

REGIONAL ROUNDTABLE REPORT SUMMARY

Provided by:

East Central Community College/Shelton State Community College
Meridian Community College/Wallace Community College-Selma
Jones County Junior College/Alabama Southern Community College
East Mississippi Community College/Bevill State Community College

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The following report is a condensed summary of the questions that were asked at the regional roundtables. The information represents the overall commonality of the answers to these questions provided by the participants.

For a more detailed report, please refer to full summary attached.

ASSESSING THE REGION'S CURRENT ECONOMY

How would you describe the Region's current economic development strategy? Is there a consistent goal for the entire Region? What is the goal? What are the principal tactics to achieve the goal? How engaged are you in this strategy?

- There is no development strategy, if there is one it is locally more so than a regional collaboration.
- There is no consistent goal or common agenda for a better economic stride.
- Each community is more focused on their own community than the region as a whole.
- There is no real engagement from individuals in a strategy other than those who participated at the roundtables.

Is the Region's economy stronger or weaker than the numbers suggest? What factors may not be showing up in the data?

- The strength or weakness of the region's economy varies depending upon the community. Some areas show a strong economically, but then some areas show a weak one.
- Common data that is not represented is the cost of living in the region, unreported income (underground economy), underestimation of commercial hunting & fishing, and male/female ratio for the region.
- The statistics showing the number of jobs where people are commuting within in the region needs to be looked at further. The numbers may be fewer according to one roundtable report.

Is there momentum in the Region's economy right now? If so, why? If not, why not?

- The consensus is that there is momentum at this time due to various reasons. However, it is not consistence throughout the entire region. It may vary with communities because efforts might be geared on a local level and not necessarily a regional one.
- The reason why there is a current momentum is the rise of the Metal Industry (sprouts clusters), Automotive Industry, Defense Industry, Twin Rivers, WIRED Initiative, More Strategic Partnerships, and More Community Involvement.

What do you see as the biggest economic hurdles facing the Region's economy today?

- The consensus for the region in regards to economic hurdles is: 1) Education 2) Infrastructure 3) Improvement on Workforce Development
- Other hurdles that were discussed are the lack of marketing for the region, affordable Housing, and the negative perceptions of the region by outsiders.

ASSESSING THE REGION'S ECONOMIC FUTURE

What do you think is the Region's most promising economic direction? That is, if you could pick one industry in which the Region has the best shot at prosperity, what is it?

- The most common answers given were:
 - Automotive
 - Agriculture
 - Tourism

On which economic asset(s) is this "most promising" direction built? Is this asset currently appreciated for its future value? If not, what steps are necessary to build a new economic engine on fully using it?

- Assets that were not being appreciated for its future value:
 - Technology usage within Workforce Development and Higher Education
 - Education (HS & Higher Education)
 - Agriculture
 - Tourism
- There needs to be a comprehensive plan so that these areas are not underappreciated.

Which Economic Assets in the Region could transform the Region's Economy? For example, the Region's rich forest has historically fueled wood products and paper industries. What if it were focused on outdoor recreation instead? Which assets have the power to do this?

- The region needs to focus on its abundant wildlife.
- River & Waterway accessibility and usage
- Commercial Hunting & Fishing
- Historical/Cultural Tours (Tourism)

In light of the day's discussion, which economic directions for the Region have consensus support?

- Automotive Industry: This would allow for spin-offs to automotive clusters.
- There needs to be a regional support base for entrepreneurial growth.
- The region needs to develop alternative energy production.
- The region should cultivate its tourism potential.

What steps are needed to move these promising directions from concepts to reality?

- Developing a regional strategy or plan.
- Developing relationships and regional networks.
- Improving the region's focus on Education.
- A more regional marketing tool to accent the region's tourism assets.



A critical starting point going forward will be the Region's workforce. In light of the most promising economic directions the group has identified, what skills must the Region's workforce acquire? How best to boost these?

- Technology type skills like Computer Literacy.
- Promoting a stronger work ethic for individuals.
- Acquiring and emphasizing skills in applied sciences such as Engineering, Math, and Science.
- Focusing on basic skills like Reading, Math, and Writing.
- These can be encouraged through community involvement, apprenticeships, and mentoring programs.

Improving the Region's prosperity will also require improving educational outcomes generally. What practical steps to address this do you recommend as part of the Region's new economic strategy?

- The region needs to offer dual-enrollment for High Schools/Community & Junior Colleges.
- The curriculum needs to offer more technical programs along with existing academics.
- There needs to be a more direct focus on Math and Science programs.
- Developing an alternative education delivery, especially in regards to decreasing the drop-out rate in High Schools.
- There should be community education for the elderly in order to improve the quality of life.
- Focusing more on technical training.

What are critical needs in boosting the Region’s level of entrepreneurial activity? How effective are existing entrepreneurship support programs? How available is start-up capital to new business in the Region?

- There needs to be more incubators or a regional virtual incubator.
- Designing curriculum in schools to focus more on entrepreneurial activities.
- Programs that currently exist are meager. However, there is some success within the Universities and Colleges in the surrounding area.
- There is limited start-up capital, if any. Also, minorities are less likely to find start-up capital than others.

**ASSESSING A SENSE OF “REGION”
AND “LEADERSHIP”**

A critical starting point in a “regional” development strategy is to have a strong sense of the “region.” To what extent does the WAEM “region” exist in the minds of leaders across the 37 counties?

- There is no sense of the WAEM region.
- The WAEM region is not promoted to the extent of people being aware that it exists.
- There isn’t a great deal of “elected official” knowledge of support of the initiative at this time.
- The leaders in these areas do not think on a regional mindset. Their focus is more locally.

An important factor in the success of the Region’s development strategy is a diverse group of leaders to select, own, and drive the strategy. In your opinion, does such a group exist? If not, who can/should provide the roundtable to engage such a group and keep it going? Are there strong candidates to supply the “glue” for this group?

- The consensus is that there is no group currently engaged other than those present at the roundtables.
- Possible Leaders in the community could be:
 - Educators
 - Business and Industry people
 - Community Colleges
 - Mayors of the communities
 - The Montgomery Institute

What features of the Region's culture and heritage will be hurdles in creating the regional leaders' group? What features will be helpful?

● Hurdles:

- Racial Tension
- Political Propaganda
- Artificial/Territorial Boundaries
- Small Town Mentality

● Helpful:

- Collaboration between cultures
- Southern Hospitality
- Faith-based Groups
- Racial problems being alleviated

The following report is a full detailed summary of the questions that were asked at the regional roundtables. The information was provided by the 8 community/junior colleges that facilitated the roundtables.

The answers are color-coded to represent each region's response to the questions. The community/junior colleges are codes as such:

East Central CC/Shelton State CC – RED

Date: 4/4/07 Time: 10:30am - 2:00pm

Number in attendance: 34 (22 from MS, 12 from AL)

Alabama Southern CC/Jones Junior JC – GREEN

Date: 4/12/07 Time: 9:30am – 2:00pm

Number in attendance: 19 (9 from MS, 10 from AL)

Wallace CC-Selma/Meridian CC – BLUE

Date: 4/9/07 Time: 10:30am -2:00pm

Number in attendance: Not Given

East Mississippi CC/Bevill State CC –PURPLE

Date: 3/29/07 Time: 10:00am – 2:00pm

Number in attendance: 20 (11 from MS, 9 from AL)

**IDENTIFYING KEY EXISTING
“ECONOMIC ENGINES” IN THE
REGION**

Forestry/Timber

- Tem-Teck, Weyerhaeuser, Mannington Flooring, Jasper Products, Georgia Pacific, and International Paper.
- Lassiter Lumber, Linden Lumber, Weyerhaeuser, Rock-Tenn, Georgia-Pacific, Scotch Plywood, Hood Industries, Quality Plywood, Masonite, Alabama River Pulp, Hammerhill, and Louisiana-Pacific.
- Pulp/Paper
- Forestry Resources*

Wood Product

- Wood Waste, Bio Mass, Jasper Products, Paper and Pulp.
- Georgia-Pacific, Scotch Plywood, and Quality Plywood.
- Wood Products*
- Wood Products*

Automotive Industry

- Mercedes, Nissan, and Toyota.
- Automotive Industry*

Automotive Supplier

- Unipress, Tower Supplier, Teikura, and Sanoh.
- Building Products*

Agriculture

- Poultry: Tyson, Sanderson Farms, Kock, Lady Forest; Catfish; Shrimp Farming.
- Marshall Durbin, Wayne Farms, Sanderson Farms, Cotton Farming and Cattle.
- Food stock for livestock, Row Crops, Cattle, Catfish Farming, and Recreational Farming.
- Agriculture*

Tourism/Recreation

- Gaming and Family Recreation, Mossy Oak, Lodges, Pearl River Resort, Trails, Water Recreation, State Parks, Natural Parks, Heritage Tours, Pilgrimage, Golf Trails, Civil War Battle Grounds, and Bed & Breakfast.
- Hunting and Gaming
- Hunting/Fishing, SEC Sports, Casinos/Race Tracks, Historical/cultural tourism, and Festivals.
- Recreation, Tourism, Historical Interest, and Noxubee Refuge.

Manufacturing

- Rubber and Plastic Tires, Metals, Foundry-ESSCO Corp., Taylor Machine Works, La-Z Boy, Wood Building Products and Furniture, Hol-Mac, HIS, Severcorr and Retail.
- Metal Fabrication: Laurel Machine & Foundry, Hol-Mac, McCall Industries, Dart Container, Ce-Mix and Retail, Textiles: Teledyne, Vanity Fair, and TentCot.
- Steel Mill, Apparel, Light Equipment, and Automotive Supplies (building products).

Education

- Education Institutions and Higher Education
- Educational Institutions in the region
- Schools/Universities/Education
- K-12 School Systems, Colleges, Universities, Vocational & Technological Programs and Educational Opportunities.

HealthCare

- DCH, Bryce Hospital, North MS Hospital.
- Medical: Various Hospitals
- Health Care*

Technology

- Howard Computers, Raytheon, Peavey Electronics, Lockheed Martin, and AGT.
- Computer Manufacturing
- Electronics and Defense Contractors
- Research Institutions

Infrastructure

- Road Infrastructure-Construction
- Road Construction
- Tombigee (waterways), Railways, Interstate, Airport Access, 4-Lane Highways.

Energy Providers

- Energy Corp., MS Power, Central Electric Power Association, Southern Pine, TVA, East MS EPA, Kemper, Strategic Power Resources, and Federal Salt Domes.
- Energy*
- Low-cost Utilities

Oil, Gas, & Coal

- Mining (Surface & Underground), Coal Mines, and Natural Resources.
- Clay and Natural Gas Production: TK Stanley, Richton Project, and Petroleum Refining.
- Coal Mining

Food Processing

- Catfish and Corn Dogs
- Food Processing*

Workforce Development

- Ready Workforce
- Skilled/Diverse/Intellectual and Union Workers
- Fayette, AL has a great work ethic and strong workforce

Others

- Service Industries and MS Band of Choctaw Indians
- Population, Trucking, Military Bases, Small Businesses, Quality of Life, Social Services Transfer.
- Service Sector, Small Businesses/Entrepreneurship, Collaborative Partnerships, and Banking/Finance.

**IDENTIFYING POTENTIAL KEY
“ECONOMIC ASSETS” IN THE
REGION**

Transportation

- Railroads, Hwy 15 North & South, Interstate 59 & 20, Trucking, Tenn-Tom Waterway, and Infrastructure Improvements.
- River System: Tenn-Tom Waterway and Black Warrior River
- Waterway System: Transportation
- I-22 Development from AL to MS.

Tourism/ Recreation

- Casino, Golf Trails, Forest Wildlife, Hunting & Fishing, Historical & Cultural Sites, Agri-Tourism, Noxubee Refuge, River Access, SEC Sports, Gaming and Family Recreation.
- Rails for Trail Projects, Golf, Arts & Crafts, Hunting & Fishing, Possible Reservoir in Richton, River, Historical Sites, Cultural Heritage,
- Trails, Outdoor events, Golf, Arts/Theatre, Retail/Shopping/Restaurants, Bed & Breakfast, Civil Rights/Southern Heritage, and Gaming Industry.
- Tourism with Natural Resources, Being a Destination Point, and Opportunities for Recreational Land use.

Forestry/Timber

- Southern Yellow Pine, Wood, and Wood Resources.
- Timber-Related Industries

Medical

- People to address the aging population
- Healthcare

Agriculture

- Green Production, Organic Farms, Row Crops: Corn, Soy Bean, etc., Catfish Farming and Processing.
- Agriculture with bio-diesels, emphasize green economy, creative alternative fuels, and recycling.
- Bio-fuel crops and Shrimp/Fish Farms

Education

- Community College/Junior College, University, K-12
- Education Institutions

Entrepreneurs

- Training for potential entrepreneurs
- Minority Business Development, Grow and build existing businesses, and Small Business Development Center.
- Entrepreneurship
- Existing Entrepreneurial Spirit

Manufacturing

- Metal Trades, Plastic and Rubber Tires
- Automotive Industry

Workforce Development

- Underemployed and Available Workforce
- Work Ready HS Graduates, Trainable Workforce, and Youth Workforce Readiness.
- Education/Training Centers
- Workforce Potential

Technology

- Computer Support, Aerospace, and Military
- Aerospace/Aviation, Nano-Technologies and Need Innovated Technology
- Aviation/Aerospace

Other

- Retail: Expansion/Distribution, Collaborations with the region, value added food, and Timber Processing.
 - Culture/Climate-Retirement Communities, Energy, Twin Rivers, and Continue a Go-Zone Tax Credit after Katrina for quicker depreciation of equipment.
 - Construction Trades
 - Improve Education, Changing our image, Cheap & Available Land, Connecting communities through interstate and highways, Maintenance for interstate and highways, and Quality of Life.
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East Central CC/Shelton State – RED
Alabama Southern/Jones Junior – GREEN
Meridian CC/Wallace CC –BLUE
East MS/Bevill State - PURPLE

IDENTIFYING POTENTIAL KEY “ECONOMIC ASSETS” IN THE REGION

1. **How would you describe the Region’s current economic development strategy? Is there a consistent goal for the entire Region? What is the goal? What are the principal tactics to achieve the goal? How engaged are you in this strategy?**
 - Most counties have their own strategies and some in both states are participating in other regional plans between just few counties, but no coordinated WAEM regional strategy was determined. An example of the feedback: “Strategy-disconnected, not coordinated,” “It seems like if we did have a strategy, everyone would know it...it would be publicized and we wouldn’t have to ask the question.”
 - The consensus was that there were no consistent goals over the entire region. “The goals are [either] non-existent or outdated.”
 - West Alabama tends to focus its goals on aviation and wood related product/services and tourism. Automotive is a background option but not aggressively sought. East MS tends to focus its goals on Service centers, aviation, wood, processing and tourism. “There is a goal for a better life, but no plan on how to accomplish that.”
 - Hiring an economic developer for each individual county.
 - “More or less,” “Jamie Wallace is involved, unless person is in government; this is not a part of activity.”

- Somewhat hap-hazard and unorganized. There is little interaction at this time between the region areas. There are some upgrades to rail between Wayne Co. and Lauderdale.
 - Education and utilities strongly support economic development...locally and regionally. There is a workforce development council in the southern Mississippi area of the region as a whole.
 - All are engaged—only a few counties work together.
 - “Get a big mill.” Keep existing industries and attract more of that type.
 - Not giving thought to entrepreneurs, some can’t afford an Economic Developer; build an industrial park, a few smaller regional efforts, and community efforts, but no 37-county region.
 - Fragmented
 - No consistent goal
 - Locally promoted industrial recruitment (new industry)
 - Table participants were all engaged
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- We perceive the current economy as largely “locally driven.” Each locality has its own economic development program, for the most part. There are very few collaborative efforts. Those which have been collaborative in nature have yielded very positive results, such as the Golden Triangle’s collective effort in recruiting Eurocopter USA to the regional industrial park. Currently there is not a strategy we are in the beginning stages.
 - Lacks regional cooperation and coordination.
 - Overarching strategies
 - Lack of focus
 - Misguided in certain industries (i.e. manufacturing, and automotive)
 - There are no apparent consistent goals for the region.
 - Most citizens aren’t even aware of their local goals. Participants at this table, ranged from slightly involved to greatly involved.
 - Tactics are different in each community, not coordinated.
 - Develop and expand an automotive corridor from AL to MS
 - Heritage Tourism
 - Agro-Tourism
 - Linking Colleges and business industries
 - One-stop, career links, ATE
 - Workforce Resource Awareness
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- Attract businesses that tie into the automotive industry,
 - Attract timber industry in the southern part of the region and mobile home manufacturing in the northern part of the region.
 - In Brooksville, marketing assets to attract unique businesses to develop tourism.
 - In Fayette County (AL) trying to attract any industry that will bring jobs that will keep our population in Fayette County.
 - Some strategies have been duplicated. Have strong community development efforts to have a better quality of life for residents. Mostly, strategies are geared towards job creation, trying to retain students, and some efforts have been made to build retirement communities. Some feel the strategy is not good, no plan exists, provincial, and communities are strategizing independently with no regionalism.

2. Is the Region's economy stronger or weaker than the numbers suggest? What factors may not be showing in the data?

- As a whole, the regional economy is probably a little weaker overall than the numbers suggest. There are a few pockets of progress that “bump” the numbers upward.
- Stronger, but has weakness that need to be addressed in lower SES areas. Part of the problem is perception of low skill, low education – expectations not high enough.
- Factors not showing: quality of life, lower cost of living, lack of willing workforce, housing issues, education issues, convenience issues, underemployment, lack of your future self, not valuing educational opportunities, and lack of access to enough skilled people.

- Some areas are stronger and some are weaker.
- The work ethic for foreign companies can be challenge for US workers.
- Mixed-some think stronger, some say about right.
- Cost of living
- Data only reflects to 2004, and Katrina not taken into account, Economy stronger than suggested. Minority population not reflected and not being used to their full potential for jobs, training.
- Pretty much on target with RUPRI's report.
- Unreported income, underground economy (including some illegal).

- Four the tables agreed the economy was stronger; one table reported the economy was weaker, and one table reported the economic numbers on the region are accurate.
- For the tables that believed the economy was stronger, their suggested factors were: “the ‘underground’ economy,” “Arts and culture not included, commercial hunting and fishing underestimated or deemphasize,” “bottom line discussion is that everyone who wants a job has a

Job in the region.” The table that said the economy was weaker simply added “economically depressed.” The table that said the numbers were accurate wrote “It is because we have lower paying jobs and an untrained workforce.”

- In Marion County (AL), the personal economy is stronger, but underemployment is a problem. Need to look at each county individually. Need to look at the number of jobs where people are commuting within the region (may be fewer). Need to look at male/female ratio for the region in and out of the workforce. One group simply stated that the presentation was accurate and gave image of the region.
- Number of people in the “workforce” age that are not working for whatever reason(s).

3. Is there momentum in the Region's economy right now? If so, why? If not, why not?

- There is momentum within the region at the present time. Notably, the Mercedes expansion, the arrival of Severcorr and accompanying companies (this makes an emerging metals cluster). Also, the Nissan presence in Canton and the impending arrival of Toyota to the Tupelo area will significantly impact the region. These three strong auto manufacturers virtually surround our region, giving rise to an anticipated boom in automotive suppliers. There is also an emerging growth of Defense Related industry, such as Eurocopter, Aurora Flight sciences, etc.
- To a certain extent, yes.
- We must first change our mindset so that we compete in a global economy.
- There are pockets of momentum and that depends on the current leadership, citizens also have a lack of hope and there is insufficient community involvement.

- Develop of Twin Rivers and the WIRED initiative is developing momentum. The regional concept brings benefit to all those who play in the game.
 - The education support is somewhat strong. Richton (Perry County) has a level 5 rating (also Lighthouse rating).
 - Yes, consensus is that region is on the right track.
 - Collaboration between governors
 - Media is working together more
 - Presidents of community colleges
 - Beginning to develop a momentum with the smaller regional efforts.
 - Two governors are really coming together in AL & MS
 - Yes – not equally across the region. Somewhat tied to the national surge in economy.
- All tables answered yes to this question, but two tables’ added caveats that the degrees of momentum were not consistent throughout the entire region.
 - *If so, why?* “More communication and awareness. More strategic partnerships, more focus on education and workforce development.” “Automotive industry has changed the economic landscape;” “this is the last frontier in economic development;” “We are driven by panic and fear now.”
- Yes, there is momentum, but it seems to be an up/down cycle because wherever there is a positive, there is a negative.
 - People are getting more involved with economic development efforts. Also announcements of new industries coming into the Region.
 - No environment for entrepreneurship, existing industries not being supported enough, people are buying products over the internet instead of from local businesses. Momentum as a Region is lacking because economic development efforts are being done in individual counties/communities and are not being focused on as a “Regional” effort.

4. What do you see as the biggest economic hurdles facing the Region’s economy today?

- Lack of focused leadership
 - Sustainability...loss of current economic drivers
 - Infrastructure (Basic)
 - Technology
 - Broadband
 - The most apparent challenges are Workforce Readiness and a lack of “branding” that is essential for individuals to identify with and for recognition in the Global Marketplace.
 - Lack of Education, limited skills of workforce, limited work ethic, and legal climate as pertains to allowing dropouts at age 16.
- Low quality education – segregation; low curriculum standards; too much focus on “going to college work”, not workforce training; lack of parental support.
 - Lack of Infrastructure
 - Drug and gang issues
 - Lack of affordable property
 - Lack of population centers/socio-economic centers
 - Lack of marketing our strengths and assets
 - Global competition

- Lack of infrastructure within all parts of the region
- Legislative representation---Politics
- Workforce development, diversity not considered with the minorities for using and developing them in the workforce, government is subsidizing the people to the extent that they don't to work, basic skills education is lacking in K-12, self-esteem lacking in people and don't feel they can move forward.
- SKAAP – (Skills, Knowledge, Attitude, Abilities, and Personality) of workforce. Differences of administration between states/counties/municipalities.
- Territorial/legal boundaries, community awareness, education, drugs, lack of consensus, lack of trained/skilled labor, motivation of the workforce, promotion of Manufacturing/Tech as a career, site preparation/spec buildings, negativism, lack of recreation, crime, health care (need better health care).
- Education, Image, Work Ethic, Trained Workforce, Trends, Viewed as a Cultural Wasteland, Immigration, Poverty and Lack of Mentoring.
- Lack of Parental Mentoring
- Availability of People Coming Together
- Need an Active Strategic Plan (not one that just gets filed away somewhere)
- Need to start a mindset for higher education early --- prior to Kindergarten
- Need better early childhood education
- Need to advertise the region and expose it as a region lack of East/West Railway
- Affordable Housing
- Marketing empty houses in Brooksville
- Double-edge sword with the school systems (re: County and City)
- Negative Perceptions of the Region by outsiders
- Infrastructure to Support Development
- No “Can-do” attitudes to make things happen
- Proximity to Interstates and 4-lane highways
- Lack of a North/South Highway in Fayette, AL area
- Young people leaving the area after high school and college

ASSESSING THE REGION'S ECONOMIC FUTURE

1. What do you think is the Region's most promising economic direction? That is, if you could pick one industry in which the Region has the best shot at prosperity, what is it?

- This table felt that the Automotive manufacturing sector shows the most apparent promise. Much of this will fall into Advanced Manufacturing or Producer Services categories. Training for this cluster will also prepare individuals for work in the emerging defense-related industries. (i.e. high tech manufacturing)Automotive Industry
- Energy and Alternative Fuels/High Tech

- Healthcare, Agriculture, Natural Gas, Tourism, Biomass
- Growing Current Asset
- Residential Construction
- Automotive Industry
- Electronics Industry
- Green Focus
- Tourism
- BioFuel
- Agriculture
- Aquaculture

- Tier 2 or tier 3 automotive
- Aerospace
- Agriculture
- Retiree Relocation and Attraction
- Tourism
- Wood Products
- Agriculture based technology to develop alternative energy, bio-mass, food, clothing, pharmaceutical crops, etc...

- Three tables chose Agriculture/Aquaculture; Two tables chose Automotive Industry; One table chose Education

- Automotive Industry, Timber, Tourism, Recreation (hunting), Polymer Industry, Bio-diesel Plant, High-Tech Industries, Aerospace, Metal Industries, Silicon Valley-type Industries, and Defense Cluster

2. On which economic asset(s) is this “most promising” direction built? Is this asset currently appreciated for its future value? If not, what steps are necessary to build a new economic engine on fully using it?

- This is primarily based on the strong work ethic perceived in our local workforce, coupled with the historic loyalty our people display to employers. The future value of this asset is perceived in various ways by different viewers. There is a pronounced need to bring the overall workforce “up to speed” in the technology essential for success in the Advanced Manufacturing arena, as well as Producer Services associated with this type economy.
- Energy – Agriculture and Timber
- High Tech – Education
- Energy – No, but is growing in timber.
- High-Tech – No, education needs to be re-vamped to focus on science, math, and work ethic
- Energy – focus on small production plants at first, include tax incentives
- High-Tech – focus on math, science, and computer-based assignments in schools, increase depth of training

- Southern Yellow Pine, Coal bed Methane Gas, Baby boomers, Tenn-Tom Waterway, Casinos, hunting, fishing, Food tours, Civil War Battlegrounds, Moundsville Festival, Bed & Breakfasts, Historical Tours. None of these assets are appreciated for future value and can become appreciated if they are promoted
- “Green” Agriculture
 - These create diversity in the workforce and job sector. Today, we are too focused on wood industry.
 - Utilizing education sectors to train to the needs of companies...we have to be site ready
 - We have to be aggressive in our recruitment
 - Land
 - Climate
 - Infrastructure
 - University Research
 - Trained workforce
 - Marketing
 - R&D
 - Quality of life, safe area to live, low cost of living, forest (timber), natural resources, need more community development, so everyone will appreciate their assets, need to recognize the diversity (ethnicity and age) in healthcare (stop out-sourcing), advertise assets for appreciation, prepare students in HS and Junior Colleges for healthcare courses in technical area, like radiology (also more basic training in HS to prepare with basic skills). Training being done outside of schools is not useful, so education needed to bring a person up to par. Need more flexible and vocational training. Need service and technical jobs to build a retirement community (build houses, plumbing, electrician, etc). Need a comprehensive plan to plan for this in the future. Educational system needs to be more reactive to changes.
 - Natural resources such as land and climate. Must have technology development to create new products and applications.
 - Use land for more nature-based recreation and tourism including hunting, fishing, etc... Not currently appreciated.
- Agriculture: Education and workforce readiness coupled with available natural resources (land, climate, etc.) and technology developments. Automotive: Strong education systems, physical infrastructure (highways), recreation. Education: Education system.
- Consensus among all three tables was that agriculture is not appreciated for its future value.
- Education is not appreciated, especially in terms of how it is ranked within the local government.
- Need more entrepreneurs willing to invest in value-added agriculture and need to devise a marketing plan to promote agriculture. Increase support/Community awareness for education.
- Education, Healthcare, Colleges & Universities, Noxubee Refuge, Existing Automotive Industries, Existing Aviation Industries, and Available Natural Resources.
- College and Universities not appreciated for their future value for big industry such as polymer, agriculture, and engineering.
- Education, Healthcare, and Tourism is not appreciated.
- Use technology available at existing institutions to draw industry. There needs to be a method that will allow for growth of our Colleges and Universities.

- For education, scholarships are needed; better pay for educators; early childcare; efficient school systems; better checks and balances for our school system; need more community and parental support; need business consultants and partners in the schools; academics, not sports, needs to be the focus; need a focus on vocational programs and change the perception of them. For healthcare, increased wages to teach the mass of students entering the healthcare field. To build upon tourism, we need to find one resource in the Region to market and then each individual community needs to do their own thing with that resource. Also suggested that the individual communities pool their resources within the Region to attract people.

3. Which Economic Assets in the Region could transform the Region's Economy? For example, the Region's rich forest has historically fueled wood products and paper industries. What if it were focused on outdoor recreation instead? Which assets have the power to do this?

- A focus on Tourism that builds on the abundant wildlife available in our forest, rivers and streams and geared toward promotion of hunting and fishing.
 - Historical and cultural sites/events (pilgrimages, civil rights, etc.)
 - Family oriented destinations
 - Timber-Nature Trails and Bike Trails
 - Southern Yellow Pine, Coalbed Methane Gas, Baby boomers, Tenn-Tom Waterway, Casinos, Hunting, Fishing, Food tours, Civil War Battlegrounds, Moundville Festival, Bed & Breakfast, Historical Tours. None of these assets are appreciated for future value and can become appreciated if they are promoted.
 - Green Farming
 - Tourism
 - Hunting and Fishing
 - River Recreation
 - Money
 - Leadership
 - Education
 - Focus
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- Using the rivers as a method of exportation and recreation
 - There are airports in several communities/cities that could be support mechanism for the aerospace area
 - Eco-tourism
 - Hunting/Fishing
 - Resort Development
 - Food-related industries
 - Processing
 - Packaging
 - Distribution/ Transportation
 - Alternative Fuels, Forestry, Agricultural products, Kudzoo, Timber by products
 - Use land to highest and best application
 - Use the research universities to develop the crops and applications. For example, use timber coupled with polymers to develop stronger/better/more durable building, materials.
 - Other alternative energy sources can be developed. Fibers such as cotton can be further.
 - Food crops can be developed with inherent medicinal properties
 - Magnify production per acre, as well.

- Most of the answers were brief and tended to parrot the example in this question. “Timber for recreation and [wildlife] habitat,” “Agriculture-outdoor recreation would be a side cluster [sic],” “Commercial hunting and fishing,” “Education-having an entire renaissance,” “We have a lot of undeveloped land where retail or recreation could go in,” “Workforce.”
- Travel spots, hunting and retreat areas such as Noxubee Refuge. Historic sites such as the annabellum homes. Community Colleges. Affordable land, power, and labor costs. Dual-use assets such as a marina on the Tombigee for water spots, recreation, and a restaurant.

4. In light of the day’s discussion, which economic directions for the Region have consensus support?

- Workforce development in support of automotive clusters, focusing on advanced manufacturing. Plus a cohesive, regional support base for entrepreneurial growth and development
- Alternative Energy Production and Research
- Tourism, Automotive, and Niche Manufacturing
- Automotive/spin-off manufacturing companies
- Agriculture
- Harness our natural resources in innovative ways
- Use assets like heritage, history, diversity in Tourism. Focus on entrepreneurship (make communities e-friendly)
- Reclaim and recycle (needs to be made economically feasible)
- Use land to highest and best application
- Use the research universities to develop the crops and applications. For example, use timber coupled with polymers to develop stronger/better/more durable building materials.
- Other alternative energy sources can be developed. Fibers such as cotton can be further.
- Food crops can be developed with inherent medicinal properties
- Magnify production per acre, as well.
- As in question #2, three tables cited Agriculture, two cited Automotive, and one cited Education.
- Attracting automotive industries, film industries, gaming, and tourism

5. What steps are needed to move these promising directions from concepts to reality?

- Development of a Regional Strategy
- Get transportation systems up to speed between the two states
- Schools (k-12 through universities) need to enhance focus on math and science
- Building Regional Leadership from the local level
- Build Image Campaign—Locally & Regionally that tie in
- Form Brand
- Build Relationships between Leaders (Locally & Regionally)
- Overcoming Regional Jealousy
- Schools working together along with industries

- Build an Intrastate CO-OP
 - 2 year & 4 year schools work together to fill needs and support the region
 - Education for working individuals
 - Building Regional Networks & Relationships
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- Develop a spear-head group to visit trade shows for new companies in automotive and aerospace. Once a company chooses a location, the region has to continue to support the growth mechanism, regardless of the community chosen. Success will breed success...meaning one community may not win a particular company but they may win the next because of the initial company coming to the area.
 - Community Information Structure
 - Education and Training
 - Marketing
 - Community Development towards grass-roots support, Build a people's agenda like in Louisiana, Educate the communities about what we need to plan, Curriculum Development in involve parents in their children's education (start in pre-school), Test students to see what talents they having coming out of HS and Junior Colleges can building on those talents, Start a pilot program to put computers in homes for distance learning (to get a GED) and if test is passed, get to keep the computer (will also get children in the home access to a computer). Acquire grants for specific educational goals.
 - Advertise and market tourism and tourist attractions. Web-design education for advertising our region and assets.
 - Each community needs to decide what their economic engines are and then the region can put it all together
 - Strong research and development. Collaboration between universities
 - Training and education of students to work in these fields
 - Advanced food processing technology
 - Agriculture: Greater education and awareness. More research into pharmaceutical crops, alternative fuels, etc... "Developing the food industry; natural fuels."
 - Automotive: "Point of reality—here now—[on the] outskirts of [the WAEM] region. Not here in our region right now. 1. Developing workforce – training and education (workforce development); 2. Political – fully behind industry," "Develop a creative strategy to utilize what we have in a different way, like what took place in California."
 - Education: Develop plan of action- Timeline for implementation, Goals & Benchmarks, Monitoring, Networking, Commitment, and Public Perception
 - Need a regional plan with involvement of entities with resources. Need to have discussions with large automakers to know what they want and need, as well, as with 1st, 2nd, and 3rd tier suppliers. Need to develop relationships for enterprise activities.
 - Need to think out of the box to find something unique and innovative. Improve focused education and create incentives to attract industry to our region
 - Identify companies to focus upon. Need to have a way to identify the Region, something to call ourselves. We also need a map of the Region for tourism

BUILDING A NEW STRATEGY

1. A critical starting point going forward will be the Region's workforce. In light of the most promising economic directions the group has identified, what skills must the Region's workforce acquire? How best to boost these?

- Technology skills such as robotics, industrial maintenance, plc, cnc, etc...
 - Skills: Engineering, Chemistry, Management
 - Computer Skills, Communication Skills, Basic Skills, a will to work, Hospitality Skills, ability to be self-reliant.
 - Reading, Math, Writing
 - Workforce
 - Use the Community Colleges
 - Boost—re-vamping education
 - Work Ethics
 - These can be boosted through community involvement, Apprenticeships, Mentor Programs, Role Shadowing, and lower minimum wages for teens, so they get the jobs that will teach them work ethic. Also, children need to be taught how to be self-sufficient and accept nothing less than the best for themselves. Give Job Credits to employers that employ teens and teach them good work ethics.
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- Technology
 - Problem solving skills
 - Work Ethics
 - Transportation system --- especially public for rural areas
 - Communication/Marketing Skills
 - Mechanical/Metal Works
 - Applied Science/Chemistry
 - Mathematics
 - Technology/Computer/GPS
 - Effective communication for global communication of what the region has, Reduce dropout rate, Increase quality of basic skill education, hospitality training, Prepare students in HS and
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- Junior Colleges for healthcare courses in technical area, like radiology (also more basic training in HS to prepare with basic skills)
 - Training being done outside of schools is not useful, so education needed to bring a person up to par.
 - Need more flexible and vocational training
 - Need service and technical jobs to build a retirement community (build houses, plumbing, electrician, etc...)
 - Reorganization of the Community and Junior Colleges
 - Bring more technical training to CC's. Have better life-long learning education (community education for elderly), more cultural activities done at the community colleges like a ballet or drama, concerts.

- Technical & Technology skills that is capable of being applied in more than one arena. For example, machine tool operations that be advanced to CNC operation. Such as PLC operation, computer applications
 - We should make a final decision on the industry we want to focus on seek guidance from those companies/industries
 - Education
- Technology/Computer Skills; Math, Science, Communications, Entrepreneurship, Management, Organization/Development, Literacy, Finance. “Industry needs to be define [skills] – work with educational institutions,”
 - “More focus on career/technical training and education,” “Government needs to address issues as well.” “Start in the high school getting them ready for the workforce---skills and attitudes, financial literacy.” Training service delivery programs. Developing alternative ways to [provide] traditional education to reach more of the population.”
- Need basic skills, ability to be trained, good attitude, HS Diploma, basic computer, analytical skills, communication, strong work ethic, high-speed internet, workers vs. workforce, and hope for the future
 - Create a desirable environment for students to learn. Foster hope for the future in our youth, and convince them they can be successful. Change the Region’s image. Create an environment where people can advance themselves. Need commitment and cooperation throughout the Region. Identify what producer services are and use this to educate our workforce. Need a common workforce credentialing system between the states and this 37-county Region. Focus on reading in early childhood education and make it exciting. Dual enrollment with technological and vocational programs in High Schools. Change the image of tech and vocational programs with the community, parents, and students.

2. Improving the Region’s prosperity will also require improving educational outcomes generally. What practical steps to address this do you recommend as part of the Region’s new economic strategy?

- Develop alternative education delivery methods to thwart high dropout rates
 - Focus on math and science
 - Computer skills, Communication Skills, Basic Skills, a will to work, Hospitality Skills, and ability to be self-reliant
 - Introduction of workforce Training in elementary school
 - More emphasis on training and awareness of our targeted industries during high school
 - Introduce entrepreneurship in high school
 - Trained skilled Workforce – 2 year schools
- Electronic Techs
 - Quality of Life --- Retain Youth
 - Educate Elder Generation --- to improve quality of life
 - Increase labor participation
 - Promote dual enrollment for HS/CC-JC to include Technical as well as academic programs
 - Include entrepreneurship in curriculum
 - Drop out prevention--- saying no to 16 year olds quitting school

- These can be boosted through community involvement, Apprenticeships, Mentor Programs, Role Shadowing, and lower minimum wages for teens, so they get the jobs that will teach them work ethic. Also, children need to be taught how to be self-sufficient and accept nothing less than the best for themselves. Give job credits that employ teens and teach them good work ethics.
 - Schools working together
 - Industries working together
 - Teach classes that benefit multiple industries
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- K-12 partnerships---mentoring and guidance in the early years for true workforce leadership
 - Practical application
 - Experiential education for flexible decision making
 - Have open mind-sets and realism
 - Possible Math and Science school in our region (other than Mobile, AL and Columbus, MS)
 - Target/Educate Parents to support children to succeed
 - Partnership Industry with Education
 - Effective communication for global communication of what the region has, Reduce drop out rate, Increase quality of basic skills education, hospitality training, Prepare students in HS and Junior Colleges for healthcare courses in technical area, like radiology (also more basic training to HS to prepare with basic skills)
 - Training being done outside of schools are not useful, so education needed to bring a person up to par, Need more flexible and vocational training, Need service and technical jobs to build a retirement community (build houses, plumbing, electrician, etc)
 - Reorganization to the Community and Junior Colleges
 - Bring more technical training to CC's
 - Have better life-long learning education (community education for elderly), more cultural activities done at the community colleges like a ballet, drama, or concerts
 - Our high school curricula will need to be modified so that students graduate with capability to work. Also, with the basis to build and learn more technology applications
 - Promote basic skills such as construction
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- “More focus on math and science as well as technical focus,” “Collaboration between industry, government, and educational institutions.” “Entrepreneurship must come into the schools; this can be integrated into current curriculum without switching or changing. Students need to experience learning communities, as now done in MS, it gives exposure to other career paths.” “Include work with K-12 and post secondary that mirrors the workforce that we want. There should be more emphasis developing the students into what we need rather than developing a job environment for those graduating from our schools.” “Support and increase funding [for education].”
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- A guarantee of a free two-year college education to every resident. Combine the last two years of High School with a two-year college degree and/ or dual enrollment through a program such as the Early College Enrollment Program (ECEP). Proportionally fund city and county schools. Need a program that will track someone's talent and where they have gone.

3. What are critical needs in boosting the Region's level of entrepreneurial activity? How effective are existing entrepreneurship support programs? How available is start-up capital to new business in the Region?

- Business mentoring, A "One-Stop" resource for potential entrepreneurs to obtain assistance. Possibly more incubators or a regional virtual incubator
 - Needs--- innovative financing, training
 - A true entrepreneur can start a business with little or no start-up capital. SPDC's are coming up in MS and AL. It's easier to start a business than it is to sustain it due to competition with large chain stores. Small businesses need to beat out large chains with personal service and individual attention to the customer
 - Hosting more Entrepreneurial Academics
 - Including Extension Offices in Entrepreneurial Development
 - Include and expand Development / Academics
 - Entrepreneurs
 - Critical Needs to Boosting
 - Inconsistency in course offerings
 - Availability of venture capital
 - Improve awareness
 - Existing programs are meager, at best.
 - Most at table not aware of any entrepreneur support programs, don't know effectiveness
 - There is not any start up capital available
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- Clarke Co., AL has a high school program that helps with small business education
 - USM is developing a Small Business incubator (driven by the polymer science)
 - Capital is somewhat limited but banks support with small business lending.
 - SBDC's do help with entrepreneurial development
 - More incubators
 - Awareness
 - Marketing
 - Business Assistance Programs
 - Start-up Financing
 - Entrepreneur programs in High School
 - Some counties do well, some are lacking. Not consistent. Lack of monitoring. "Biggest success is Small Business Development Center."
 - Not very available. "Lots of help after you've been around for five years, but not much when you start up."
 - Educate people about entrepreneurial activities and what an entrepreneur is, Educate people on how their talents can be utilized to build a business
 - Need apprenticeships for technically trained to learn how to turn their technical training into a business opportunity (like an incubator), and leadership training.
 - Programs not ready available
 - No Angel Networks and money from banks is not easily acquired, banks dance around entrepreneurship investment by donating to economic development. The Montgomery Institute is good about helping an entrepreneur get started.

- Need to foster Angel-Network groups
- There needs to be greater emphasis in K-12 on basic education and entrepreneurship
- There needs to be available resources to support those desiring to start their own business
- Healthcare insurance and other “safety net” applications are necessary
- “Must build an entrepreneurial support system. Delivery of current assistance is poor at best,” “Better job---capital, training, infrastructure, “ “Not much,” “Start-up capital is limited in the WAEM area. There should be more marketing and advertising of the programs that are available. The lack of community knowledge prevents the overall programs from being successful,” “Building cultural bridges—Respecting diversity and political diversity—Financial support for the school systems”
- “Programs--- are good in areas, but lacking in some areas,” “It is sporadic.”
- “Start-up capital –have it, need more of it, but also need to educate people where to go,” “Not available,” “Small business loans are very hard to get- Availability is contingent upon who is asking,” “Accessing capital is a hurdle—because of the risk involved on the banks part.”
- We need to share the existing programs and stop re-creating the wheel. Need a super industrial site. Need local funding for entrepreneurs. Need entrepreneur centers like the one in Decatur. We need high-speed internet access. We need to market the region’s resources. Need to find out other WIRED regions’ strategies for this and hear their successes. Local government need to be more supportive of communities. Increase high-growth entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs need to be educated on the level commitment it takes, and how to develop a business. We need focus on how to network existing entrepreneurs and pool resources, so entrepreneurs can assist each other (the Universities could be used for advice on developing this idea).
- MUW has a women’s entrepreneurial program, and many of the colleges and Universities have programs as well. The University of Alabama has a program to help entrepreneurs (we need this regionally). MSU’s program is not much help for small business----it’s more for hi-tech businesses.
- Some angel networks exist. The SBA loan is not simple and is too complex to navigate, so people shy away from it. There is a misconception that banks provide start-up capital, and they don’t. Minorities cannot find capital.

BUILDING A NEW STRATEGY

1. A critical starting point in a “regional” development strategy is to have a strong sense of the “region.” To what extent does the WAEM “region” exist in the minds of leaders across the 37 counties?

- Participants at this table did not perceive any sense of WAEM region at the present time
- “A resounding ‘No!’” Leaders do not think regionally
- A sense of region does not exist
- Start viewing ourselves as a region

- There was significant knowledge of the WAEM initiative in the area
 - There doesn't seem to be a great deal of "elected official" knowledge of support of the initiative at this time
 - The leaders "talk the talk", but don't walk the walk
 - Not much of a sense of regional across the state borders---lots of programs within the borders
 - Whole new concept, but the players are being sought after and the sense of the region is being conveyed
 - Non-existent
- Three tables agreed there is no sense of the WAEM region in the minds of leaders. Two tables stated that leaders are definitely aware, and one table stated "it is just no coalescing."
- There is no sense of "region," because it isn't promoted, and people are not aware of it. We need a name with visual reminders and internal marketing. There is an inability of local leadership to dedicate their efforts to one thing; a region does not exist in their minds at local and state levels.

2. An important factor in the success of the Region's development strategy is a diverse group of leaders to select, own, and drive the strategy. In your opinion, does such a group exist? If not, who can/should provide the roundtable to engage such a group and keep it going? Are there strong candidates to supply the "glue" for this group?

- This group was not aware of any existing organized that would be a natural point for regional leadership to grow from
 - Yes and no---- no for political groups who are concerned about only their communities; yes for educational leaders who are leading the push
 - Even though they are not engaged in regional economic development, elected leaders should lead this initiative with industry leaders and education
 - Community leaders from all aspects of life. We need a central regional council and smaller councils in the region that report back to the larger central council
 - The Montgomery Institute could possibly foster continued development. Perhaps a better step would be creation of a foundation (or similar entity) for the purpose of perpetuation
 - Yes, the Governors of Alabama and Mississippi
 - Get the "right" people involved: MBCI, Elected Officials, High Schools
- There is not a group currently engaged a region approach but the concept is good. Those that should be involved should be the economic developers or another identified source from each county that could provide insight for their location to help with the regional opportunities.
 - There are individuals in each community that could help with this process
 - Parts of it exist---educators---but there is a lack of input and leadership from the business and industry community
 - Business and industry take lead. Community colleges need to also take the lead
 - Candidates are available, but not sure if they will step up
 - The economic developers from different areas need to be involved---pull from all walks of life to be involved, bring the power companies.

- Include faith-based leaders and groups, K-12 educators, local government
 - The “We Can” Organization Hidelburg, MS (Mayor is President and is contact)
 - There are possible candidates such as Tenn-Tom, TMI, but no consensus group leasers for the region
- There was only one definitive answer to this question, and that table state “Yes, among those present here today.” Another tabled addressed the question by stating “There is some effort in creating a group. The commission does act as a governing council directing the initiative.” The other tables did not address this specific question, instead focusing on one of the follow-up questions
 - “Possibly the Delta Regional Authority [or the] Tenn-Tom Waterways Council,” A community Economic Development group—combine individuals from the communities to come together---like the group ‘Team Selma’,” “There should be a “working” group including civil leadership facilitators that focus on the leg work and keeping the champions and team leaders for this effort. Use that group as a beginning pint, and expand to incorporate key players.”
 - No answers from any table addressed this question. Time constraints and fatigue may have contributed to this.
- There is no diverse group of leaders involved in economic development activities. Economic development activities have traditionally been conducted by males; diversity is lacking. This strategy would be “fundamental shift” that will infringe upon an existing and long-standing structure. We must change the mindset of leaders from focusing on “us” to focusing on the “region.”
 - There are strong candidates who should be a part of the plan, and some of them are present in this room. 90% of a mayor’s job is economic development, and some of them would make strong candidates. Maybe, have a mayor’s association for the region

3. What features of the Region’s culture and heritage will be hurdles in creating the regional leaders’ group? What features will be helpful?

- Current local politics, a lack of consensus regional leadership and artificial boundaries created by city, county, and state borders will all be hindrances along with some lingering racism. Our emerging communications networks and transportation systems will be positive assets
 - Hurdles- Racial Tensions of the past and present, multiple minorities
 - Helpful- Churches and faith-based (can also be a hurdle), sense of community, Southern Hospitality
 - Different languages and people tend to confine themselves to their own community.
- Limited leadership training sources.
 - Financial resources
 - Race relations
 - Lack of diversity—racial and gender
 - Southern regionalism
 - Common language
 - Work ethic
 - Willingness to collaborate

- Hurdles: “Turf-dom,” Don’t let regionalism be a fad. Our “dirty south” reputation, religious fundamentalism, racism,
 - Helpful: Influx of new citizens without that “Turf-dom” attitude and bringing new ideas to the table. Look at us sitting here today
 - Sectionalism, apathy, political boundaries
 - “Control” Race
 - Relationships being built
-
- Territorial/Legal boundaries, Distrust, Race relations, Political fighting, lack of information sharing, Greed, Economic/Class differences, Fear of change/growth, Small town mentality
 - Four tables did not list anything helpful. Of the two that did, here are their exact answers: “Helpful Features--- great progress in collaboration between cultures,” “Helpful: Race problems being alleviated.”
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- Hurdles: Lack of education, perception, rural nature, desires to preserve “my small town,” racial tension, lack of understanding, apathy, self-interest, social classes, and overcoming our cultural diversity (including faith-based)
 - Helpful: Southern pride, financial assets, venture capitalist, faith-based organizations, and diversity

