



Annual Report Economic Development 2021

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

FEBRUARY 18, 2022

**Director of Economic Development
Denise McKay**

Director's Letter

As we close out the year 2021, I am pleased to take this opportunity to share with you the developments and significant achievements that were accomplished during 2021, and to provide some insights into our strategic direction going forward.

First and foremost, I am proud of the efforts of the elected officials, the community leaders, and the numerous volunteers that assisted with the development and adoption of the Joint Economic Development Strategy (JEDS). The JEDS defines the economic vision of the county and allows us to take control of our economic future.

Another major accomplishment in 2021 was the 5-year update to the Joint Comprehensive Plan (JCP). Updating the JCP took approximately 8 months to complete and is a major undertaking that is completed through an extremely public process. An advisory committee made up of 15 people along with staff and local officials met several times in person and/or online to discuss issues, consider updates to material from the existing comprehensive plan, and offer their thoughts on future development concerns. Six public forums were held, and the public was surveyed (online) in which 640 responses were received. The information gathered throughout this process was incorporated into the JCP of which the governing bodies then adopted.

Adopting this strategy along with the updated Comprehensive Plan opened doors for the county to participate in several initiatives. Since adoption the Cities of Hiawassee and Young Harris, along with Towns County, applied for and were accepted into the Georgia Initiative for Community Housing, a three-year program designed to help us understand our current housing situation and develop programs to attract and create quality work-force housing. Through the efforts of the City of Young Harris with the support of Hiawassee and Towns County a county-wide youth leadership program is in the process of being developed with the assistance of the Fanning Institute.

The Joint Development Authority and the Hiawassee Downtown Development Authority have made remarkable progress in a few short years. We know that possibilities are limitless for our mountainous, rural area and are committed to improving our communities every day.

Sincerely,

Denise McKay

Denise McKay, EDFP, CPM

Director of Economic Development



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Economic Development

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Denise McKay

The Hiawassee Downtown Development Authority (DDA) had quite a few things to celebrate in 2021.

In only our second full year of existence we saw the installation of the Facade Grant Program, the first of many initiatives the DDA has in mind to improve the downtown area. The Facade Grant Program is a 50/50 matching grant in an amount up to \$1,500 per project and is available on a first-come first-served basis. Improvements may include painting, lighting, windows and doors but not signage, as the grant is intended to improve the exterior appearance of the building and not the business itself. Guidelines and the application are available online at www.HiawasseeGa.gov, Economic Development or in City Hall.

In 2021 the DDA celebrated eight ribbon cuttings. Businesses included Mountain Quilts, Artworks (new location), Ash's Ink, T-Bird's Nest, Hir Restaurant, Backyard Bait and Tackle, Craig Realty Group and Daniels United Table.

First Friday Night Market continues to be a smashing success. Building upon the popularity of the inaugural year, we had a record-breaking 27 participating vendors in 2021, and closed off part of Bell Street to accommodate everyone. Live performances included Grace Worley, GAS, Rachel Pinson and Kaleb Garrett. The 2022 First Friday Night Market promises to be even bigger and better than 2021.

The DDA Board saw a significant turnover in 2021, with the loss of three of our valued board members, Rob Sollie, Lindie Wright and Alec Therrel, due to expiring terms or other commitments. Fortunately, we filled these vacancies with strong new members, Peggy Gardner, Tyler Osborn and Ashlyn LaPorte. Each new member has already contributed far beyond our expectations, and we are truly blessed to have them on our team.

Perhaps the most significant event in 2021 was the contribution of a house. Thanks to the generosity of an anonymous donor, a lovely house on River Street was given to the City, who signed an agreement with the DDA to manage the property for the next 50 years. Plans for the house, to be known as the Shook House, are still being discussed among the board members.

The Paris Business Center is moving forward. Phase 1 which included installing some structural support inside and outside the two-story building and covering the roofs of both buildings to keep them safe from the elements is complete. The Request for Proposals for Phase 2, encompassing the main renovations, was published in December 2021, and we anticipate starting demolition within the first quarter of 2022, with renovations to start shortly thereafter.

Finally, on a personal note, it is with mixed emotions that I submitted my resignation as the Chairperson and from the DDA Board. While I am sad to give up this labor of love, I am thrilled to report that board member Peggy Gardner will carry on the torch. In addition, it is not truly "goodbye," as I will be serving as the Downtown Development Program Manager for the City of Hiawassee and overseeing its day-to-day operations. Moreover, I will be representing the City as a member of the Joint Development Authority. I look forward to bringing my experience with the DDA to the JDA and will always look after the best interests of our beloved Hiawassee.

I wish you all the best of luck in 2022, and I am excited about helping the DDA continue to accomplish great things for the city in the years to come.

Respectfully,

Steven Harper

Chairperson



Board of Directors

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Director

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Administrative Assistant

Sally Clark

Letter from the Director

I am very pleased to have the opportunity, once again, to talk about the Joint Development Authority of Towns County, City of Hiwassee and City of Young Harris. 2021 has been a very productive year for the JDA.

In April we partnered with the City of Young Harris in applying for the Innovations in Community Leadership Initiative through the J.W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development to create an active, long term youth leadership program in Towns County. In June, we were thrilled to learn we were accepted. Since that time, we continue to work with the Fanning Institute, the City of Young Harris, Towns County Schools, the Rotary Club of Lake Chatuge, and Family Connections to develop an enduring leadership curriculum for the youth of our community.

In July the JDA spearheaded the community effort to seek technical assistance related to housing and community development through the Georgia Department of Community Affairs. We applied for the Georgia Initiative for Community Housing (GICH) three-year program. A team consisting of 21 members from public and private sectors, civic organizations, community leaders and volunteers was formed, and they completed a grueling application. We were one of seven communities selected to advance to the second phase of the application process of which only five would be accepted into the program. The team presented our case to the GICH Selection Team in September, and we were subsequently accepted to participate in the program beginning in 2022.

While working on these two endeavors we sought and received generous outside funding for the professional development of the JDA website which will commence in the first quarter of 2022.

Finally, through the efforts and hard work of Economic Development Director Denise McKay, in December we announced the expansion and relocation of Eastern Metal Signs and Safety. The leading manufacturer of work zone safety products will move into privately owned property within the Towns County Industrial Park in January 2022. This shift will facilitate the creation of 10 to 15 jobs within the first year and up to 70 new positions promised within the next three to five years. With new equipment and upcoming improvements, Eastern Metal is making an initial investment of over \$1 Million in this community.

We are working with the county to develop an intergovernmental agreement to manage of the Towns County Industrial Park as it is an existing resource that will be used to attract industrial enterprises to our area.

We look forward to a continuing and collaborative effort to address our communities' economic development.

Sincerely,

Vicki Constantinides

Vicki Constantinides

Chairperson

50 Irene Berry Drive
Young Harris, GA 30582

Economic Development at Work - Towns County

Strategic Planning

2021 marked a year of accomplishments for Economic Development with the adoption of the Economic Development Strategy for Towns County (EDS) and the Cities of Hiawassee and Young Harris. This strategy was developed with the assistance of the Georgia Mountain Regional Commission and has received the National Association of Development Organizations, Aliceann Wohlbruck Impact Awards. “The Impact Awards program honors NADO members for their creative approaches to advancing regional economic development and improved quality of life. These projects have made significant impacts on their regions and demonstrate the diversity of services and program delivery provided by regional development organizations across the country.” (Impact Awards, 2021). The EDS was officially adopted in March 2021.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan Five-Year Update was undertaken in 2021. Updating this plan is an extensive and very public process involving many community leaders and stakeholders. The information gathered throughout this process along with components of the Economic Development Strategy were incorporated in the Joint Comprehensive Plan which was adopted by the governing entities in November of 2021.

In July the JDA spearheaded the community effort to seek technical assistance related to housing and community development through the Georgia Department of Community Affairs. We applied for the Georgia Initiative for Community Housing (GICH) three-year program with a solid team consisting of two bankers, two council representatives, two planning and zoning board members, two members from the Hiawassee DDA, a real estate professional, the Towns County Commissioner, and the superintendent of Towns County Schools. After a grueling application process, we hosted the GICH Selection Team in September for a presentation and tour of our community. We were subsequently accepted as one of five communities that will participate in the Program beginning in 2022.

The City of Young Harris applied for the Innovations in Community Leadership Initiative through the J.W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development to create an active, long-term youth leadership program in Towns County. The JDA is the forerunner for the program and has very strong partners, The City of Young Harris, Rotary Club, the Hiawassee Downtown Development Authority, Towns County Schools, Family Connection all working together to develop an enduring leadership curriculum for the youth of our community.

Industrial-Strength Development

Eastern Metal Retention and Expansion

2021 closed with an announcement that Eastern Metal is expanding its operation in Towns County. The company will be relocating from Hiawassee to a privately owned property within the Towns County Industrial Park in January 2022. This move will facilitate the creation of 10 to 15 jobs within the first year and up to 70 new positions promised within the next three to five years. With new equipment and

upcoming improvements, Eastern Metal is making an initial investment of over \$1 Million in this community.

The Towns County Industrial Park ownership was signed over to Towns County in 2021. A property assessment was completed upon receipt of ownership, and an intergovernmental agreement is being drafted for the Joint Development Authority (JDA) to manage this property for the County. This 14.5-acre industrial park, located off State Highway 339 is well suited for light industry and has infrastructure in place to accommodate such industry.

The JDA raised private funding to help with the development of a website. The website will be developed and become live in 2022.

City of Hiawassee

The City of Hiawassee continues to move forward with implementing the Downtown Strategic Plan which contains six priority areas: Quality of Life, Community Identity, Historic Town Center Revitalization, Town Square, Economic and Work Force Development, and Transportation. The strategic plan contains 26 goals. Six goals have been completed, work has begun on 17 goals of which several will always be “in process” and the remaining three are long term goals to be initiated by the end of 2023.

Hiawassee Accomplishments

- Appalachian Regional Commission - \$600,000 for the Paris Business Center
- Completed phase 1 - stabilization of Paris Properties
- Raised \$117,500 in private donations for the Paris Business Center
- Entered into a joint agreement with Towns County and the City of Young Harris to participate in the Georgia Initiative for Community Housing program
- Donation Tubes installed Lloyds Landing and Mayors Park for the purposes of beautification projects as of 12/21/2021 have raised \$5,281.88.
- Received \$9,000 anonymous donation for beautification projects
- Shook House Donation - Intergovernmental Agreement with City to manage property
- Alcohol Ordinance revised and adopted
- Pedestrian Crosswalk installed at the hospital
- Eight Ribbon Cutting businesses, consisted of seven new and one relocation
- Façade Grant program launched – awarded first grant 12/2021, still in progress
- Rural Zone program activated – two entities qualify for tax credits
- Infographic – Towns Forward Developed
- Density ordinance - from four to six units pers acre
- Paris Business Center - three active clients – partnering with SBDC
- Joint Comprehensive Plan Five Year Update - Completed and adopted
- Obtained 501(c3) for Economic Development, Hiawassee DDA Inc.
- New lights installed Town Square Park
- Night Market - has turned into a major attraction and demonstrates that Hiawassee is alive after five

City of Young Harris

Young Harris has made great strides moving forward in community and economic development. The elected officials have taken the lead in implementing the plans that were developed and adopted in 2020. Under their direction numerous projects have been completed or are in progress.

Young Harris Accomplishments

- Joint Comprehensive Plan Five Year Update - Completed and adopted
 - Zoning Code - reviewed and updated
 - Fanning Innovations in Community Leadership Initiative - Awarded participation for the purposes of developing a Youth Leadership Program for the County.
 - Joint Economic Development Strategy - Adopted
 - Mayors Park new pavilion installed and park update
 - Cupid Falls new pavilion installed
 - Entered into a joint agreement with Towns County and the City of Hiawassee to participate in the Georgia Initiative for Community Housing program
 - Creative Place Making Collaborative - year 1 accomplishments
 - Public Art installation
 - Art Gallery - Peach State Bank
 - Art Showcase - Public Library
 - Two Crosswalks Painted
 - Private investment - two murals Cable building
 - Annexation of Kaiser Dean property
 - Website redevelopment initiated to be active Jan 2022
 - Peach State Bank - new location
 - Cable Fine Arts Opening in downtown Young Harris
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The culmination of all these efforts, Towns County, Hiawassee, and Young Harris resulted in my being honored by the Georgia Mountain Regional Commission as its 2021 Appointed Official of the Year Award. While I was flattered by this recognition, it cannot be stated enough that it would not have been possible without the help of the various members of the Towns County JDA, Hiawassee DDA, GICH Team, Youth Leadership Development Team, and the staff at Towns County and the cities of Young Harris and Hiawassee, together we make a great team.

Priority Areas of Focus 2022

2022 Work Plan - Towns County

- Strategic Plan for Economic Development
 - Define Implementation Strategy and develop a work plan for JDA
- Industrial Park Agreement
- Agricultural Arena Park Development
- Website development for the JDA
- Georgia Initiative for Community Development
- Grant - research and apply as appropriate
- Asset Inventory and development plan
- Marketing plan
- Tell our story

2022 Work Plan – City of Young Harris

- Georgia Placemaking Collaborative - 2nd year
- Water First
- Expand sewer to old college farm
- Zoning districts and uses - update
- Miller Park - Resubmit Grant
- Cupid Falls - ADA ramp installation to lower falls and park improvements
- Cupid Falls - dog park development
- Main Street Start up
- Gateway Signage
- Marketing plan
- Tell our story

2022 Workplan – City of Hiawasse

- Fundraising - \$800,000
 - Kickoff public awareness - April 22
 - Hard Hats and Heels Gala - first quarter 2023
- Develop Arts and Beautification Program
- Shook House - business development
- Implement a Youth Entrepreneurship Booth with the Night Market with youth coordinator
- Main Street - compliance with the 10 standards and implement a work plan based upon the 4point approach
- Grants - research and apply as appropriate
- Build a volunteer base
- Establish Hiawasse Business closed Facebook page for communications
- Redevelopment of Paris Properties
- Property Acquisition - future development
- Marketing Plan
- Tell our Story

2021 Highlights



