug abuse</p> <p>Youth and brain drain</p> <p>Lack of entrepreneur opportunities</p> <p>Lack of planning</p> <p>Underutilized public buildings</p>	<p>Opportunities:</p> <p>Redevelopment</p> <p>Infill development or new</p> <p>Branding</p> <p>Blairsville</p> <p>Region</p> <p>Level Playing Field</p> <p>Partnerships</p> <p>Tourism Authority</p> <p>Hospital</p> <p>Young Harris College</p> <p>North Georgia Technical College</p> <p>Blue Ridge EMC</p> <p>Hinton Center</p> <p>Chamber of Commerce</p>	<p>Threats:</p> <p>Blairsville - Incentives</p> <p>Resistance to change</p> <p>Lack of ordinances</p> <p>Tax Collecton - inconsistent, no penalty</p>
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Areas of Potential Growth: Listed in order of achievability.

1. Sports Tourism
2. Commercial (retail, food service)
3. Commercial (professional services)
4. Tourism
5. Redevelopment
 - i. Properties – dilapidated
 - ii. Underutilized government properties
 - iii. Georgia Mountain Fair Grounds
 - iv. Downtowns
6. Agri-business
7. Industrial
8. Arts-Makers Market

Other accomplishments on behalf of Towns County

Joint Development Authority created, and initial funding awarded in the amount of \$4,500

TVA Economic Development training coordinated, scheduled February 2021

Firehouse Sub Grant awarded \$7,890

Tourism Product Development Team – application accepted, and team visit awarded, scheduled May 2021

Building a strong foundation (toolbox) is comprised of many resources and tools. As we were going through the development of the County’s plan, work was underway to create a community development plan for the City of Young Harris as community development is the foundation of economic development.



Grants Awarded City of Young Harris

- Grants - Cupid Falls Park Grant \$155,440
- Vibrant Communities, \$5000

Initiative Awarded City of Young Harris

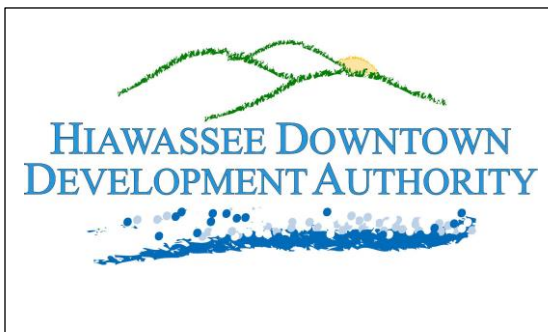
- Georgia Place Making Collaborative

Applied for not awarded:

DNR Trail Grant – Unnamed park \$

Hiawassee had a Downtown Strategic Plan in place and was ready to begin implementation. As the City had an existing plan the accomplishments for Hiawassee are numerous.

- Formation of the Downtown Development Authority – August 2019
- Main Street Affiliate
- Nine (9) new businesses opened in 2020
- Hiawassee Night Market
- Established Social Media presence – Facebook 342 followers
- Rural Zone Designation
- Mural Installment – Grants awarded \$5,000 and \$13,000
- Grant application in the final review stage before submittal to ARC \$600,000 for business development center
- Architectural and Engineering Report for Paris Business Center
- Kayak boat ramp installed
- Gateway Community participation
- Sign Ordinance updated and adopted
- Alcohol Ordinance updated and adopted
- Paris Business Center – business plan finalized and began working with clients. Currently serving five clients
- US Department of Ag grant \$67,500
- Major Fundraising campaign developed; software obtained for fundraising management





Priority Areas of Focus 2021

2021 Work Plan - Towns County

- Comprehensive Plan Update
- Comprehensive Strategic Plan for Economic Development
 - Implementation Strategy and develop a work plan
- Tourism Product Development Team visit May 2021
- Industrial Park Agreement
- Park Development
- Website development for the JDA
- Georgia Initiative for Community Development Application
- Grant for an educational facility – agricultural, livestock, equestrian
- Asset Inventory and development plan
- State-mandated training eight hours for the JDA – TVA Economic Development training does not fulfill this obligation
- Marketing plan
- Tell our story

2021 Work Plan – City of Young Harris

- Comprehensive Plan Update
- Georgia Placemaking Collaborative
- Plan First
- Zoning districts and uses
- Miller Park
 - Environmental Assessment
 - Resubmit Grant
- Main Street Affiliate
- Marketing plan
- Tell our story

2021 Workplan – City of Hiawassee

- Comprehensive Plan Update
- Fundraising - \$1,500,000
- Rural Zone – implementation and monitoring
- Main Street – compliance with the 10 standards and implement a work plan based upon the 4point approach
- Build a volunteer base
- Establish Hiawassee Business closed Facebook page for communications
- Redevelopment of Paris Properties
- Obtain 501C3 for DDA
- Property Acquisition – future development
- Marketing Plan
- Tell our Story

Notes: