

Synthesis of Development Strategies for the WAEM WIRED Region

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Executive Summary

This report presents a synthesis of recent studies and reports on the West Alabama - East Mississippi Workforce Innovation in Regional Economic Development (WAEM WIRED) region. The purpose is to describe the current thinking of economic developers and the nature and character of economic development efforts in the region. Information on the economic base, assets, and the extent to which studies inform development strategies in the region is also provided.

Economic development plans and strategies at the local (community and county), regional, and state levels focus on four main areas: (1) Economic growth, which generally involves new industry recruitment/attraction/development, support for existing business, and diversification; (2) Infrastructure, with a heavy focus on transportation infrastructure; (3) Workforce, which involves all types and levels of education and programs for worker retraining, placement, and skills assessment and development; and (4) Quality of life, which covers social, community, and environmental issues. Overall, there is heavy emphasis on economic growth and recognition of the fact that the areas of focus are not mutually exclusive.

Manufacturing, trade, services, and government provide most of the region's jobs. The region has many types of assets—cultural, social, political, natural, financial, human capital, infrastructure, institutional—several of which are not fully developed with some at nascent stages. Development plans and strategies often mention natural resources, typically for developing tourism and for energy production. Churches are underutilized assets, especially for the quality of life focus where they can be very valuable.

Many of the economic studies are commissioned by local or state-level agencies and organizations. Thus, these studies do inform decision makers at various levels. However, it is not clear how much these studies influence economic and workforce development approaches. Anecdotal evidence suggests that studies are often shelved for two main reasons. The first pertains to limited funds for development and the second relates to frequent changes in leadership (elected and other) or championing of development efforts, especially for rural counties. A survey of economic developers would help to fully grasp the extent to which economic studies and economic development plans and strategies inform and influence local, regional, and statewide economic and workforce development approaches.

There seems to be very limited bi-state or cross-border regional collaboration for development, although a few plans call for regional intrastate cooperation with neighboring counties. Mississippi and Alabama have begun to explore potential bi-lateral economic development efforts under Governors Haley Barbour and Bob Riley. Two state level summits have been held in the West Alabama-East Mississippi region and there have been discussions for a common industrial park near the I-20/59 corridor that would draw workers from both states. It is not clear whether an organizational structure exists to provide policy direction or carry out the implementation of ideas considered in these efforts; the WAEM WIRED effort is the exception.

**Development Strategies and Economic Assets of the East Mississippi Part of the
WAEM WIRED Region**

prepared by

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Introduction

The purpose of this project was to describe the current thinking of economic developers in the WAEM WIRED region and to provide some notion of the economic base, assets, and development strategy of the region. The Mississippi region consists of the following counties: Clarke, Clay, Covington, Greene, Jasper, Jones, Kemper, Lauderdale, Leake, Lowndes, Oktibbeha, Perry, Neshoba, Newton, Noxubee, Scott, Smith, Wayne, and Winston. Data was accumulated from community colleges in the region and sources internal to Mississippi State University.

In order to describe the current thinking of economic developers in the East Mississippi region, the economic development plans of individual counties and municipalities was requested. The request revealed a wide variety of development approaches in the counties that are actively pursuing planning and development activities. Some counties did not respond to the request for information.

Each of the development plans contained similar dimensions upon which action would be taken. These dimensions are grouped into a rubric consisting of four main categories: Social Infrastructure, Physical Infrastructure, Business Development, and Workforce Education. Within each of these main categories there were several action plans in common. These are described in detail below. Totals are given in both the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the rubric. The vertical totals give some idea of the scope undertaken by each county submitting data while the horizontal totals indicate the degree to which the action is common throughout the combined counties. There is no indication of the degree of community involvement in establishing these goals for action and little indication of the depth of involvement in such activities.

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Actions to Develop Social Infrastructure

County		Clay	Winston	Leake	Smith	Noxubee	Neshoba	Newton	Jasper	Clarke	Lauderdale	Kemper	Lowndes	Oktibbeha	Covington	Jones	Perry	Greene	Wayne	Scott	Total	✓		
Social Infrastructure	Improve Health Care System	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	No Data Given							10		
	Improve Race Relations		✓	✓	✓		✓				✓												5	
	Develop Recreation Facilities and Programs	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓							11	
	Arts Facilities and Programs	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓		✓							10	
	Housing Needs			✓	✓		✓	✓															4	
	Social Programs		✓						✓	✓			✓										4	
	Improve Child Welfare								✓	✓	✓	✓	✓										4	
	Improve Child Care									✓	✓	✓	✓										3	
	Improve Senior Welfare								✓														2	
	Improve Senior Care									✓													1	
	Clean up County	✓				✓					✓		✓	✓		✓							6	
	Improve Civic Involvement		✓										✓	✓		✓							4	
	Reduce Crime and Drug Abuse							✓	✓														2	
	Data Book			✓																			1	
Total ✓		4	3	6	5	3	5	5	7	8	5	6	5	5										

Of the 13 counties providing information,¹ the only development actions noted by a majority of the counties were to improve the health care system, develop recreation facilities and programs, and develop arts facilities and programs. The least noted actions were the creation of a county data book, the improvement of senior care and welfare, and reduction of crime and drug abuse.

Actions to Develop Physical Infrastructure

County		Clay	Winston	Leake	Smith	Noxubee	Neshoba	Newton	Jasper	Clarke	Lauderdale	Kemper	Oktibbeha	Lowndes	Covington	Jones	Perry	Greene	Wayne	Scott	Total	✓		
Physical Infrastructure	Improve Transportation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		No Data Given							11		
	Improve Support System	✓				✓			✓		✓	✓	✓										5	
	Fiscal Effectiveness								✓														1	
	Efficient and Effective Gov't							✓	✓														2	
	Maintain Buildings	✓								✓	✓												3	
	Improve Water System			✓	✓					✓	✓	✓	✓										5	
	Improve Sewage System			✓	✓					✓	✓	✓											5	
	Building Code			✓	✓		✓																3	
	Improve Education Facilities							✓						✓									2	
	Improve Parking		✓																				1	
	Fire Protection												✓										1	
	Improve Power Grid					✓							✓										2	
	Extend Natural Gas Availability												✓										1	
	Promote Natural Resources					✓																	1	
	Industrial/Research Park Creation									✓				✓									2	
	Land Use and Zoning							✓						✓									2	
	Total ✓		3	2	4	4	4	3	3	4	4	5	7	4										

¹ The information contained in the four tables was synthesized from strategic plans of each county. In four instances, the county strategic plan was combined with the strategic plan of the major municipality in the county. These combined county/municipality development plans included: Oktibbeha county and Starkville, Leake county and Carthage, Lauderdale county and Meridian, and Clay county and West Point.

Of the 12 counties that addressed physical infrastructure in their development plans, eleven of the counties described action regarding improvement of the transportation network. These actions were mainly aimed toward securing federal and state funds for road construction and improvements. There were no other actions that were common to a majority of the counties. The remaining most popular actions consisted of improving water and sewer systems and improvement of county support systems.

Actions to Promote Business Development

County		Clay	Winston	Leake	Smith	Noxubee	Neshoba	Newton	Jasper	Clarke	Lauderdale	Kemper	Oktibbeha	Lowndes	Covington	Jones	Perry	Greene	Wayne	Scott	Total ✓
Business Development	Promote Existing Businesses	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓								12
	Recruit New Businesses	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓								12
	Recruit Retail Companies	✓				✓	✓						✓								4
	Promote Small Businesses		✓	✓				✓					✓								5
	Recruit Small Businesses		✓	✓				✓					✓								5
	Recruit New Industry	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓							11
	Promote Existing Industry	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓							11
	Promote Retiring in County	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓							6
	Promote Tourism	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓		✓							9
	Incubator Program		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓				✓								6
	Offer Tax incentives					✓															1
	Diversify County's Economy										✓										1
	Removal of Alcohol Restrictions						✓														1
Total ✓		7	6	9	7	8	7	8	5	5	6	7	9								

Of the 12 counties providing information regarding actions to promote business development, all counties noted the promotion and recruitment of new businesses/industry as a priority. However, specific plans to achieve this goal were not stated. The remaining most popular action plan to promote business development was to promote tourism into the area. Six of the counties stated their plans to develop a business incubator program. Interestingly, only one county stated its intentions of providing tax incentives for business development.

Actions to Develop the Workforce and Education

County		Clay	Winston	Leake	Smith	Noxubee	Neshoba	Newton	Jasper	Clarke	Lauderdale	Kemper	Lowndes	Oktibbeha	Covington	Jones	Perry	Greene	Wayne	Scott	Total ✓
Workforce and Education	Improve Public Education	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓							13
	Determine Adult Skill Set			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓							4
	Encourage Training				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓							9
	Promote Skills Set			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓								7
	Increase Number of Educated People		✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓								8
	Improve Community College Enrollment					✓															1
	GED Programs		✓		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓									7
	Community Involvement			✓	✓			✓							✓						4
	Continued Cooperation with MSU														✓						1
	Decrease Dropouts		✓									✓		✓							3
	Reduce Drug Abuse		✓																		1
Total ✓		1	5	5	5	5	4	6	5	5	6	4	4	2							

Thirteen counties provided information regarding workforce and education development plans. All thirteen designate the improvement of public education as a priority. The other actions that were stated by a majority of the counties were to encourage training, promoting a specific skills set, increasing the number of educated citizens, and development of GED programs. Reducing the dropout rate was a specific goal of only one county.

In addition to the county plans, the East Central Planning District's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies of 2004 established several projects for the region as a whole to promote economic development. For the most part, the CEDS plans mirror the county-level plans. In order to improve social infrastructure, the CEDS include several programs for the elderly, increased low cost housing, improving regional appearance, crime prevention programs, and increasing number and quality of recreation facilities. Regional jails, water systems and fire protection, industrial park expansion and I-20/I-59 corridor improvements are recommended to build physical infrastructure. Education/workforce improvements pointed to general increases in training and educational attainment. Discussion of business development was again very general with no specific plans or industrial targets. Statewide development initiatives such as Momentum Mississippi and Blueprint Mississippi also mirror the general development plans stated in the county-level documents; e.g., increasing education statewide, and attracting new businesses statewide. No specific ways of achieving the goals are suggested and nothing specific to the region of interest here.

In summary, in order to promote economic development in the Mississippi counties in the WAEM WIRED region, the view of economic developers in the actions that need to be taken in the region are:

- Improving the health care system
- Improving the education of the present and future workforce
- Development of recreational and arts facilities and programs
- Construction and maintenance of roads
- Development of a tourism industry

The overriding goal of all of the developers is to recruit and promote business and industry. Actions taken to address the above dimensions are one way to aid in the recruitment process. However, none of the plans reviewed included mention of specific actions to be taken or specific business or industry types to be targeted for development. In addition, current development plans make do not describe nor mention leveraging any of their particular local economic assets for development purposes.

Economic Base of the East Mississippi Region

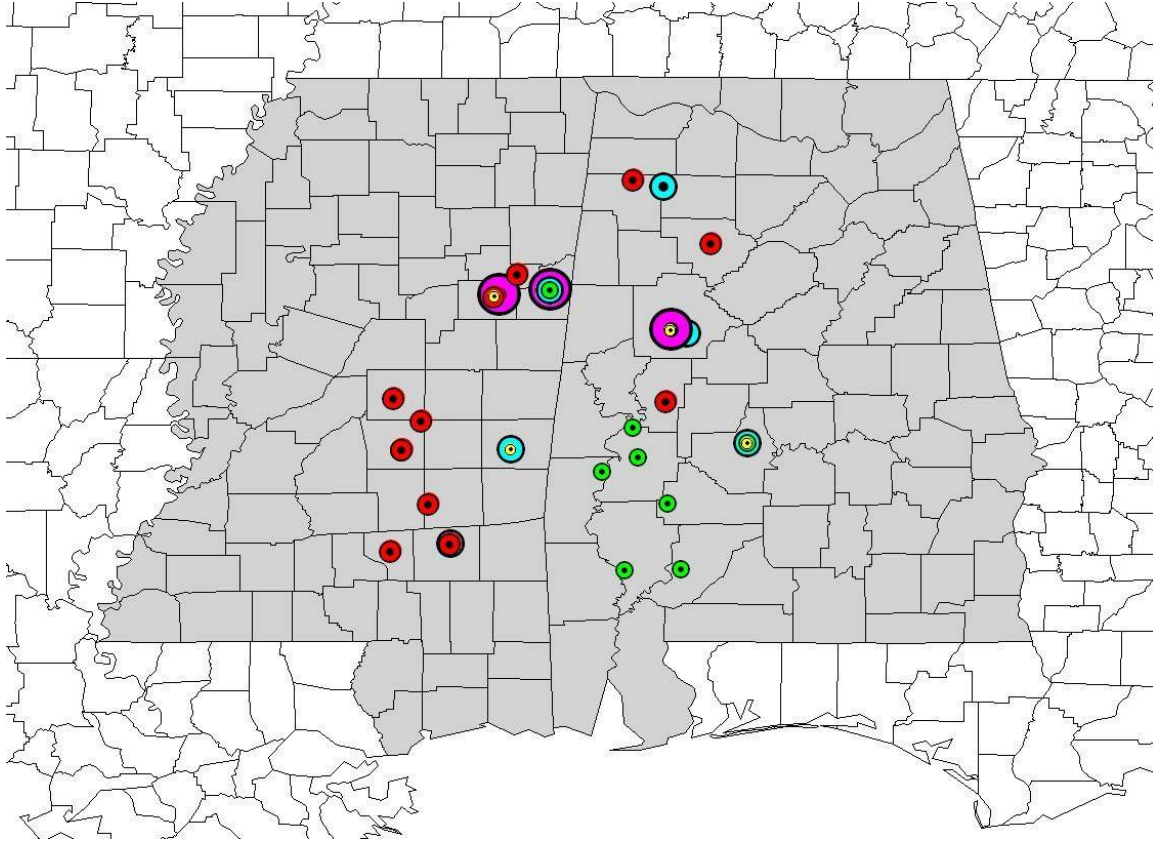
The economic base of the region can be described by the industry classification of the current workforce. The table below describes the size of the current (the most recent data is available for 2004) workforce and the changes in the workforce that have occurred since 2002. These measures are broken down by industry type.

Several industries experienced a contraction of employment in the region from 2002 to 2004. These industries included manufacturing, health care and social assistance, utilities, and wholesale trade. The construction, and accommodation and food services industries were relatively large employment sectors that experienced over 10% growth. The largest employment sector, retail trade, experienced moderate growth throughout the time period.

Industry	Number of Jobs 2004	Percentage Change From 2002	Percentage of Total Jobs 2004
Forestry, fishing, hunting, and agriculture support	1825	-1.617250674	1.162598104
Mining	695	5.945121951	0.44274284
Utilities	1149	-7.487922705	0.731959026
Construction	10301	18.77089819	6.562149628
Manufacturing	38168	-14.11727645	24.3145449
Wholesale trade	5746	-6.977497167	3.660432168
Retail trade	24588	2.956201323	15.66354092
Transportation & warehousing	4385	2.982620949	2.79342065
Information	2752	26.87874597	1.753134237
Finance & insurance	4591	-1.922666097	2.924650902
Real estate & rental & leasing	1493	13.88253242	0.951100805
Professional, scientific & technical services	4127	15.4082774	2.629064316
Management of companies & enterprises	1192	6.144256456	0.759351748
Admin, support, waste mgt, remediation services	5996	16.29169899	3.819692182
Educational services	2211	50.10183299	1.408495566
Health care and social assistance	19418	-6.545384541	12.37004383
Arts, entertainment & recreation	1367	32.33301065	0.870833758
Accommodation & food services	16421	34.18042164	10.46083478

Employer Base of the WAEM WIRED Region

The map below illustrates the geographic location and type of industry for the employers in the entire WAEM region with over 500 employees (prior to 2007).



COLOR	INDUSTRY
Red	Manufacturing including food processing
Green	Manufacturing including wood processing
Cyan	Manufacturing including metal processing
Magenta	Education
Yellow	Health care

The placement of the circle designates the firm's geographic placement. Since some businesses are located in the same town, the circles may overlap. The color of the circle represents the main industry within which the firm operates.

The map illustrates a cluster of food processing facilities on the Mississippi side of the region, while a cluster of wood processing firms are located on the Alabama side. In the northern part of the region, the universities are somewhat grouped together. The metals manufacturing industry is more dispersed.

Synthesis of Development Strategies for the West Alabama Part of the WAEM WIRED Region

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Introduction

This report presents a synthesis of recent studies and reports on the West Alabama portion of the West Alabama - East Mississippi Workforce Innovation in Regional Economic Development (WAEM WIRED) region. The purpose is to describe the current thinking among economic developers, describe the nature and character of economic development efforts in the region, and provide information on the economic base, assets, and the extent to which studies inform development strategies. There are 18 counties in the West Alabama part of the WAEM WIRED region. The counties are Choctaw, Clarke, Conecuh, Dallas, Fayette, Greene, Hale, Lamar, Lowndes, Marengo, Marion, Monroe, Perry, Pickens, Sumter, Tuscaloosa, Walker, and Wilcox.

Literature pertaining to the region at the local through state and even national levels was collected for the study. The community colleges in the region were involved in this search. In addition to this report, we are providing electronic files with detailed county economic conditions and trends, population projections and economic forecasts by county, projects in comprehensive economic development strategies (CEDS), available sites and buildings, a resource guide, and a summary of the material reviewed.

The reviewed material summary includes information on economic development directions and strategies as well as assets and the proposed use of these assets. It is important to note that assets and their use for development are hardly mentioned in the plans reviewed; the strengths sections of the strengths-weaknesses-opportunities-threats (SWOT) analysis in the CEDS contain a few mentions. Similarly, plans reviewed do not mention or identify economic drivers. Assets and economic drivers itemized in this report are drawn from the deductions, research, and knowledge of the authors.

Economic Development Strategies

Economic development plans and strategies at the local (community and county), regional, and state levels focus on four main areas: (1) Economic growth, which generally involves new industry recruitment/attraction/development, support for existing business, and diversification; (2) Infrastructure, with a heavy focus on transportation

infrastructure; (3) Workforce, which involves all types and levels of education and programs for worker retraining, placement, and skills assessment and development; and (4) Quality of life, which covers social, community, and environmental issues. Overall, there is heavy emphasis on economic growth and recognition of the fact that the areas of focus are not mutually exclusive. More recent studies highlight the need for broadband access, especially for distance learning and online training purposes.

Guidance for economic development direction is initiated by the Alabama Development Office and a core group of research and promotion entities that provide the professional support for industrial recruitment and marketing (Economic Development Partnership of Alabama, the utilities—Alabama Power, Energen, Tennessee Valley Authority, Alabama Electric Cooperative, and the metropolitan economic development agencies). This group has targeted six industries as the primary focus for economic development—automotive, aerospace, biotech, chemical, distribution and forest products.

Counties and regions may have some sense of their strengths with respect to the existing manufacturing base and workforce skills, but tend to rely on the direction and opinions of the more informed and better funded organizations previously mentioned. In addition, one strong suggestion from the state development agency and Governor’s Office is that the local role is to prepare their area and local decision-making organization in order to respond to requests and exploration from prospective investors. Thus their primary orientation is to focus on identifying property, acquiring options, developing infrastructure and incentives, and to understand and remedy any workforce issues in order to support economic development.

The CEDS have become the primary tool used as basis for distributing state and federal funds administered by State of Alabama agencies. These plans are cursorily updated each year, with more detailed long-range updates every third or fifth year. For the planning and update process, the regions rely on the involvement and input of their boards, which consist primarily of elected officials (mayors, county commissioners, probate judges). Although there may be representation of economic developers, chambers of commerce, educational institutions, and at large civic leaders, the systematic approach to identifying a broad-based group of constituents is not emphasized or communicated in the process.

CEDS typically contain a SWOT analysis and a listing of project priorities (tabular summary provided as mentioned previously). Their goal statements are broad (e.g., “To increase and improve the local transportation opportunities that link up neighborhoods, counties and cities.”), with little or no details on specific objectives, action steps, organizational responsibility, and timeframe. This may probably result from the state’s use of CEDS as guiding documents for funding allocation. Thus the focus is on the needed improvements of the built environment (roads, bridges, airports, industrial parks, healthcare facilities, schools) and less emphasis on the capacity building needed to support planning, decision making, budgeting, and continuous investment and development.

Statewide Initiatives—Governor Bob Riley is launching a Rural Economic Development initiative at the end of April, 2007 which will organize the state into eight regions, roughly coinciding with the existing Regional Development Commissions. The WAEM WIRED counties will be attached to the following current Regional Development Commissions: Northwest Alabama Council of Local Governments (Marion); West Alabama Development Commission (Fayette, Hale, Greene, Lamar, Pickens, Tuscaloosa); Birmingham Regional Planning Commission (Walker); Alabama-Tombigbee Regional Commission (Choctaw, Clarke, Conecuh, Dallas, Marengo, Monroe, Perry, Sumter, Wilcox); and Central Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission (Lowndes). At the state level there will be an operating board made up of a state level executive committee, the co-chairs of each of the regions and an advisory board. Each region will have an operating board headed by two co-chairs and a minimum of four operating committees (economic development, education/workforce, healthcare and infrastructure). The charge to each region is to develop a strategic plan of action for each of the focal areas, with implementation strategies, and implementation assignments and timelines. Leadership development, strategic planning, inter-regional cooperation and private-public partnerships are the foundation of this initiative with each region taking the responsibility of identifying resources and volunteer support for implementation. This initiative reports directly to the Governor and has access to all agencies through the Governor and the Governor’s cabinet.

Regional Initiatives—Regional development councils or commissions have been in place since the mid-1960s with enabling legislation and longstanding funding support from the U.S. Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration and the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (which administers state and federal funds for infrastructure and technical assistance), Appalachian Regional Commission, Delta Regional Authority, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, U.S. Department of Labor, and U.S. Department of Energy. The regional councils work with the elected leadership of the counties and communities they represent, providing assistance in securing and administering federal and state grants, planning, transportation, senior services and other programs as directed by the council’s board. The five regional councils where the WIRED counties are located have been actively involved in education and workforce development issues (through the Workforce Investment Areas and regional task forces), infrastructure development (long-term improvement plans of roads, ports, airports, bridges, industrial parks, access roads), law enforcement, safety and security issues, and access to healthcare.

Regional economic development initiatives have been a private-public effort involving the utilities, the larger manufacturing firms, banks, universities and economic development professional organizations. These multi-county organizations focus on industrial development activities (property options, site preparation, infrastructure development, financial incentives, legal and inter-governmental issues), and marketing, as well as workforce recruitment and training. Nearly all of the WIRED Counties are part of a regional economic development initiative, with industry focuses, infrastructure development plans, and a commitment to workforce development. The less developed counties are still somewhere in the beginning or intermediate states of organizing and

bolstering support for the implementation of their ideas and plans. The Workforce Investments Areas (WIAs) have driven the process of regional strategic plans and public-private coalitions to target skills development, worker certification, and re-training and placement opportunities for displaced workers.

There are several regional economic development organizations in the 18 West Alabama WAEM WIRED counties. The *Walker County Economic and Industrial Development Authority* operates autonomously but also has a cooperative agreement with the *Birmingham Metropolitan Development Board*. Lamar, Fayette and Pickens Counties successfully organized a private-public partnership called the *West Alabama Economic Development Authority*. Sumter and Greene Counties have a working agreement between their two county industrial boards. The *Tuscaloosa County Industrial Development Authority* is responsible for Tuscaloosa County, but also provides assistance to the counties immediately surrounding Tuscaloosa. Monroe and Conecuh are part of the *Coastal Gateway Economic Development Authority*. Lowndes County receives direct assistance from the *Montgomery Chamber of Commerce* and the *Alabama Development Office*. *Twin Rivers Economic Development Partnership* is a new organization that is being formed to represent the coalition between Choctaw and Clarke Counties.

County Level—Most of the 18 counties have a county level chamber of commerce and industrial development authority or board that focus on the business and economic development needs of that county. These organizations work in tandem with the regional and state level organizations to enhance and promote their local areas. The majority of these organizations are active in the state level organizations, have a working relationship with state and regional development groups and have frequent interaction with various information and marketing resources. This provides the local organizations with an understanding of the state’s strategic direction, an understanding of the infrastructure and labor needed to support a targeted group of industries and their role in the overall equation. Many of the counties and towns have an interest in downtown revitalization, and a rudimentary understanding of market trading areas and the need to identify opportunities in agricultural, housing, retail and commercial activities. Support to various communities on local comprehensive and broad-based economic development has been provided by the Alabama Historical Commission’s “Mainstreet” program, “Your Town Alabama,” Auburn University Center for Architecture and Urban Studies “Small Town Design Initiative,” the “Alabama Communities of Excellence” program, Auburn University Rural Studio and the University of Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network. In addition, several of the WIRED counties and communities have accessed technical assistance from the community and economic development staffs of Alabama Power, Alabama Gas Corporation, Alabama Electric Corporation, the University of West Alabama, the University of Alabama Center for Economic Development, and the Auburn University Economic and Community Development Institute. Companies in the WIRED region receive technical assistance on business, engineering, and workforce training from the *Alabama Technical Assistance Network* (Alabama’s affiliate to National Institute of Science and Technology’s Manufacturing Extension Program with specializations ranging from biotechnology, environmental and green technologies, automotive, etc)

which has 16 specialized technology centers, five of which are in the region; the *Small Business Development Center Network*, the *Alabama Industrial Development Training* program, and various specialized centers of the major state universities serving the area.

Most counties and many communities have a general strategic plan. Many do not understand how to make a plan operational, or how to bridge changes in leadership. A great need throughout the area is on-going leadership development which emphasizes regional collaboration and regional strategies. Auburn University and the Alabama Cooperative Extension System have recently re-organized their community development staff and will be emphasizing leadership development training and increasing their resources committed to this area. As many of the WAEM WIRED counties are considered some of the most rural and underserved in Alabama, this area will receive significant attention from Auburn/ACES in the coming two years.

Economic Development Assets

The region has many types of assets—cultural, social, political, natural, financial, infrastructure, human capital, institutional—some of which are not fully developed with a few at nascent stages (e.g., entrepreneurship development and broadband availability). Development plans and strategies often mention natural resources, typically for developing tourism and for energy production. Churches are underutilized assets, especially for the quality of life focus where they can be very valuable.

Organizations—The primary organizations serving the WIRED counties are described in the economic development strategies section above. These include the regional development commissions, the local and county chambers of commerce, the county and regional economic development organizations and the industrial development authorities and boards. These organizations are supported and supplemented by assistance from the utility companies, the educational institutions, specialty centers, and state and federal agencies. There are several civic organizations and groups that provide community service, care for the environment, etc.

Institutions—These include educational and health care institutions, churches, government agencies, foundations, and non-governmental entities in the region. State and federal funding and private company funding provide support for some of these institutions.

Physical infrastructure—The significant physical infrastructure supporting economic development include the built infrastructure of airports, bridges, buildings, highways, industrial sites and parks, and river ports and also for communications.

Airports—There are 18 civil airports throughout the 18-county West Alabama WAEM WIRED area with runways ranging from 2,700 to 8,000 feet. Three of the airports are coded by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and six have officially published instrument approach procedures (IFR standards) making them accessible during inclement weather conditions.

Buildings and Industrial Sites and Parks—The 18-county region has 63 available buildings sufficient for industry needs, ranging from 7,500 to 278,000 square feet, with 14 of these buildings exceeding 100,000 square feet. In addition, these counties have 104 industrial sites, most prepared with the basic utilities and the majority within 5 miles of a state or US highway. Forty-five of these sites range from 9 to 80 acres, and four of these are considered mega-sites, having from 1,350 to 1,600 acres.

Highways--The major north-south highways spanning the region are Highway 43 (through Marion, Fayette, Tuscaloosa, Greene, Marengo, and Clarke Counties), Highway 69 (through Walker, Tuscaloosa, Hale, Marengo, and Clarke Counties), and Highway 17 (through Lamar, Pickens, Sumter, and Choctaw Counties). The east-west connections between Mississippi and Alabama are Highways 78 (connecting Tupelo to Hamilton), Highway 82 (connecting Columbus to Tuscaloosa), Highway 80 (connecting Meridian to Demopolis), and Highway 84 (connecting Waynesboro to Choctaw, Clarke, Monroe and Conecuh counties). The I-85 Extension is on the drawing board and may provide an additional East/West access in the future. I-20/59 runs diagonally, southwesterly, through Tuscaloosa, Greene, and Sumter counties.

Railroads—Many of these counties have been historically linked to the coal and forest products industries, which has resulted in significant rail infrastructure throughout this region. Burlington Northern serves Greene, Lamar, Marengo, Pickens, Walker and Wilcox Counties. CSX Transportation serves Conecuh, Dallas, Lowndes, Marengo and Tuscaloosa Counties. Kansas City Southern serves Pickens and Tuscaloosa Counties. Norfolk Southern serves Clarke, Dallas, Fayette, Greene, Hale, Perry, Sumter, Tuscaloosa and Wilcox Counties.

Waterways, Rivers, River Ports—The Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway project has provided significant investments in Pickens, Greene and Sumter Counties, creating river ports at various sites. These sites include: Pickens County Port (Burlington Northern Railroad), Aliceville River Terminal and Bevill-Hook Port/Aliceville in Pickens County; Crossroads of America Port/Boligee (Burlington Northern Railroad) in Greene County; and the Port of Epes in Sumter County. In addition, the Tombigbee River boasts the Pennington Site in Choctaw County, and the Coffeerville Site (Norfolk Southern Railroad) in Clarke County.

Tourism and Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure—Western Alabama is rich in culture and history (pre-Columbian Native American, European settlement, pre and post-Civil war, civil rights) and the natural resources that provide opportunities for experiential tourism and outdoor recreation. The Alabama, Black Warrior, and Tombigbee Rivers, along with the various impounded lakes created by locks and dams, provide ample boating and fishing sites. Hunting destinations, improved and primitive camping sites and numerous hiking trails are available year around for use by residents and tourists. This area contains the Talladega National Forest—Oakmulgee District (Hale, Perry, Tuscaloosa Counties), 6 state parks, 23 marinas, numerous wildlife management areas, numerous natural and man-made lakes and managed private forestlands, many with private and destination hunting lodges.

There are two organized regional tourism organizations within this area. The West Alabama Regional Tourism Alliance represents Greene, Hale, Marengo, Perry, and Sumter Counties. The Alabama-Tombigbee Tourism Program (Alabama's Southwest) has developed a comprehensive system of programs and trails highlighting the culture, history and crafts in Southwest Alabama, which includes Clarke, Choctaw, Conecuh, Dallas, Marengo, Monroe, Perry and Wilcox Counties. The Tuscaloosa Convention and Visitor's Bureau promotes museums and destinations throughout West Alabama, including their venues on its websites, its publications and in its marketing campaigns. In addition, Black Belt Treasures is a non-profit created in 2005 to promote and support the arts and crafts of 18 Black Belt counties, which include all the WAEM WIRED area, with the exclusion of Fayette, Lamar, Tuscaloosa and Walker Counties. At the state level, the State of Alabama's Bureau of Tourism and Travel is supporting the development of the Black Belt Heritage Area, which may apply for national status, which includes Choctaw, Clarke, Conecuh, Dallas, Greene, Hale, Lowndes, Marengo, Perry, Pickens, Sumter and Wilcox Counties.

Socioeconomic Structure and Dynamics—Analysis of socioeconomic trends and dynamics for the 18 counties using selected demographic and economic indicators showed that only Tuscaloosa County outperformed the state as a whole over the 1990 to 2005 period. None of the remaining 17 counties managed to keep pace; they all underperformed. Variables considered in the assessment include labor force, employment (persons employed), unemployment, underemployment, population, housing units, per capita income, average wage per job, poverty, educational attainment, real output, wage and salary employment (jobs), and business sales. Trends in these variables were analyzed for the period from 1990 to 2004 or to 2005, depending on data availability. By current employment statistics, manufacturing is the dominant economic sector for 13 counties. Five counties are non-specialized (or mixed) economies and none are services-dominant economies. Manufacturing, trade, services, and government provide most of the region's jobs.

Population projections and forecasts of real economic output and employment were made for the 18 counties in the study in five-year intervals from 2005 through 2030. Economic forecasts were for industry sectors using the one-digit SIC (Standard Industrial Classifications) codes. Three counties are projected to have double-digit population growth; Tuscaloosa (21.2 percent), Hale (20.5 percent), and Lowndes (14.2 percent). Tuscaloosa County will add the most new residents, nearly 35,800. Only Greene County is expected to lose residents, by 0.8 percent.

Real economic output and jobs will increase in all counties over the forecast period. Output growth will be fastest in Hale County with 118 percent higher in 2030 than in 2005, followed by Marion with 110 percent, Lowndes with 106 percent, Clarke with 103 percent, and Tuscaloosa with 97 percent. Fayette County will have the lowest output growth with 29 percent. Jobs located in each county will grow from 15 percent for Perry County to 98 percent for Clarke County; Tuscaloosa will have the second fastest job growth with 78 percent.

Working Together

There is very little record of bi-state or cross-border regional collaboration for development involving the WAEM WIRED region counties. A few of the reviewed documents and plans call for regional collaboration with neighboring counties, but typically these are for intrastate county groupings (e.g. a multi-county Corridor X group that includes Marion and Walker counties).

The states of Mississippi and Alabama have begun to explore potential bi-lateral economic development efforts under Governors Haley Barbour and Bob Riley. Two state level summits have been held in the East Mississippi-West Alabama region, highlighting the commonality between both regions and the rationale for collaboration. The states have discussed a common industrial park near the I-20/59 corridor that would draw its workforce from both states. It is not clear whether an organizational structure exists to provide policy direction or carry out the implementation of any of the ideas considered during these efforts; the WAEM WIRED effort is the exception.

Extent to Which Studies Inform or Influence Economic and Workforce Development Approaches

Many of the economic studies are commissioned by local or state-level agencies and organizations. Thus, these studies do inform decision makers at various levels. However, it is not clear how much these studies influence economic and workforce development approaches. Anecdotal evidence indicates that studies are often shelved for two main reasons. The first pertains to limited funds for development and the second relates to frequent changes in leadership or championing of development efforts, especially for rural counties. A survey of economic developers would help to fully grasp the extent to which economic studies and economic development plans and strategies inform and influence local, regional, and statewide economic and workforce development approaches.