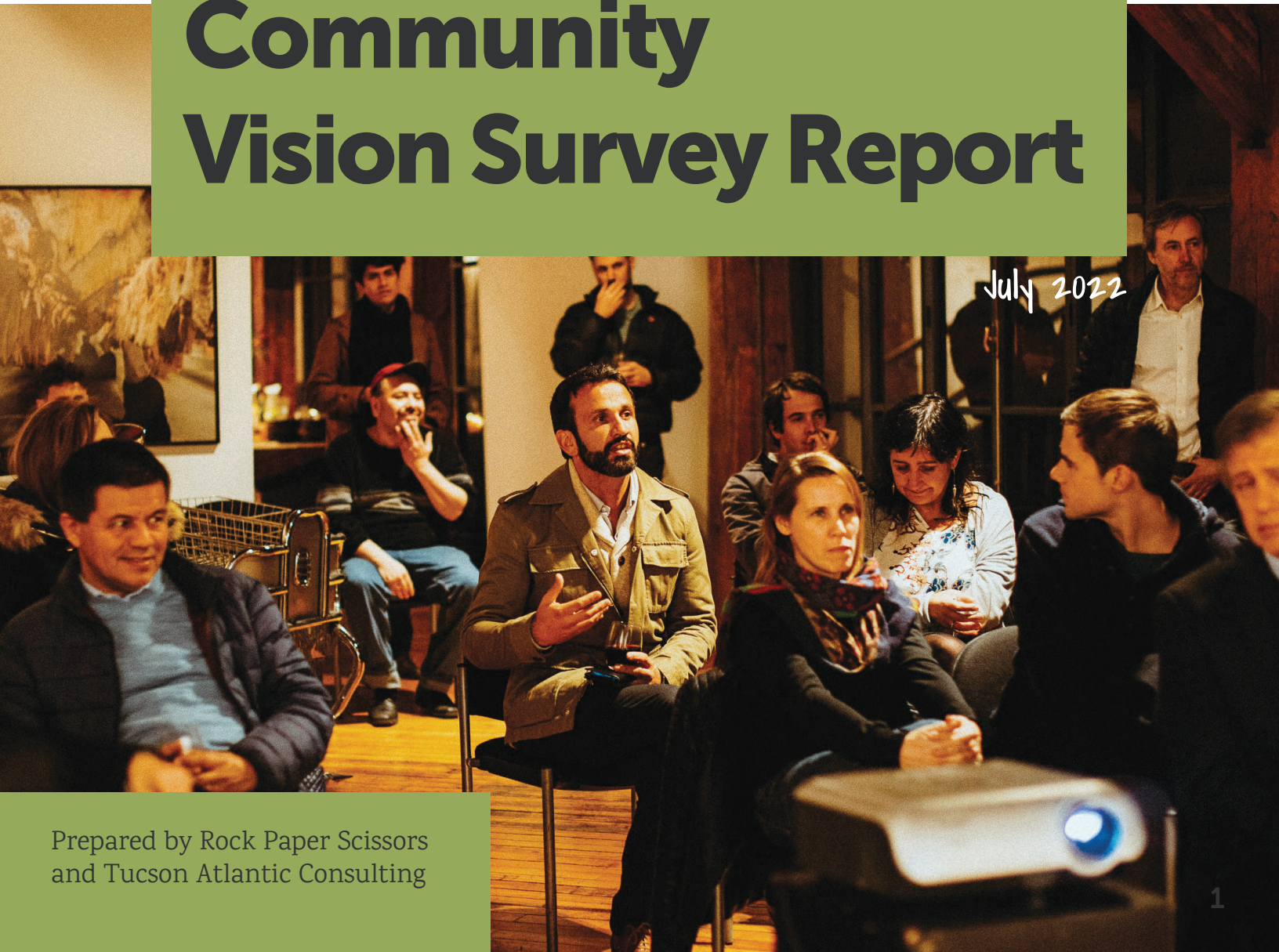




Strategic Plan Focus Groups, Town Halls, Interviews & Community Vision Survey Report



Prepared by Rock Paper Scissors
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Public Input

An economic development strategy must be based on two important cornerstones: broad public input and consensus to ensure widespread support of the plan; and a shared vision for the future to guide policies and actions.

The combination of surveys and meetings helps ensure that every citizen of Rabun County has an opportunity to provide input whether they are computer literate or not.





Focus Groups



Focus groups were held to collect feedback from specific groups of people in regard to the current state of Rabun County including its strengths and weaknesses, challenges residents and business people currently face, and what they would like after to see in the future. Five focus groups, each with 8 to 12 participants, were held representing the following parts of the community: manufacturing/business, retail/restaurant, general group of residents, Chamber of Commerce representatives and a teen/youth group. The teen focus group was also held to give the younger generation a voice in the future plans of Rabun County, where the Strategic Plan team heard their concerns and ideas for the future.



Manufacturing/Business

Key Takeaways

Assets:

- Rabun County is a great, clean and scenic place to live and regulations are much less restrictive than Atlanta.
- Workers (older ones particularly) are highly productive and have good work ethic.
- Rabun Country will “self itself” when it comes to recruiting executives. They enjoy the good life and they will move their companies.

Way to improve:

- Businesses in Rabun are having trouble finding workers. Many young people have drug problems and are tested before they are employed.
- It would be advantageous for North Georgia Tech to more integrated into the business community in Rabun County. They have expressed interest in doing so.
- Affordable housing has become a severe problem with many workers having to commute from other counties where housing is more available.
- Rabun is a bit far from a commercial airport.
- Daycare badly needed.



Restaurant, Retail & Service

Key Takeaways

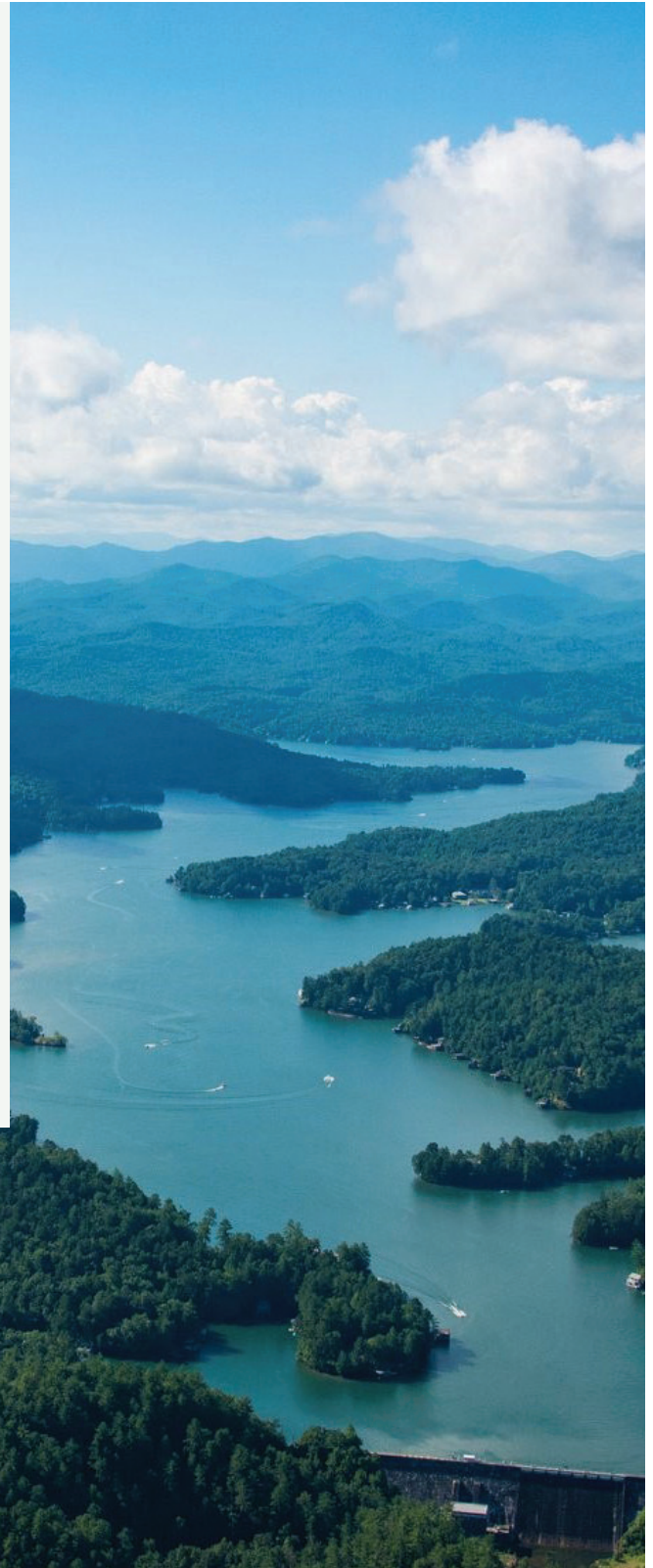
- Direct change in a way that maintains and enhances what we have.
- Create more opportunities for activities that kids and families can enjoy (ex: more structured activities).
- Better housing options. Could consider rentals above buildings in town, like Asheville. Teachers, young professionals, etc. need more affordable places to live.
- Create opportunities to connect high school students to local businesses.
- Better advertising about what's already here and available (ex: 3 state parks in the county, how people can come here and easily get to other nearby locations).
- More unity between the county and cities - work as a team.
- Ways for those who want to start a business here but aren't sure where to start to connect with those who are knowledgeable about it.
- Protect the greenery on 441 and clean up the corridor, and protect the natural resources.
- Protect the small-town values.
- Workforce is a big challenge. Hiring and keeping employees is a challenge. Create more job opportunities.
- The seasonal economy poses a big challenge.
- Water and sewer needs improvement. Need to increase lines and get them on the 441 corridor.
- Internet and public safety are also infrastructure issues that need work.



General

Key Takeaways

- Maintain the beauty and simplicity of life here. Keep as much green space as possible.
- Need to do better at adapting to the demographics and offering something for young people and families to enjoy - not just retirees.
- Infrastructure improvements are needed for roadways, internet access, parking in downtown Clayton, etc.
- Make the county appealing for kids to return to after high school & college.
- Create places to go & enjoy activities that are revenue-generating.
- Local healthcare system needs improvements.
- Talent development is needed in the area.
- Remember the high poverty rate and find the funding for people who need it.
- Daycare choices are limited. Need more daycare options.
- Better housing options.





Rabun County Chamber of Commerce

Key Takeaways

- Enhance what we have.
- Better transportation options (shuttles, cabs, Uber, etc.) so residents and visitors can go and enjoy vineyards and other places.
- Food delivery like Uber Eats & Grub Hub would also be nice to have.
- Better parking in downtown Clayton is needed.
- More parks and places to enjoy the outdoors.
- Improve water/sewer, roadways, internet.
- Add an arts center.
- Create more programming for young families to keep them here. Ex: movie theater, skating rink, outdoor movies in the summer at the football field, etc.
- Offer more for younger demographics at the rec center.
- Add an indoor pool for year-round swimming lessons - this is a life-saving skill that is important with the lakes, streams, etc. in the area.
- Build on the dual enrollment program North GA Tech offers at the high school for continuing ed & night classes. Use the Board of Education building.
- More soft skills training
- 441 is a major highway for drug trafficking.
- More intergovernmental cooperation.
- Better healthcare options - partner with a larger hospital like Northeast GA to help change the perception
- Better job opportunities are needed to keep younger people here after high school & college.



Teens

Key Takeaways



Assets:

- Very attuned to what's going on in the community.
- Appreciate that the county has a small town feeling and plentiful natural resources and scenery to enjoy.
- Understand what makes the community unique.
- Like the fact that you know many people in your community and have someone to turn to when you need help.
- Like seeing the mountains without homes all over them.
- Want to come back at some point after college.
- Want to make sure that when housing options are added, it's worked into the natural landscape vs. clearing the land & building.
- Don't turn Rabun County into a city like Atlanta.
- Realizes compromise is necessary for future growth.

Way to Improve:

- Aren't sure about the possibility of moving back right after college - they see the need for more job opportunities in order for that to happen.
- Need more things to do like bowling, a movie theater, etc. More places to shop and go out to eat.
- Jobs that apply to people with college degrees seem to be lacking.
- They know that businesses are having trouble finding workers.
- Some younger people just don't want to work, while others are trying to balance school, athletics and jobs which makes it challenging for them to work while in school.
- Housing is a challenge for lots of people - if you don't have family land, it will be hard to afford a home here in the future unless there are more apartments/options for working class.
- Feeling unprepared for adulthood. Would like to see more of this addressed in school. Would also like to have more career counseling or guidance and opportunities to learn from local professionals to help narrow down ideas of what careers they might want to pursue.



Town Hall



Two town hall meetings were held to provide citizens of Rabun County the opportunity to express their ideas and concerns in regard to the future growth of the county in a public forum. These meetings included moderators to pose questions to attendees and ensure conversations stayed on track.

Town Hall Meetings

Key Takeaways

- Scenic beauty and natural resources.
- Tourism - must protect the industry.
- Need planners to counter development pressure.
- Need to revamp/update zoning ordinances.
- Need better internet with fiber optics.
- Housing growth must be controlled, with better zoning and subdivision regulations.
- New industry and activities should be eco-friendly. Highways should offer some green space.
- Schools must work more closely to train worker shortages, notably construction & retail trades.
- Broadband is needed in the rural areas of Rabun County.
- Infrastructure such as bridges & utilities need repair.
- A grant writer needs to be employed by the County.
- Better mental health facilities and programs need to be provided for Rabun County.
- A regular monthly "Town Hall" Meeting should be held for Rabun County citizens to have input.
- There exist a critical worker shortage in Rabun County, particularly among construction & retail trades.
- A critical need exist for low-cost, more affordable housing.
- The film industry should be recruited to Rabun County for it uses our natural beauty and pays well.
- Public safety is a big issue that no one talks about. We can't have growth without it.
- Keeping the greenery.
- Affordable housing - we have a lot of people here who have lots of money and people who don't so we must have affordable homes.
- Being more creative with the workforce. Kids aren't working as much because parents are concerned about their kids being out in the world.

- What do you say to people who don't think we need growth.
Change will happen whether we want it or not, especially with people moving out of Atlanta. Money talks.
- Can we measure what film does for the local economy? Films give really good boosts.
Everyone needs to be involved with determining what kind of growth we want. We can encourage the kind of growth and development we want and discourage what we don't want through planning & pushing things in the right direction.

People need to get involved & attend meetings. No one currently attends a lot of the planning & zoning, city council meetings, etc.

Moderator's Observation:

There was concern expressed with unbridled growth in Rabun County. Housing zoning and subdivisions should be modified to control growth. Citizens requested more transparency by public officials. Rabun does not need land-intensive manufacturers and doesn't have the labor supply or housing to support it. Fiber is needed in rural areas to ensure internet availability.

Individual Interviews



The Forward Rabun Executive Committee selected representatives from the Rabun County community to be interviewed individually as a part of the public input collection. This included elected officials, business people, and others to ensure a diverse selection of feedback. Many echoed the statements from town hall and focus group participants, and other interesting points were raised as well. All will be taken into consideration to build the strategic plan.

Key Takeaways

Housing

- Need affordable, middle-class housing.
- Need new building ordinances.
- Need land use plan.
- Need a county building inspector.
- Denser housing needed.
- Don't want any more section 8 housing.

Workforce

- Need white-collar jobs.
- Construction trade skills hard to find.
- Need professional skills.
- Need Doctors and Dentists.
- Drugs are a problem with young.
- Need resident engineers and an architect.

Utilities

- Clayton water & sewer needs major repairs & expansion.
- Natural gas needed.

Business Development

- Need more upscale hotel.
- Eco-tourism activities.
- No more growth.
- No large industries.
- Need daycare service.
- Need a convention center.
- Need commercial growth along 4412.
- Need mental health facility.

Education

- Excellent K-12 schools both public & private.
- Colleges need more interaction with industries.

County at-large

- Natural beauty of the area.
- Limited county private land ownership inhibits development.

Community Vision Survey



A community vision survey was conducted to offer residents and business people in Rabun County another opportunity to share their feedback on the current state of the county as a place to live and do business, as well as what they would like to see in the future. The survey was offered online and paper copies were provided at all focus groups and town hall meetings, as well as at the Rabun County Welcome Center, to ensure all residents had the opportunity to share their thoughts. The survey included open-ended questions on what respondents liked about living in Rabun County, what would make living in Rabun County better, and what they would like the county to “look like” in the coming years - their “vision” for the future. The survey also included closed-ended questions on growth and development in the county, the local economy, and quality of life.

Key Takeaways from Open-Ended Questions

Three things you like about living in Rabun County

- Rural, small-town feel.
- Knowing people.
- Natural beauty.
- Scenery – lakes and mountains.
- Schools.
- Step back in time – relaxing.
- Climate.
- Outdoor recreation.
- Common sense regulation.
- Affordable restaurants.

Three things that would make living in Rabun County better

- Affordable housing for workforce
- More healthcare options; more specialists.
- Better quality jobs.
- Better paying jobs.
- Slower growth.
- Consolidation of municipalities.
- A comprehensive growth plan.
- Managed development to protect resources.
- More retail stores; locals can't afford "boutique" shops.
- More culture.
- More green space in urbanized areas.
- Ordinances to protect the small-town charm.
- Better internet.
- Regulate AirBnB – too many.
- Activities for teens.
- Better equity between the wealthy and working-class.
- Mental health care.
- Governments working together better.
- Larger and better workforce.
- More mountain town, less upscale resort town.

Vision

Below is a representative sampling from the hundreds of respondent "vision statements."

- A place where all classes of people can live and work with the possibility of upward mobility within the county.
- Maintain small-town feel with managed growth and improved economy for people who live here.
- Thriving but not just a tourist venue.
- Better paying jobs, with less new tourists attractions and bid developments.
- Sustained growth, reaching a balance of agriculture, tourism, and industrial jobs.

- Affordable housing opportunities with high-paying jobs to support young families wishing to stay and live in Rabun County.
- A largely rural community preserving our natural beauty with pockets of lightly urbanized life in Clayton, Dillard, and Tiger
- Would like a more skilled industry, while keeping small town charm and values.
- Like our county to be a place the younger generation can raise their families with successful opportunities for employment.
- A place where the children and grandchildren of those who have lived here for generations can receive a first-rate education, can build or work in businesses and afford to live year-round in the place they call home.

Bottom line from the open-ended questions: The respondents really want to keep the beauty and small-town charm of Rabun County, but they want better jobs and a good growth plan. That is essentially their vision for the future that they want their children and grandchildren to inherit.

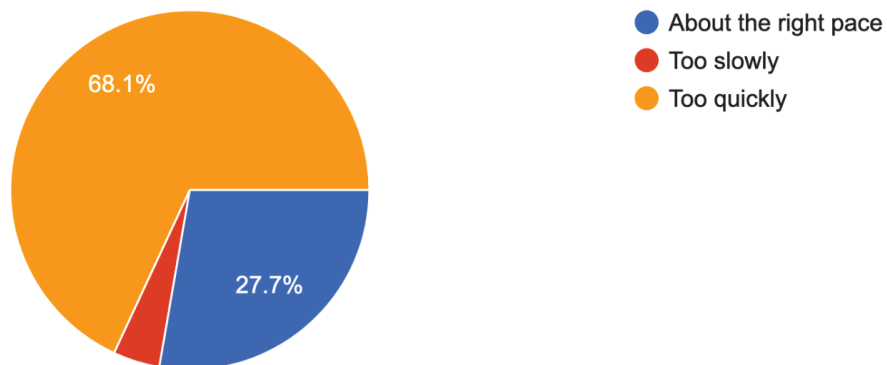
Key Takeaways from Closed-Ended Questions

Growth & Development

- Over two-thirds (68%) of respondents believe the county is growing too quickly and 78% believe stronger growth regulations are needed. However, 46% of respondents agree that growth provides better opportunity for Rabun County workers, as opposed to 30% who believe it does not (these percentages do not add up to 100% because respondents had the option of answering “neutral”).
- Looking at growth from another perspective, 55% of respondents do not believe that growth is enhancing the quality of life in Rabun County as opposed to 21% who believe it does. Hence a kind of contradiction: survey respondents believe growth enhances economic opportunity but does not enhance the quality of life. This illustrates a central challenge to development policy in the County that is discussed in several places in this report and is reflected in the above vision statements: find a way to grow the county without diminishing the quality of life.

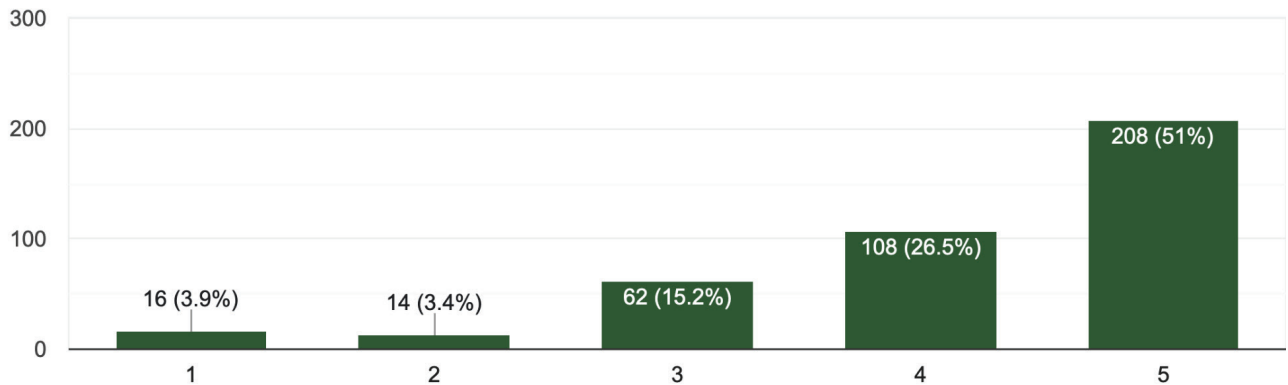
The County is growing at:

404 responses



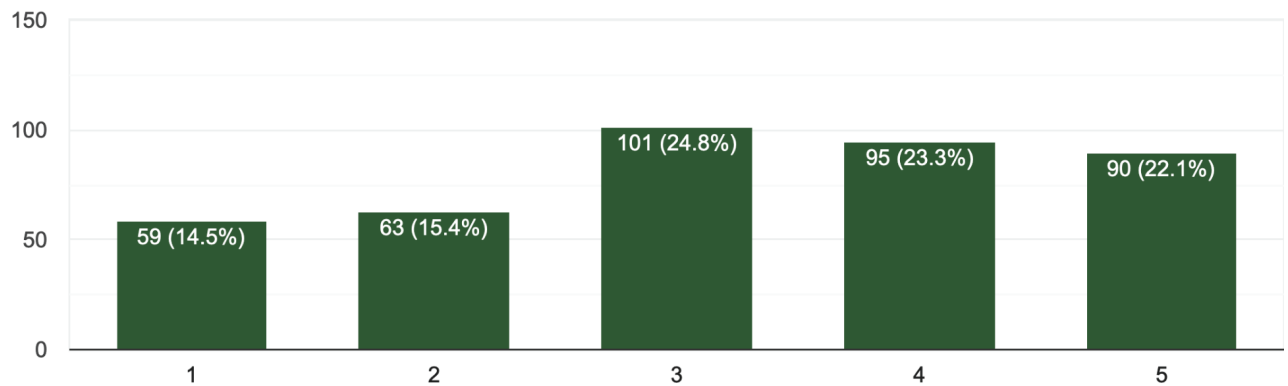
On a scale of 1 to 5, does the county need stronger growth regulations? (1 or 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral; 4 or 5 = agree)

408 responses



On a scale of 1 to 5, do you think growth provides better economic opportunity for Rabun County workers? (1 or 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral; 4 or 5 = agree)

408 responses



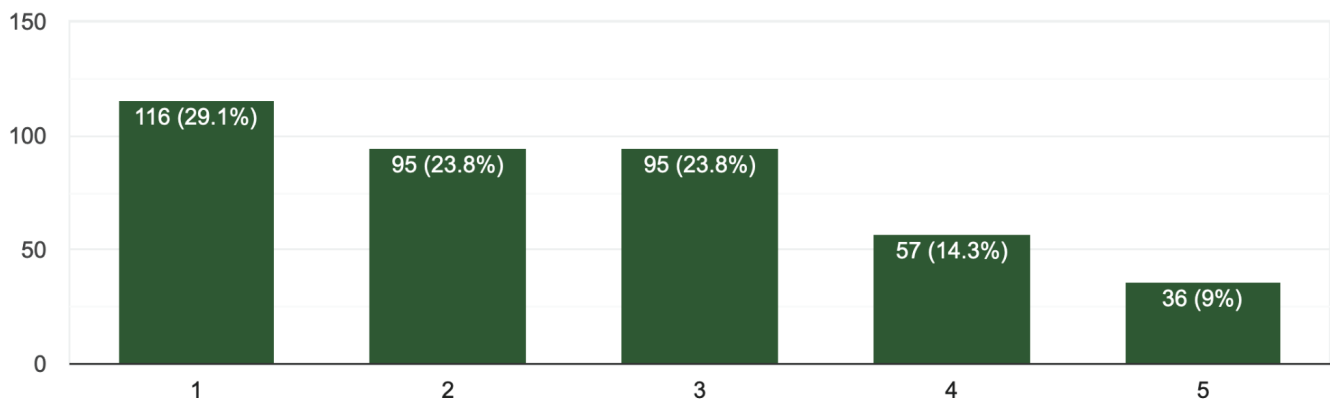
The Economy

- A majority of the respondents (53%) do not believe that good jobs are easy to find in Rabun County, as opposed to 23% who believe they are. Similarly, 64% of respondents believe that good workers are not easy to find in Rabun County as opposed to only 11% who believe they are.
- Several questions addressed the match of job to worker skill sets in the county. 44% believe that jobs in Rabun County do not meet the skills of the workforce, compared to 19% who believe they do. Overwhelmingly, 72% of respondents believe that more jobs with higher pay are needed in Rabun County.

- By a similar margin, 74% do not believe that salaries and wage rates are adequate to live in Rabun County compared to less than 9% who believe they are adequate. Related to that, 55% agree that it is important to grow and diversify the local economy to make it stronger, as opposed to 22% who do not.
- Responses were mixed as to whether the economy of Rabun County is too seasonal, with 36% believing that it is, and 30% believing that it is too seasonal.

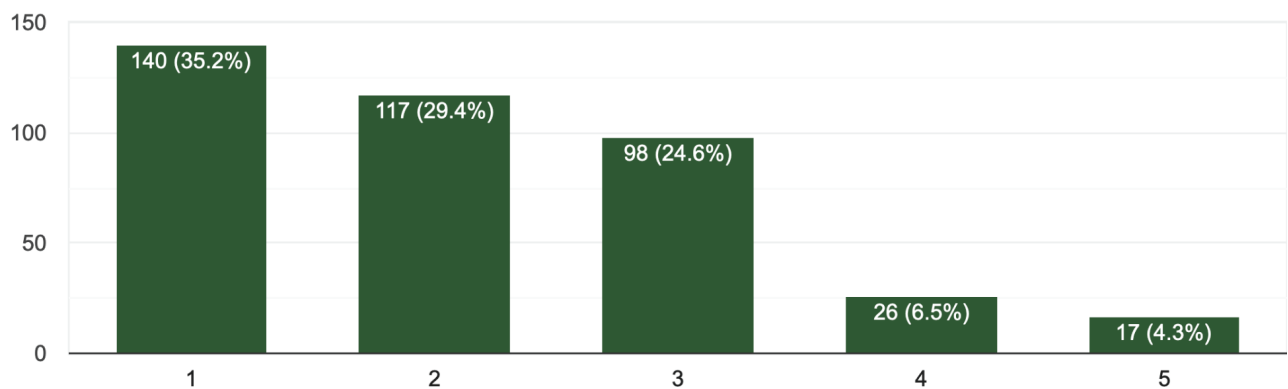
Good jobs are easy to find in Rabun County. (1 or 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral; 4 or 5 = agree)

399 responses



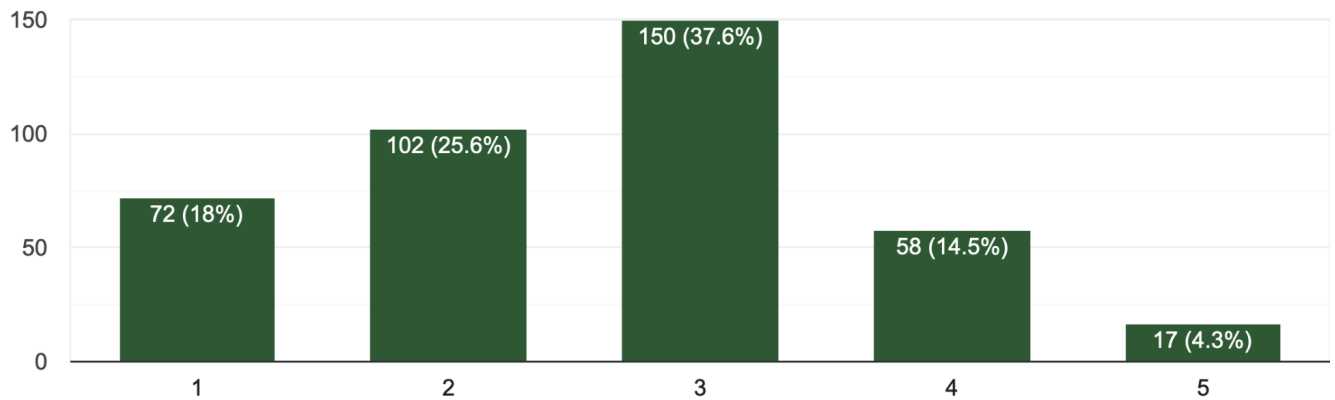
Good workers are easy to find in Rabun County. (1 or 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral; 4 or 5 = agree)

398 responses



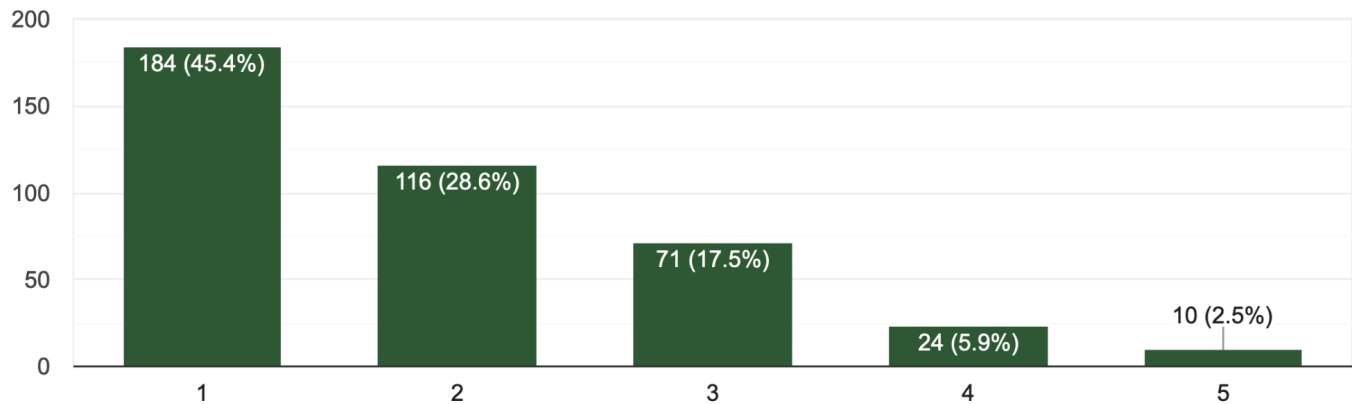
Jobs in Rabun County match the skills of the workforce. (1 or 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral; 4 or 5 = agree)

399 responses



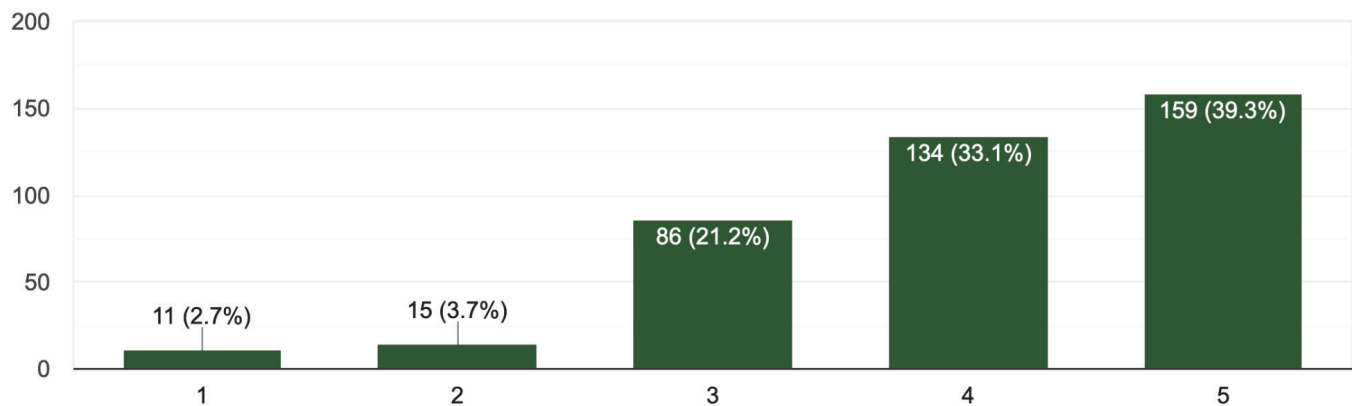
Salaries and wage rates are adequate to live in Rabun County.

405 responses (1 or 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral; 4 or 5 = agree)



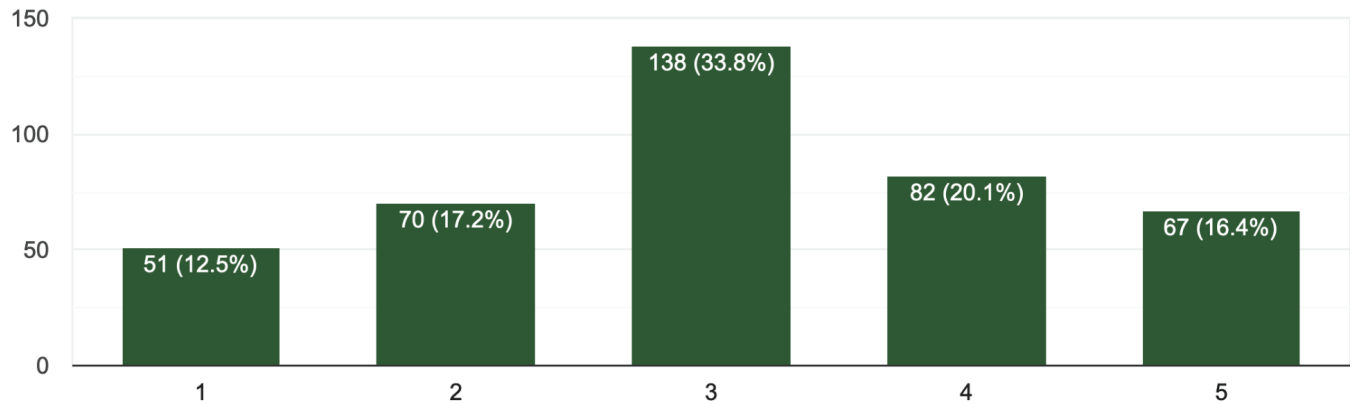
We need more skilled jobs with higher pay in Rabun County.

405 responses (1 or 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral; 4 or 5 = agree)



The economy in Rabun County is too seasonal. (1 or 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral; 4 or 5 = agree)

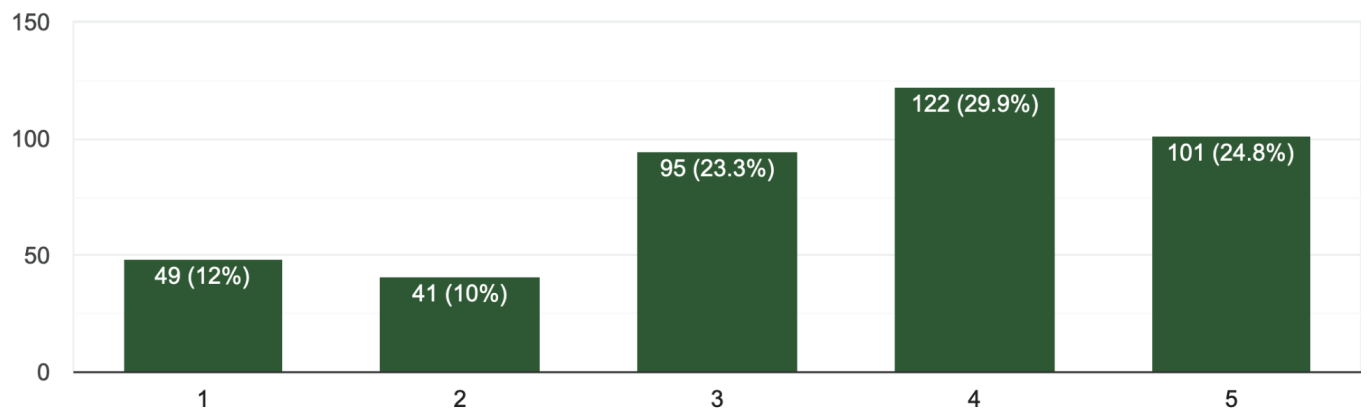
408 responses



We need to grow and diversify our local economy with new jobs to make it stronger.

408 responses

(1 or 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral; 4 or 5 = agree)

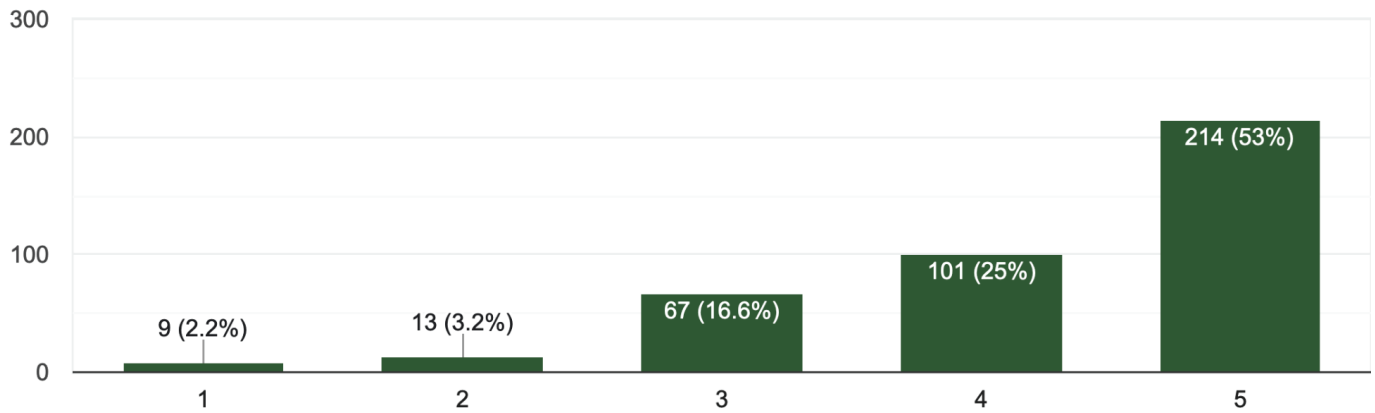


Quality of Life

- 78% of respondents believe that K-12 education is good in Rabun County, 84% believe that housing availability is not good in Rabun County, 60% do not believe that good medical care is available in Rabun County, and 66% do not believe that more national retail stores and restaurants would be a good thing for Rabun County.

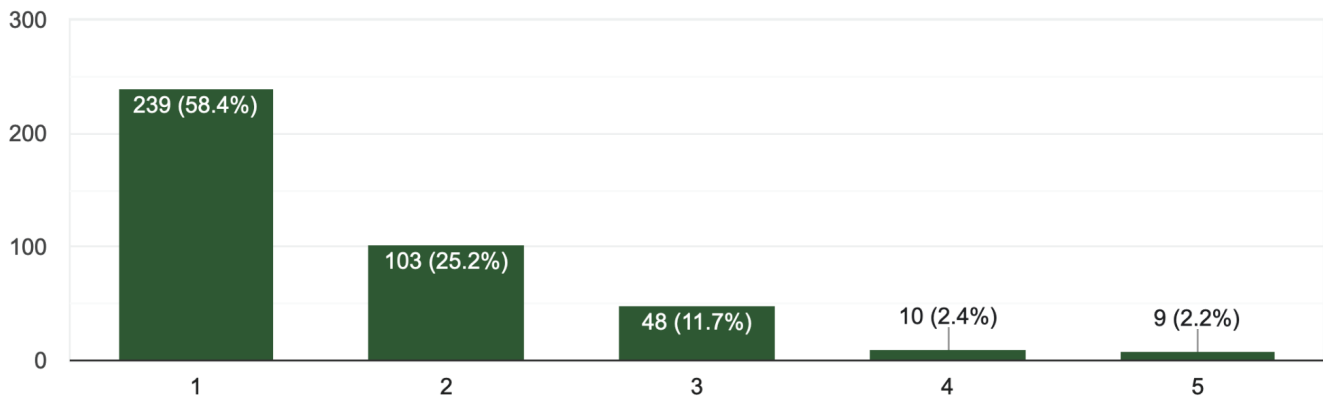
K-12 education is good in Rabun County. (1 or 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral; 4 or 5 = agree)

404 responses



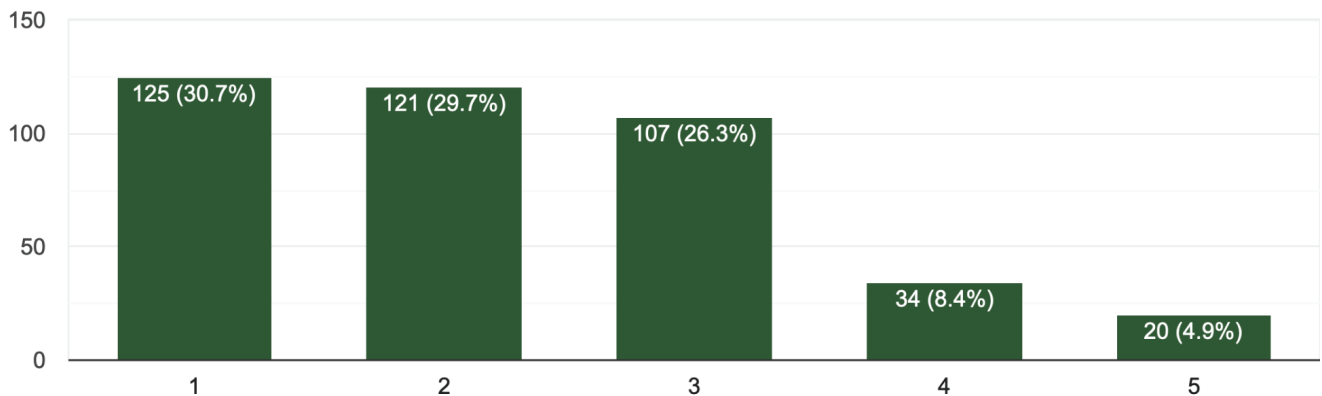
Housing availability is good in Rabun County. (1 or 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral; 4 or 5 = agree)

409 responses



Good medical care is available in Rabun County. (1 or 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral; 4 or 5 = agree)

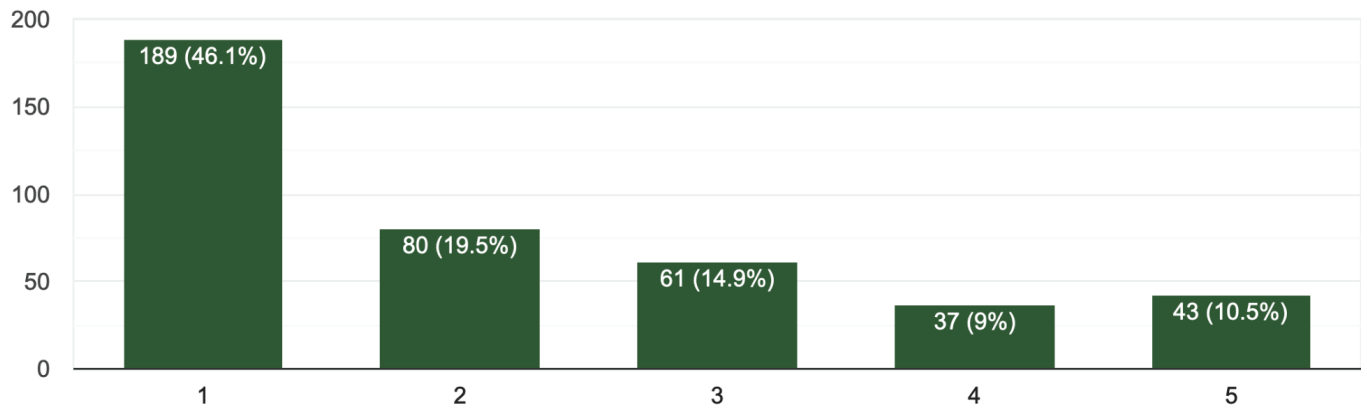
407 responses



More national retail stores and restaurants would be a good thing for Rabun County.

410 responses

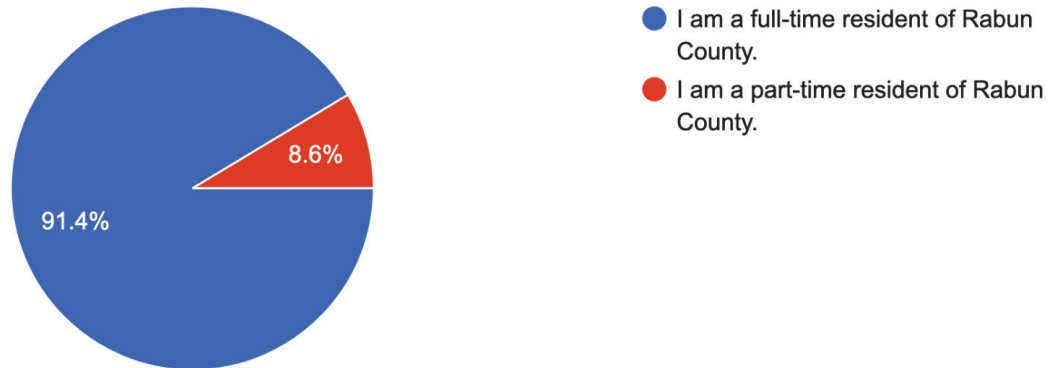
(1 or 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral; 4 or 5 = agree)



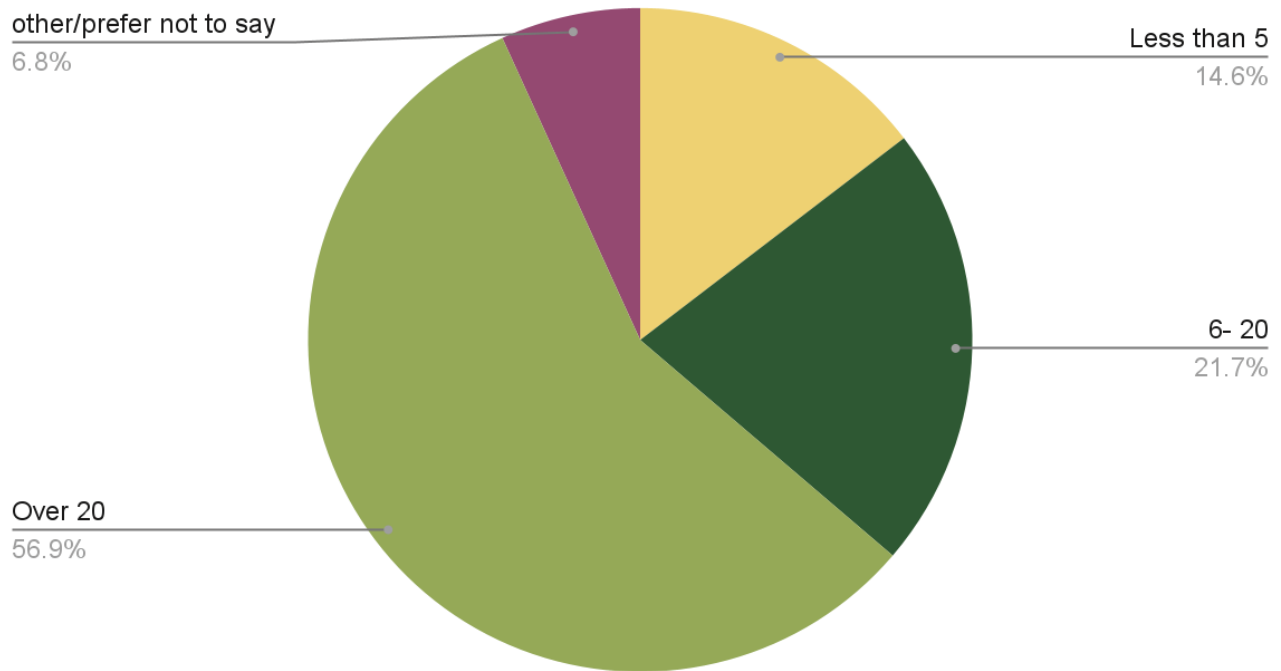
Bottom line from the closed-ended questions: Respondents to the survey believe that the County is growing too fast and that growth needs to be regulated. At the same time, they overwhelmingly want a stronger and more diversified economy with better jobs and higher pay to better match the skill sets of the existing workforce. Put another way, the survey is strong evidence that there is significant underemployment in Rabun County.

Select one.

395 responses

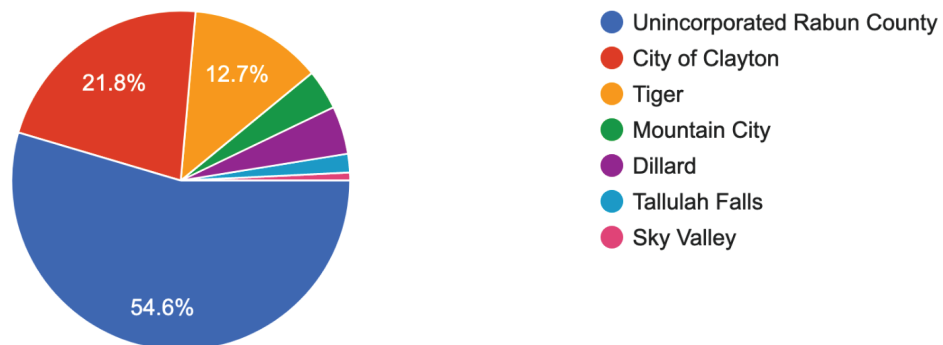


All Survey Respondents Years Living in Rabun County

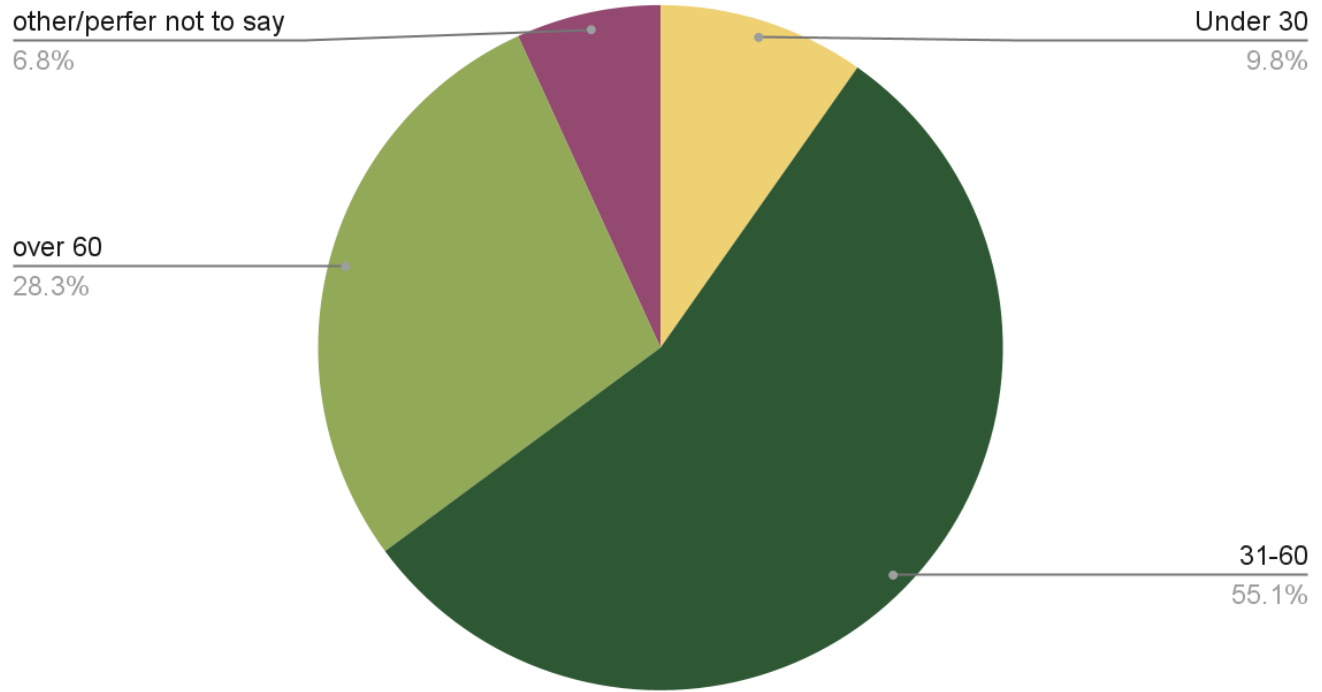


Where Respondents Live

394 responses

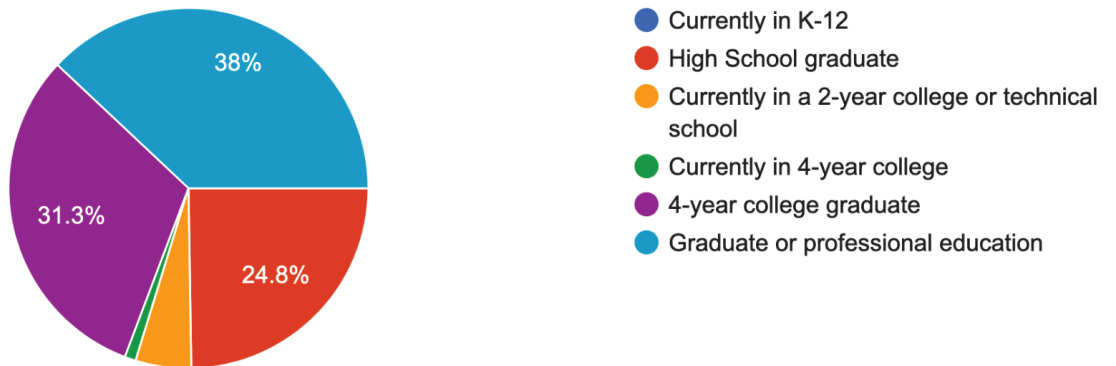


Survey Participant Ages



Education Level of Respondents

400 responses





Data Analysis

"To know your future you must know your past..."

...or similar quote has been attributed to numerous authors, and it certainly applies to community planning. Without an understanding of where a community currently stands in terms of key demographic, economic and social measures and how it got there, it is difficult to create a realistic and achievable plan for the future.

Sources for the Data Analysis section include Chmura.com (JobsEQ), EMSI and other commercial sources utilizing data from the Census Bureau, including the American Community Survey, and other sources. Unless otherwise noted, the data are for various dates between 2020 and 2022.

This section paints a brief statistical picture of where Rabun County currently stands and highlights some recent key trends. For certain measures where appropriate, Rabun County is compared to the state and the nation.

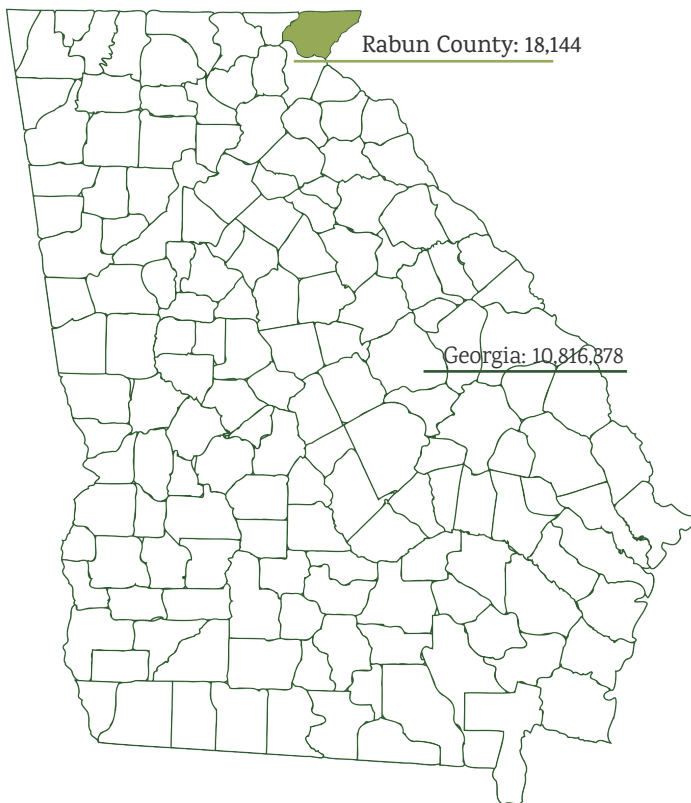
Demographics

Population

Total Population: According to the Census Bureau, the 2021 population (estimate) of Rabun County was 18,144 compared to 10,816,378 for the state. Rabun County represents less than one percent (.016%) of the state's population.

Population Growth: The population of Rabun County grew from 2010 to 2021 at about the same pace as the state: 11.4% vs. 11.6%, respectively.

Figure 1. Rabun County In Relation to Georgia

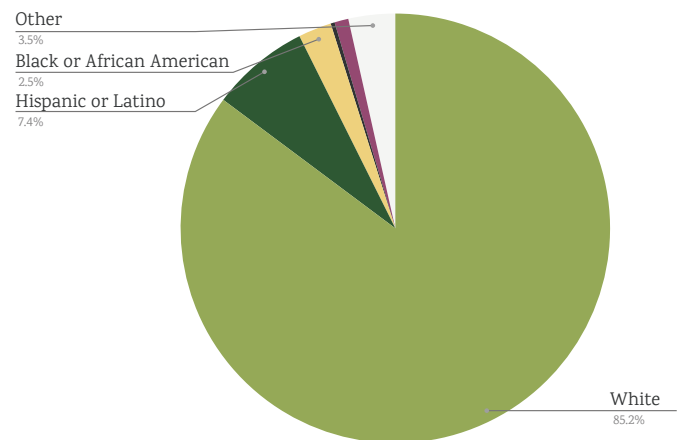


Race

Population by Race: Rabun County has a relatively small share of Hispanic, Black and other minority populations.

Figure 2. Rabun County Population by Race

Race	Percent	Number
White	92.0%	15,313
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	8.0%	1,334
Black or African American	2.7%	449
American Indian and Alaska Native	0.3%	55
Asian	1.1%	188
Other	3.8%	640

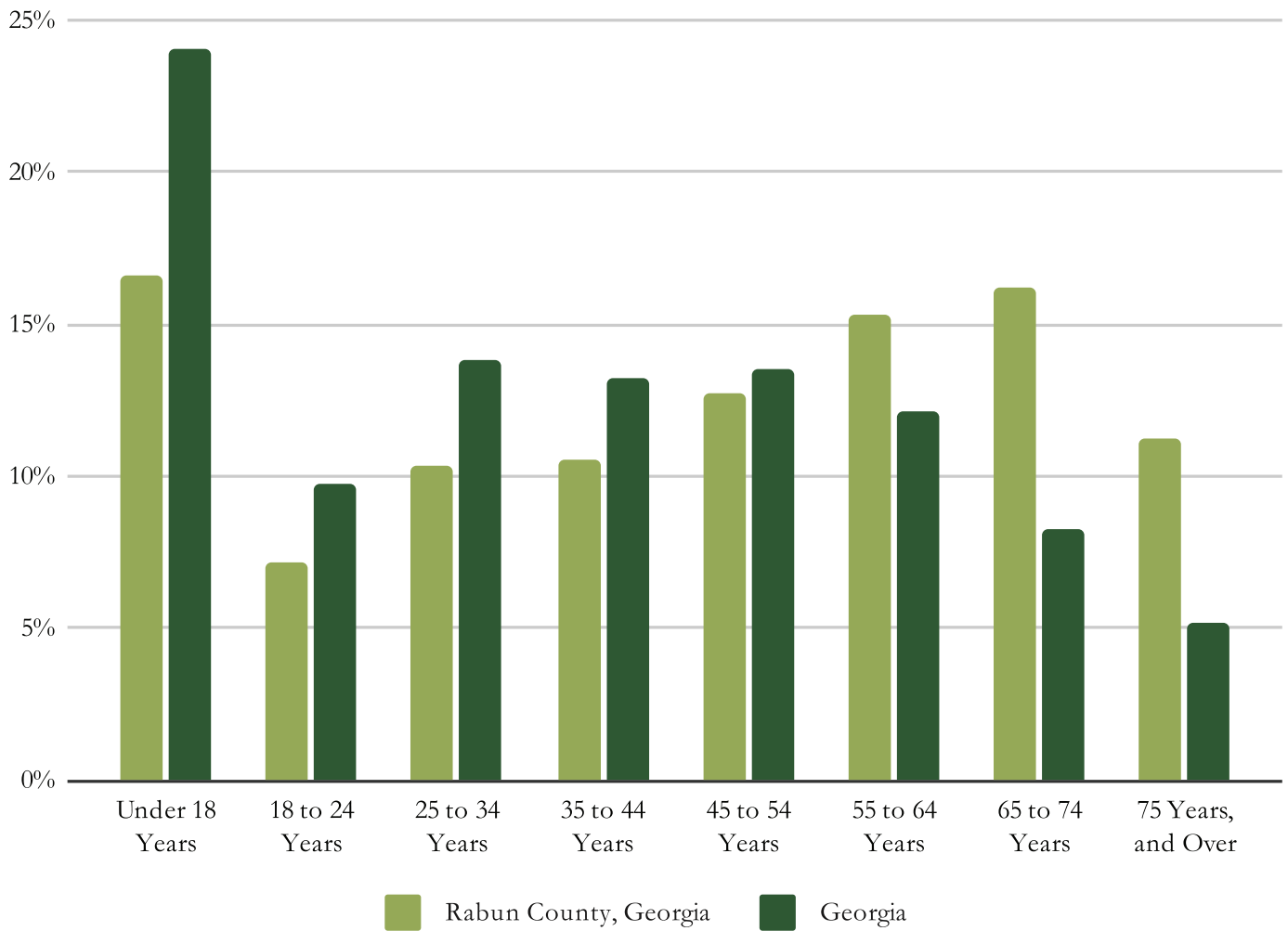


Age

Population by Age: Rabun County has larger shares of population in older cohorts (55 and above) and less in younger ones (18 and under through 45 to 54) than Georgia as a whole. This is especially pronounced in the under 18 cohort, but this is not surprising given that Rabun County has relatively fewer adults that are of child-bearing age compared to the state. Rabun County’s attractiveness as a retirement location no doubt contributes to its higher concentration of older residents.

Median Age: The median age (half below, half above) for Rabun County is 49.2 years compared to 36.7 for the state.

Figure 3. Population by Age Cohort



Educational Attainment

Typical of rural counties, Rabun County has relatively fewer residents with associate, bachelor or postgraduate degrees. In Rabun County, 26.1% of the residents have an associate degree or better, compared to 41.1% for the state.



Figure 4. Educational Attainment, Terminal Degree (Rabun County)

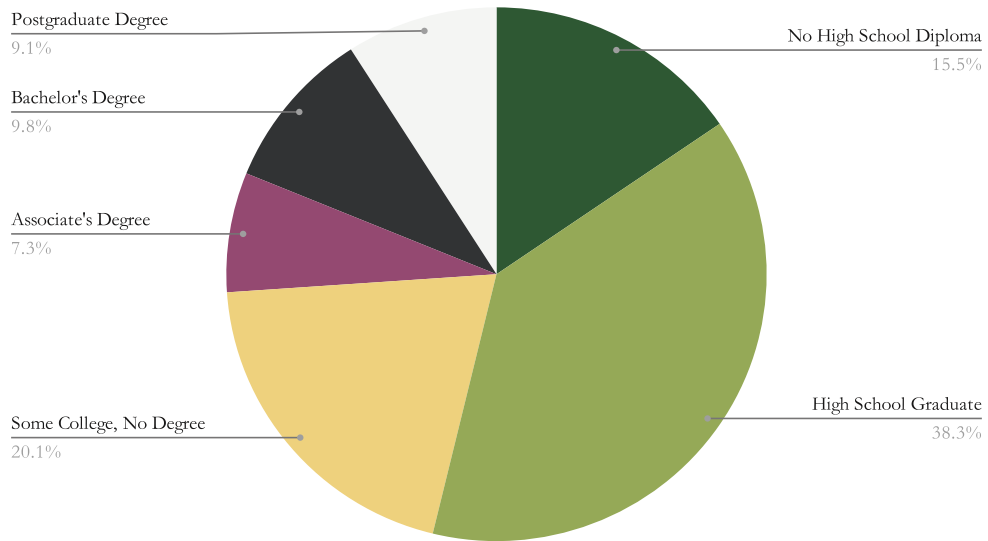
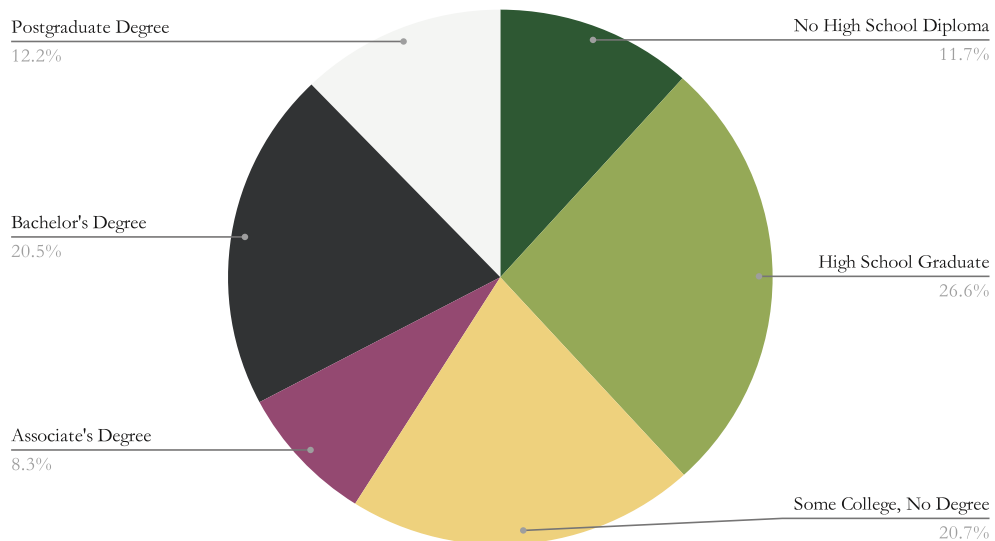


Figure 5. Educational Attainment, Terminal Degree (Georgia)





Housing

Housing markets are dynamic and statistical measurements vary. Reported sales prices differ from home values reported by the Census in that the latter are based on owners' estimates of value.

Housing Units: Rabun County has 12,620 housing units, 25.7% of which are rental units compared to 36.7% for the state.

House Value: The median house value (owner-occupied units) in Rabun County and the state are similar, \$174,500 vs. \$176,000.

Sales Price: According to Zillow, the median sales price for homes in Rabun County (end 2021) was \$345,000 compared to \$364,900 for the state.

Rabun County Sale Price: \$345,000
Georgia Sale Price: \$364,900

Housing Affordability: One common way to measure housing affordability in an area is the ratio of median home value to median income. A common rule of thumb is that a ratio of 2.5 or below represents good affordability.

This ratio calculates to 4.1 in Rabun County and 3.0 in the state. The ratio of median sales price to median income calculates to 8.1 in Rabun County and 6.2 in the state.

These ratios show that housing is significantly less affordable in Rabun County compared to the state. These higher ratios for Rabun County are driven in part by two things: lower median income in Rabun County and home values and selling prices relatively higher than in many rural areas of the state. Of course, the upscale retirement, mountain and lake homes in the County help drive up the home values and selling prices, which help explain the affordability ratios.

Economy

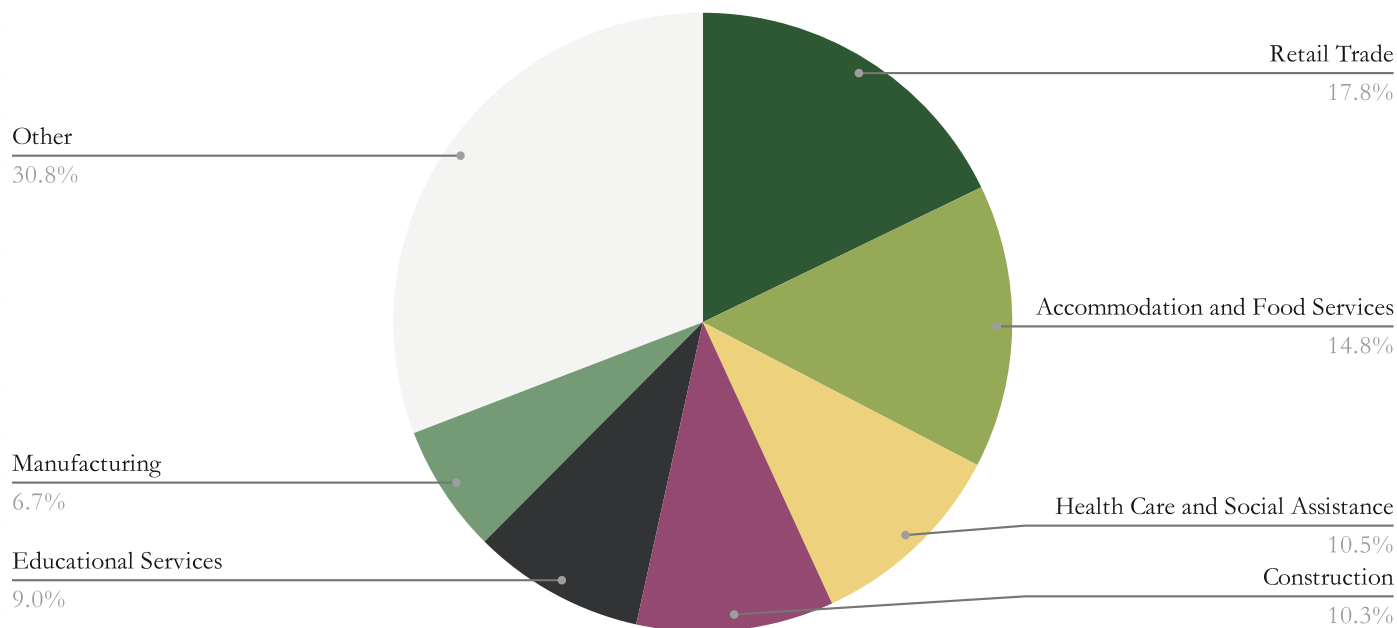
Employment

All data in the Economy section is 4th quarter 2021 unless otherwise noted. North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) is the commonly used way of classifying industries, and goes from the 2-digit (most aggregate) level to 4- and 6-digit (more detailed) levels.

Total Employment: Total employment in Rabun County is 6,300. Over the last ten years, employment has grown by 886, or 16.4%. By contrast, total employment in Georgia increased by 14.8% during the same period.

Employment by Major Industry Sector: Employment by major industry group (2-digit NAICS level) is shown in the following table and the pie chart below:

Figure 6. Major Employment Sectors



These six sectors, accounting for over two-thirds (69.2%) of total employment, reflect the continued importance of tourism and construction in Rabun County, but also show the important economic role of health care/social assistance and manufacturing in the county.

Figure 7. Employment by Major Industry Sector

NAICS	Industry	Employment	Percent of Total Empl	Location Quotient
44	Retail Trade	1,124	17.8%	1.72
72	Accommodation and Food Services	933	14.8%	1.85
62	Health Care and Social Assistance	661	10.5%	0.72
23	Construction	652	10.3%	1.75
61	Educational Services	567	9.0%	1.12
31	Manufacturing	425	6.7%	0.83
92	Public Administration	361	5.7%	1.2
81	Other Services (except Public Administration)	301	4.8%	1.11
71	Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	209	3.3%	1.89
56	Administrative, Support, and Waste Mgmt	207	3.3%	0.51
54	Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	194	3.1%	0.43
42	Wholesale Trade	124	2.0%	0.53
52	Finance and Insurance	122	1.9%	0.47
11	Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	121	1.9%	1.43
53	Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	73	1.2%	0.66
55	Management of Companies and Enterprises	68	1.1%	0.72
48	Transportation and Warehousing	67	1.1%	0.21
22	Utilities	34	0.5%	1.05
51	Information	32	0.5%	0.25
99	Unclassified	16	0.3%	2.09
21	Mining, Quarrying, and Oil and Gas Extraction	10	0.2%	0.47
	Total - All Industries	6,300	100.0%	1

Industry Concentration and Location Quotient: The third column in the Employment by Major Industry table above shows the “location quotient” for each industry. The location quotient is simply the share (percent) of total employment in Rabun County accounted for by Industry X (Employment in Industry X in Rabun County/Total Employment in Rabun County) divided by the same ratio for the nation as a whole. For example, if industry X accounted for 10% of total employment in Rabun County, but only 5% for the nation as a whole, the location quotient would be 2.0 (10%/5%). Location quotients are a way of showing the concentration or importance of an industry in Rabun County relative to the nation. If the location quotient for an industry in Rabun County is above 1, then that industry is relatively more concentrated in Rabun County than the nation. Location quotients are often used to represent “comparative advantage” of an industry for an area.

Rabun County has a comparative advantage in tourism, and related industries, including Retail Trade, Accommodation and Food Services, and Arts, Entertainment and Recreation- they all have high location quotients. Other industries with high location quotients (greater than 1) include Construction, Agriculture, and Educational Services.

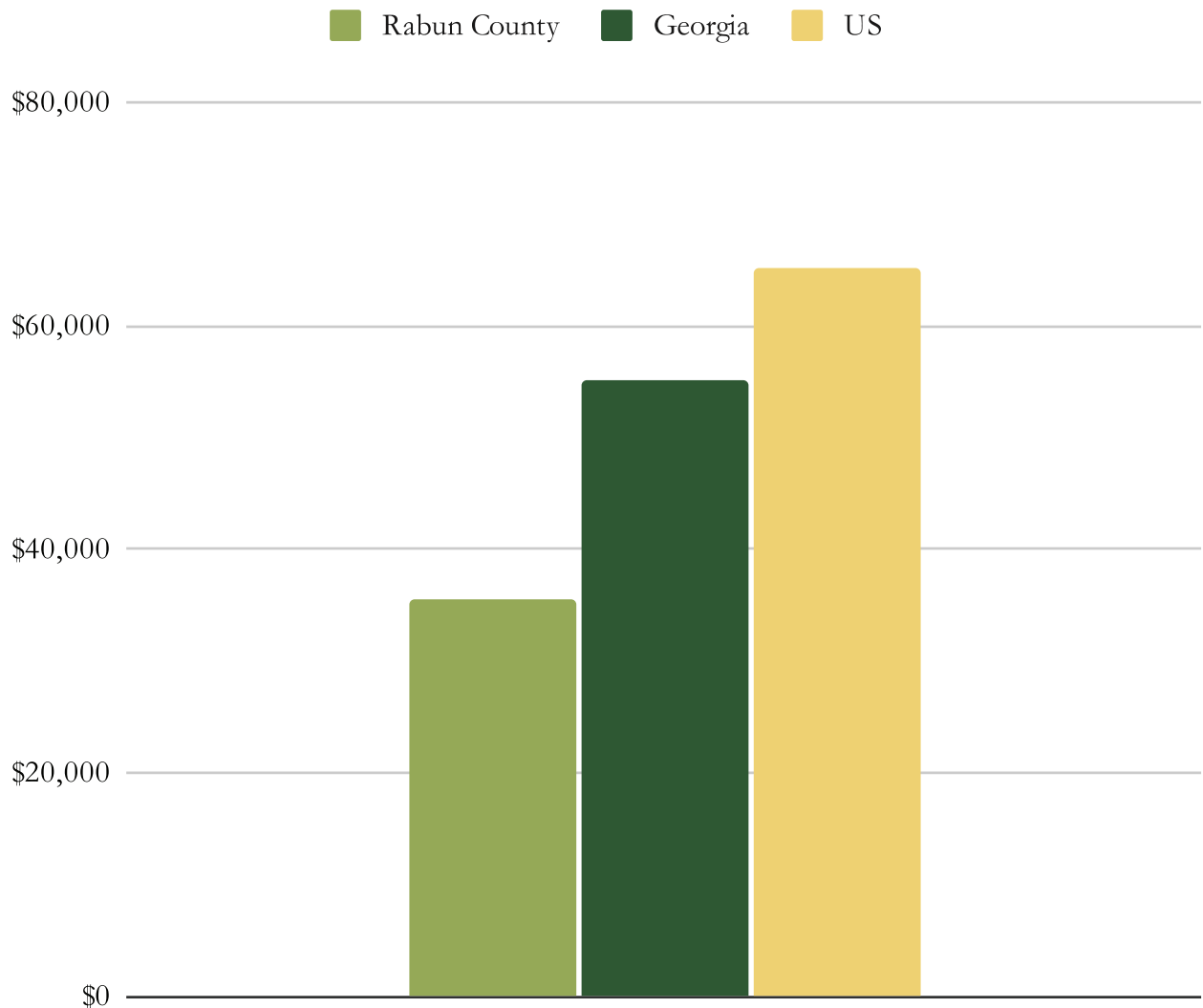
Location quotients in Rabun County are low for several industries often referred to as “white collar” or “knowledge” industries, such as Information, Finance and Insurance, and Professional, Scientific and Technical Services.

Despite the loss of manufacturing companies over the past few decades, manufacturing is still significant in Rabun County, with 425 employees, a 6.7% share of all employment, and a location quotient just under 1 (0.83).

Annual Average Wage

Wages by Industry Sector: The average annual wage (and salary) is \$35,472 in Rabun County (4th quarter, 2021) compared to \$55,075 (April 2020) in Georgia and \$65,055 in the US.

Figure 8. Annual Average Wage



In the tourism-related industries heavily represented in Rabun County, including Retail Trade, Accommodations and Food Services, and Arts, Entertainment and Recreation, wages and salaries are at the low end of the scale.

In many of the “white collar” industries with a small share of employment in Rabun County, such as Finance and Insurance and Professional, Scientific and Technical Services, wages and salaries are at the high end of the scale.

Figure 9. Annual Wages by Industry

NAICS	Industry	Employment	Avg Annual Wages
22	Utilities	34	\$86,115
55	Management of Companies and Enterprises	68	\$71,033
52	Finance and Insurance	122	\$57,831
54	Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	194	\$48,132
53	Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	73	\$43,002
62	Health Care and Social Assistance	661	\$40,923
61	Educational Services	567	\$39,712
48	Transportation and Warehousing	67	\$39,350
31	Manufacturing	425	\$38,958
23	Construction	652	\$38,829
42	Wholesale Trade	124	\$38,712
99	Unclassified	16	\$38,692
51	Information	32	\$38,434
92	Public Administration	361	\$38,034
21	Mining, Quarrying, and Oil and Gas Extraction	10	\$37,384
44	Retail Trade	1,124	\$31,747
56	Administrative, Support, and Waste Mgmt	207	\$29,674
11	Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	121	\$27,903
71	Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	209	\$26,318
72	Accommodation and Food Services	933	\$23,880
81	Other Services (except Public Administration)	301	\$23,141
	Total	6301	

Growth by Industry Sector: Some of the industries that have significant employment in Rabun County and higher rates of employment growth over the last ten years include:

- Wholesale Trade (46.3%)
- Arts, Entertainment and Recreation (41.1%)
- Healthcare and Social Assistance (26.7%)

Tourism-related industries posted moderate rates of growth during the past decade:

- Accommodation and Food Services (17.7%)
- Retail Trade (12.2%)

Figure 10. Employment Growth by Major Industry

NAICS	Industry	Q4 2021 Employment	10 Year Empl Change	Percent Change
55	Management of Companies and Enterprises	68	68	50.0%
42	Wholesale Trade	124	107	46.3%
71	Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	209	146	41.1%
99	Unclassified	16	8	33.3%
62	Health Care and Social Assistance	661	241	26.7%
21	Mining, Quarrying, and Oil and Gas Extraction	10	3	23.1%
51	Information	32	8	20.0%
11	Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	121	29	19.3%
72	Accommodation and Food Services	933	201	17.7%
54	Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	194	40	17.1%
44	Retail Trade	1,124	156	12.2%
48	Transportation and Warehousing	67	8	10.7%
23	Construction	652	53	7.5%
92	Public Administration	361	12	3.2%
61	Educational Services	567	-15	-2.7%
53	Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	73	-3	-4.3%
31	Manufacturing	425	-47	-12.4%
56	Administrative, Support, and Waste Mgmt	207	-23	-12.5%
81	Other Services (except Public Administration)	301	-41	-15.8%
22	Utilities	34	-11	-47.8%
52	Finance and Insurance	122	-41	-50.6%
	Total	6,301	899	16.6%

The table below provides more detail at the NAICS 4-digit level on which industries grew the fastest in Rabun County from 2010 to 2020. The faster-growing 4-digit industries with higher levels of employment include:

- 7139- Other Amusement and Recreation (156.1%)
- 6211- Offices of Physicians (89.9%)
- 7225- Restaurants and Other Eating Places (36.0%)

Figure 11. Employment Growth by 4-Digit Industry

NAICS	Description	2010 Jobs	2021 Jobs	% Change 10-21
8133	Social Advocacy Organizations	11	82	638.1%
3399	Other Miscellaneous Manufacturing	11	41	277.5%
6233	Continuing Care Retirement Communities and Assisted Living Facilities for the Elderly	14	51	262.3%
6244	Child Day Care Services	11	39	262.1%
3273	Cement and Concrete Product Manufacturing	21	56	171.0%
7139	Other Amusement and Recreation Industries	66	170	156.1%
5416	Management, Scientific, and Technical Consulting Services	15	28	92.9%
6211	Offices of Physicians	56	107	89.9%
5419	Other Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	31	56	80.1%
4533	Used Merchandise Stores	18	28	62.7%
6213	Offices of Other Health Practitioners	22	34	55.8%
4413	Automotive Parts, Accessories, and Tire Stores	34	50	49.0%
6111	Elementary and Secondary Schools	251	367	46.2%
4453	Beer, Wine, and Liquor Stores	14	21	45.3%
6231	Nursing Care Facilities (Skilled Nursing Facilities)	130	181	39.9%
7225	Restaurants and Other Eating Places	458	623	36.0%
8121	Personal Care Services	18	25	35.4%
4539	Other Miscellaneous Store Retailers	18	24	32.0%
5412	Accounting, Tax Preparation, Bookkeeping, and Payroll Services	24	32	31.5%
4451	Grocery Stores	173	224	29.8%
4441	Building Material and Supplies Dealers	188	239	26.9%
6212	Offices of Dentists	31	38	23.5%
2382	Building Equipment Contractors	122	149	22.1%
4841	General Freight Trucking	12	15	21.7%
5411	Legal Services	37	46	21.4%
4442	Lawn and Garden Equipment and Supplies Stores	13	15	20.9%
9029	State Government, Excluding Education and Hospitals	36	42	16.8%
5413	Architectural, Engineering, and Related Services	18	21	16.8%
9039	Local Government, Excluding Education and Hospitals	327	375	14.7%
8131	Religious Organizations	89	102	13.8%
7115	Independent Artists, Writers, and Performers	13	15	12.5%

Income

The median household income is \$44,871 in Rabun County, compared to \$61,224 in the state.

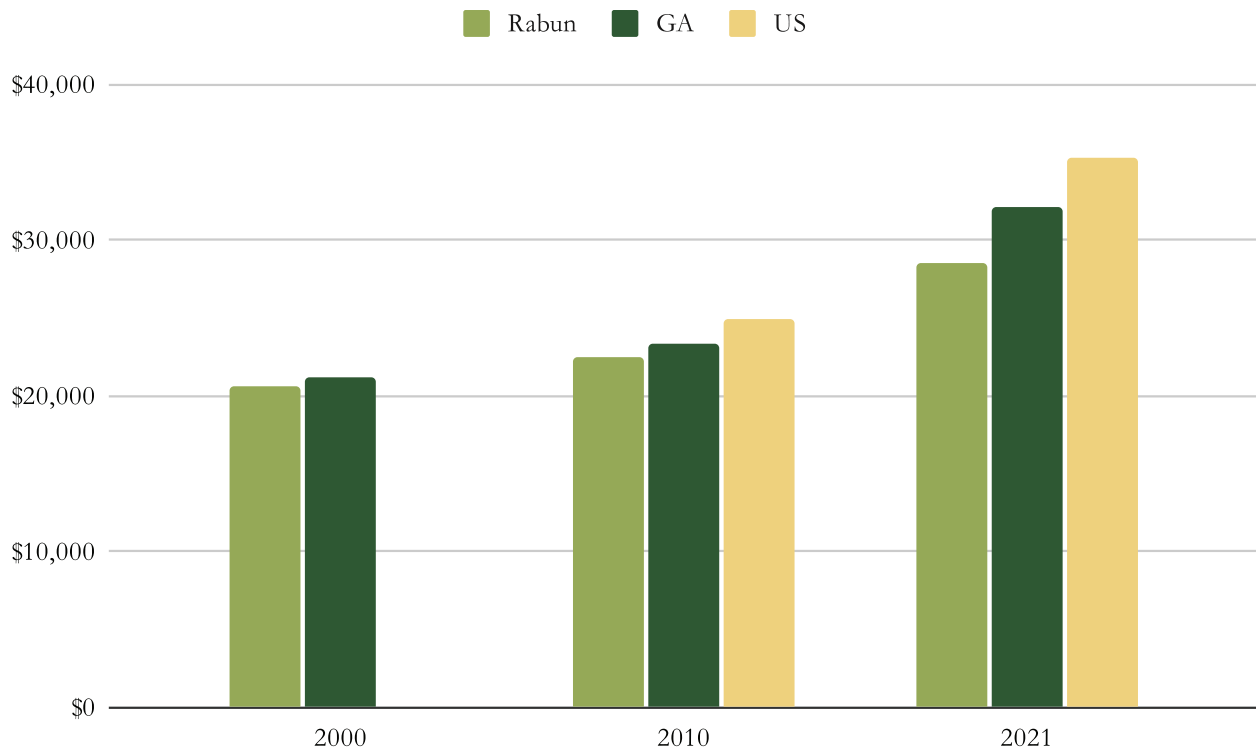
Income Distribution: Rabun County has proportionately more households earning less than \$35,000 annually (40.8%), and less earning more than \$75,000 (27.3%) than the state (39.1%).

Figure 12. Household Income Distribution

	Household Income			
	Percent		Value	
	Rabun County	Georgia	Rabun County	Georgia
Total Households			6,662	3,758,798
Lower Income	40.80%	30.3%	2,715	1,138,452
Middle Income	31.9%	30.6%	2,125	1,150,588
Upper Income	27.3%	39.1%	1,822	1,469,758
Median Income (dollars)			\$42,500	\$58,700
Mean Income (dollars)			\$66,194	\$82,406

As the table below shows, Rabun County is falling further behind Georgia and the nation in per capita income. One explanation for this is that Rabun County does not have the same proportion of growing, more highly-paid technology-based and skilled jobs as the state and nation. This may only get worse in the future, and it is another reason to diversify the county’s economy and create higher-paying skilled jobs as strongly voiced by survey respondents, public meeting participants and interviewees.

Figure 13. Per Capita Income Comparison



	2000	2010	2021
Rabun as % of GA	97.40%	96.10%	89.00%
Rabun as % of US		89.90%	80.80%

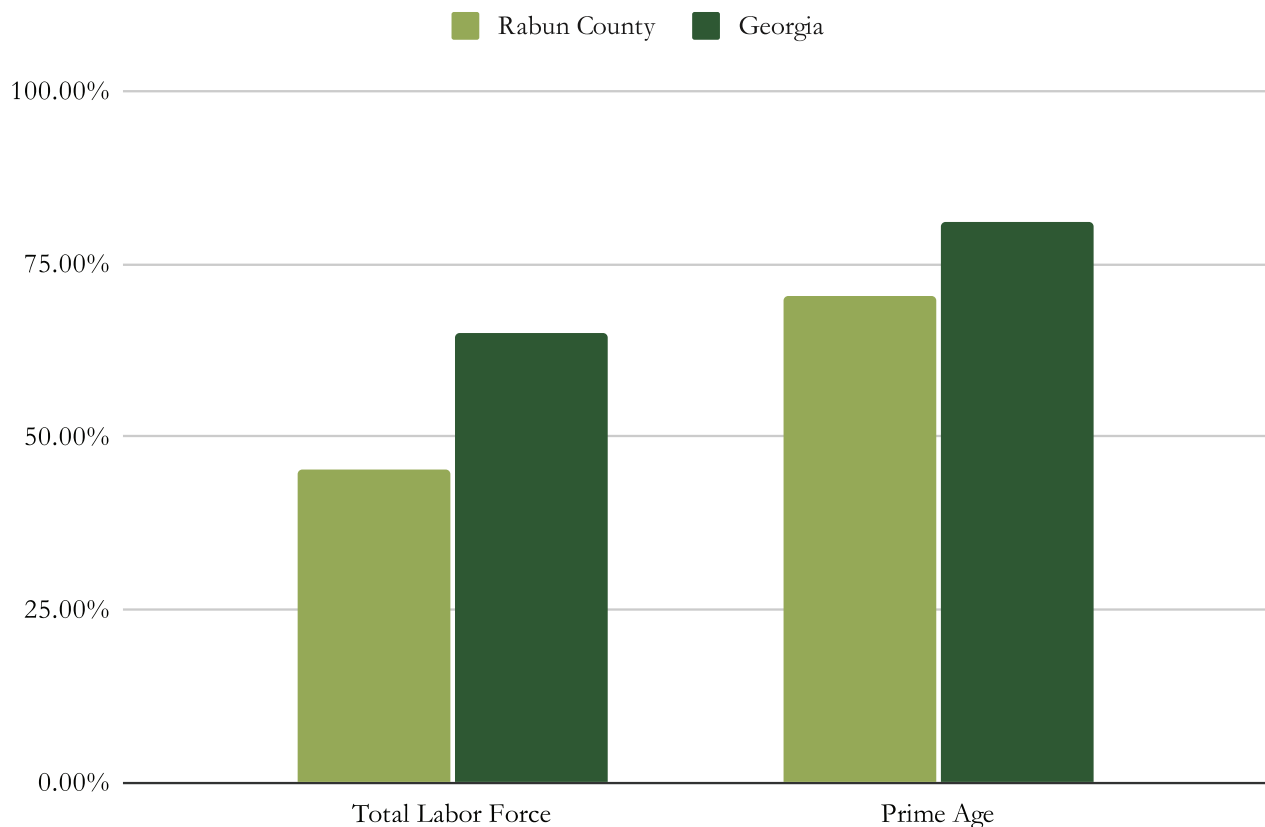
Cost of Living: The lower income distribution in Rabun County is somewhat offset by its lower cost of living (COL), including all consumer goods and services. COL is normally expressed as an index number, with 100 as the US base number. The COL index number for Rabun County is 92.2, meaning that the cost of living is almost 8 percent cheaper in Rabun County than the nation. The COL index number for the state is 96.8.

Labor Force

Total Labor Force: At year-end 2020, the civilian labor force (people employed or looking for a job) totaled 6,422 in Rabun County and 5,125,182 in the state. The labor force participation rate (all adults) was significantly lower in Rabun County (45.2%) than in the state (63.0%).

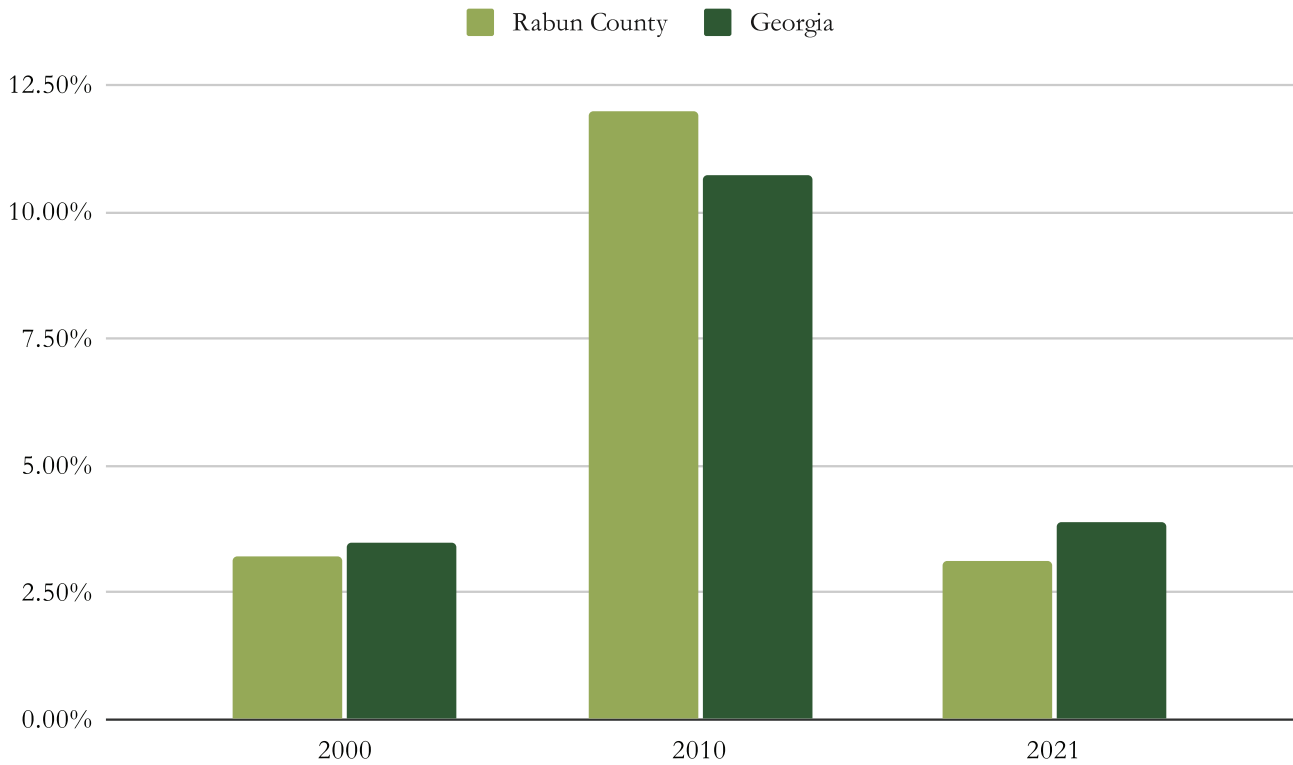
Prime Age Labor Force: The “prime age” labor force (25-54 years of age) is 3,917 in Rabun County and 3,392,727 in the state. The labor force participation rate for the prime age labor force was also lower in Rabun County (70.2%) than in the state (80.9%). This data shows that the larger concentration of older residents in Rabun County only partially accounts for its lower labor force participation rate. For some reason, residents of Rabun County in their prime working years are not joining the labor force as much as state residents.

Figure 14. Labor Force Participation Rate



Unemployment: The average annual unemployment rate in Rabun County for 2021 was 3.1%, down significantly from the 2010 rate of 12.0% following the 2008 economic downturn. The unemployment rate in Rabun County generally tracks closely with the state unemployment rate, as shown in the table below.

Figure 15. Average annual Unemployment Rates



Occupations

The data above in the Employment section shows the distribution of employment among major industries. However, within each industry, there are many different occupations. To understand a community's labor force better, it is useful to show total employment by occupation. The US Bureau of Labor (BLS) has created the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) code system for that purpose. The SOC codes in the tables below are at the most aggregate - the 2-digit level. The SOC code system breaks all 2-digit codes down to the four- and six-code level for much more detail.

Most Prevalent Occupations: The table below shows the occupations in Rabun County (SOC codes) sorted by the number of jobs in 2022. The occupations with the largest representation in Rabun County include:

- 35 - Food Preparation and Serving Related Occupations
- 41 - Sales and Related Occupations
- 43 - Office and Administrative Support Occupations
- 25 - Educational Instruction and Library Occupations
- 11 - Management Occupations

The first three of these show relatively lower earnings per hour (less than the county average of \$20.30), while the latter two of these show higher average earnings per hour.

Figure 16. Occupations in Rabun County Sorted by 2022 Employment

SOC	Description	2010 Jobs	2022 Jobs	Percent Growth	Avg. Hourly Earnings
35	Food Preparation and Serving Related Occupations	643	770	19.74%	\$12.58
41	Sales and Related Occupations	708	756	6.77%	\$16.63
43	Office and Administrative Support Occupations	673	708	5.25%	\$16.77
25	Educational Instruction and Library Occupations	434	545	25.55%	\$27.74
11	Management Occupations	253	480	90.16%	\$36.80
47	Construction and Extraction Occupations	488	455	-6.92%	\$19.03
53	Transportation and Material Moving Occupations	284	443	56.28%	\$15.31
51	Production Occupations	426	362	-15.10%	\$15.85
37	Building and Grounds Cleaning and Maintenance Occupations	325	333	2.51%	\$16.20
49	Installation, Maintenance, and Repair Occupations	286	257	-9.92%	\$20.23
29	Healthcare Practitioners and Technical Occupations	196	244	24.48%	\$34.88
39	Personal Care and Service Occupations	140	211	51.32%	\$13.99
31	Healthcare Support Occupations	135	199	47.09%	\$13.69
13	Business and Financial Operations Occupations	128	172	34.22%	\$33.86
33	Protective Service Occupations	150	172	14.60%	\$16.87
45	Farming, Fishing, and Forestry Occupations	40	130	222.97%	\$13.72
21	Community and Social Service Occupations	114	105	-8.41%	\$23.62
27	Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media Occupations	62	98	58.52%	\$27.01
23	Legal Occupations	31	41	32.96%	\$39.90
15	Computer and Mathematical Occupations	25	36	42.24%	\$33.15
17	Architecture and Engineering Occupations	41	34	-16.71%	\$31.16
19	Life, Physical, and Social Science Occupations	13	25	94.02%	\$35.57
55	Military-only occupations	27	23	-15.55%	\$17.29
	Total	5,622	6,599	17.38%	\$20.30

Highest Growth Occupations: The table below shows how employment in various occupations in Rabun County grew from 2010 to 2020.

Some of the fastest-growing occupations with significant employment in Rabun County (2010 to 2020) are:

- Management Occupations (90.16% growth)
- Transportation and Material Moving Occupations (56.28%)
- Personal Care and Service Occupations (51.32%)
- Healthcare Support Occupations (47.09%)

Figure 17. Occupations in Rabun County Sorted by Growth

SOC	Description	2010 Jobs	2022 Jobs	Percent Growth	Avg. Hourly Earnings
45	Farming, Fishing, and Forestry Occupations	40	130	222.97%	\$13.72
19	Life, Physical, and Social Science Occupations	13	25	94.02%	\$35.57
11	Management Occupations	253	480	90.16%	\$36.80
27	Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media Occupations	62	98	58.52%	\$27.01
53	Transportation and Material Moving Occupations	284	443	56.28%	\$15.31
39	Personal Care and Service Occupations	140	211	51.32%	\$13.99
31	Healthcare Support Occupations	135	199	47.09%	\$13.69
15	Computer and Mathematical Occupations	25	36	42.24%	\$33.15
13	Business and Financial Operations Occupations	128	172	34.22%	\$33.86
23	Legal Occupations	31	41	32.96%	\$39.90
25	Educational Instruction and Library Occupations	434	545	25.55%	\$27.74
29	Healthcare Practitioners and Technical Occupations	196	244	24.48%	\$34.88
35	Food Preparation and Serving Related Occupations	643	770	19.74%	\$12.58
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41	Sales and Related Occupations	708	756	6.77%	\$16.63
43	Office and Administrative Support Occupations	673	708	5.25%	\$16.77
37	Building and Grounds Cleaning and Maintenance Occupations	325	333	2.51%	\$16.20
47	Construction and Extraction Occupations	488	455	-6.92%	\$19.03
21	Community and Social Service Occupations	114	105	-8.41%	\$23.62
49	Installation, Maintenance, and Repair Occupations	286	257	-9.92%	\$20.23
51	Production Occupations	426	362	-15.10%	\$15.85
55	Military-only occupations	27	23	-15.55%	\$17.29
17	Architecture and Engineering Occupations	41	34	-16.71%	\$31.16
	Total	5,622	6,599	17.38%	\$20.30

Commuting Patterns and Regional Labor Force

Commuting Into Rabun County: As Figure 18 below shows, 71.9% of the jobs in Rabun County are filled by residents of Rabun County. The other 28% of the jobs are held by residents of other counties that commute into Rabun, including Habersham County and Macon County, North Carolina.

Commuting Out of Rabun County: As Figure 19 below shows, 79.4% of the employed residents of Rabun County work in Rabun County. The remaining 20.6% of employed Rabun County residents work in a variety of counties, but primarily those counties to the south towards the Atlanta metro area. **Rabun County residents who commute out of the county represent a loss of workers who could meet local job vacancies and most likely help make the “vision” of a stronger and more diversified county economy a reality. Furthermore, these out-commuting workers already have housing in Rabun County, so attracting them to work in the county will increase the labor force without increasing the demand for scarce housing.**

Figure 18. Workers in Rabun County by County of Residence

Where People Who Work in Rabun County Live		
Region	No. of People	Percent
Rabun County, Georgia	4,462	71.9%
Habersham County, Georgia	210	3.4%
Macon County, North Carolina	167	2.7%
Stephens County, Georgia	68	1.1%
Gwinnett County, Georgia	68	1.1%
White County, Georgia	68	1.1%
Jackson County, Georgia	63	1.0%
Fulton County, Georgia	52	0.8%
Forsyth County, Georgia	50	0.8%
Gilmer County, Georgia	50	0.8%
Lumpkin County, Georgia	45	0.7%
Hall County, Georgia	44	0.7%
DeKalb County, Georgia	42	0.7%
Oconee County, South Carolina	42	0.7%
Cobb County, Georgia	40	0.6%
Union County, Georgia	35	0.6%
Cherokee County, Georgia	33	0.5%
Fannin County, Georgia	32	0.5%
Towns County, Georgia	31	0.5%
Banks County, Georgia	30	0.5%
Other	578	9.3%
Total	6,209	100.0%

Figure 19. Employed Rabun County Residents by Place of Work

Region	No. of People	Percent
Rabun County, Georgia	4,462	79.4%
Macon County, North Carolina	183	3.3%
Hall County, Georgia	80	1.4%
Habersham County, Georgia	73	1.3%
Gwinnett County, Georgia	69	1.2%
Stephens County, Georgia	38	0.7%
Oconee County, South Carolina	35	0.6%
Jackson County, Georgia	33	0.6%
DeKalb County, Georgia	31	0.6%
White County, Georgia	26	0.5%
Jackson County, North Carolina	22	0.4%
Fulton County, Georgia	22	0.4%
Forsyth County, Georgia	21	0.4%
Union County, Georgia	16	0.3%
Cobb County, Georgia	13	0.2%
Swain County, North Carolina	13	0.2%
Clarke County, Georgia	13	0.2%
Barrow County, Georgia	12	0.2%
Lumpkin County, Georgia	10	0.2%
Fannin County, Georgia	10	0.2%
Other	434	7.7%
Total	5,616	100.0%

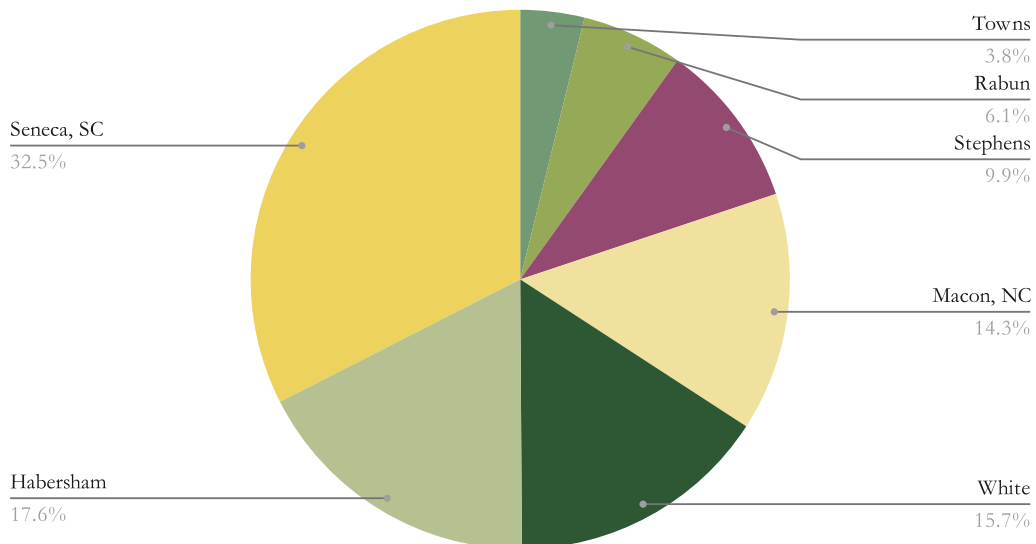
Commuting Time: The average commuting time (each way) for Rabun County residents going to work is 25.4 minutes which is only slightly less than the average commuting time for Georgia of 28.8 minutes. The rural and dispersed nature of Rabun County (46.3 people per square mile vs. 184.6 for the state) and the fact that 20.6% of residents commute to jobs outside of the county undoubtedly pushes the commute time of Rabun workers up towards that of the state.

Regional Labor Force: The total civilian labor force for Rabun and adjacent counties totals 105,654.

Figure 20. Labor Force in Rabun and Adjacent Counties

Regional Labor Force	
County	Labor Force
Rabun	6,422
Habersham	18,592
Towns	4,055
White	16,616
Stephens	10,512
Macon, NC	15,118
Seneca, SC	34,339
	105,654

Distribution of Regional Labor Force



Computer and Internet

According to the US Census Quick Facts, computer use and broadband access in Rabun County are slightly behind but not that much different from the state (2016-2020 data):

Figure 21. Households With A Computer In Rabun County



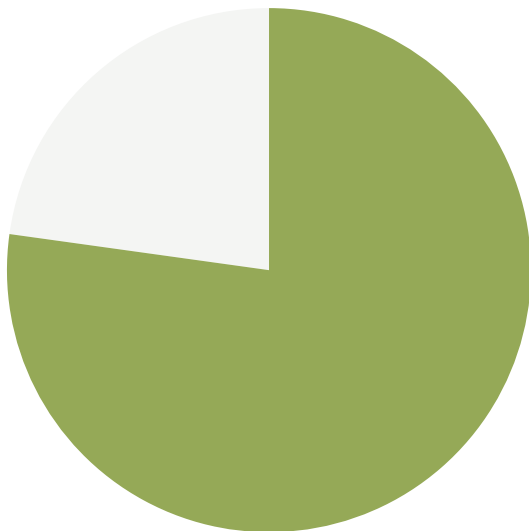
● Households with a computer (85.9%)

Figure 23. Households With A Computer In Georgia



● Households with a computer (92.0%)

Figure 22. Households With A Broadband Subscription In Rabun County



● Households with a broadband subscription (77.2%)

Figure 24. Households With A Broadband Subscription In Georgia



● Households with a broadband subscription (84.4%)



Strengths and Weaknesses Assessment

Community and Economic Development Strengths and Weaknesses

To understand the current position of the county and its ability to reach its vision in the future, it is important to conduct a “strengths and weaknesses” assessment. What strengths or assets does Rabun County possess that it can build on for the future, and what weaknesses or liabilities does it have that might inhibit achieving its vision? The strengths and weaknesses assessment and the data analysis together constitute the current situation assessment, from which a strategic

plan to achieve the vision can be constructed. Sometimes the term S.W.O.T. (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) is applied to this work. For community and economic development, we have found it more meaningful to combine “threats” with “weaknesses,” and we defer the “opportunities” part of the analysis to the recommendations and plans in the second part of this project which will contain the Gap Analysis and Strategic Plan recommendations.

Strengths

Scenic Beauty And Outdoor Recreation

- County recently received designation as an Appalachian Trail (A.T.) Community
- Three state parks: Moccasin Creek, Black Rock Mountain and Tallulah Gorge
- Four of the highest ten peaks in Georgia: Rabun Bald, Dick’s Knob, Grassy Ridge and Double Spring Knob
- Nationally designated Wild and Scenic River – Chattanooga River
- Four Georgia Power lakes – Rabun, Burton, Seed and Tallulah Falls
- Water sports: rafting, canoeing, recreational boating, fishing
- Numerous hiking trails and waterfalls
- Rated #3 best counties in Georgia for outdoor activities by Niche.com



Number of Crimes per 100,000 population in Rabun County vs. Nation

Type of Crime	Rabun County	National
Violent Crimes	108	465
Property Crimes	1760	2827

Safe Environment With Low Crime Rate

- Interviewees and survey respondents frequently commented that Rabun County is a safe environment and a good place to raise a family.
- Crime rates are relatively low, as shown by data above (crimes per 100,000 residents) from Niche.com.

Strong Community Spirit

- Strongly reflected in the survey, town hall meetings, focus groups and individual interviews.
- Appreciation for small town values and quality of life and desire to preserve it.
- “Wildcat nation” spirit around strong sports programs.

Strong Tourism, Retirement And Second Home Economy

- Rabun is a tourism leader in the Northeast Georgia Region, according to data (2020) from Tourism Economics (report prepared for Explore Georgia):
 - Visitor spending of \$102 million (5th in 17-county region)
 - Tourism-related employment of 836 (6th in region)
 - Local and state tax revenues from tourism - \$7.4 million (5th in region)
- Tourism generates strong hotel/motel tax revenues (\$230,000 for FY 2022 for the county alone).
- High-value vacation homes are a significant part of the tax digests for the county and its cities and therefore support the public schools and government operating budgets.
- Second home residents and retirees also support the retail and restaurant sector and other amenities in the county (see Attractive Community below).
- Rated #2 best counties for retirees in Georgia by Niche.com.



Attractive Community

- Quaint Main Street downtown with lots of recent renovations and improvements.
- Strong retail and specialty shops driven by tourism.
- Good restaurants (including one restaurant that earned a national OpenTable top 100 designation) that attract patrons from surrounding counties.
- Mix of people – long-time residents, retirees, 2nd homeowners.

Strong Brand And Identity

- For decades, thousands of residents of Georgia and surrounding states have visited Rabun County for recreational opportunities, vacations, summer camps, and to be with friends and family at lake and mountain vacation homes. Undoubtedly most of these visitors have fond memories and a very favorable image of Rabun County as a friendly place with a high quality of life. In addition, the name recognition of Rabun County is higher than for many other rural counties in Georgia.
- A favorable image and high name recognition factor can be a strong asset to any community trying to attract the kinds of businesses, organizations, or new residents it wants to help realize its vision for the future.
- However, in such situations, the challenge is to expand the existing image or brand to include recognition of the county as not only a good place to visit, but also to operate a business or establish a primary residence.





Schools/K-12 Education

- Extraordinary K-12 educational resources for a rural county – strong public school system and two nationally recognized private schools.
- Rabun Gap-Nacoochee and Tallulah Falls School both rated in top four boarding schools in Georgia by Niche.com.
- Rabun County High School (RCHS) rated #16 in best school districts in Georgia by Niche.com.
- RCHS overall academic performance is rated higher than 88 percent of all districts in Georgia by the Governor’s Office of Student Achievement.

Higher Education

- Four-year colleges within 50 miles of Rabun County include:
 - Piedmont University in Demorest (1)
 - The University of North Georgia in Dahlonega (2)
 - Young Harris College in Young Harris (3)
 - Toccoa Falls College in Toccoa (4)
 - Brenau University in Gainesville (5)
 - Clemson University in Clemson, South Carolina
 - Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, North Carolina
- The University of Georgia is 56 miles away in Athens (8)
- Technical colleges in close proximity to Rabun County include:
 - North Georgia Technical College in Clarkesville (9)
 - Lanier Technical College in Gainesville (10)
 - Southwestern Community College in Franklin, North Carolina

Figure 26. Rabun County in relation to nearby colleges

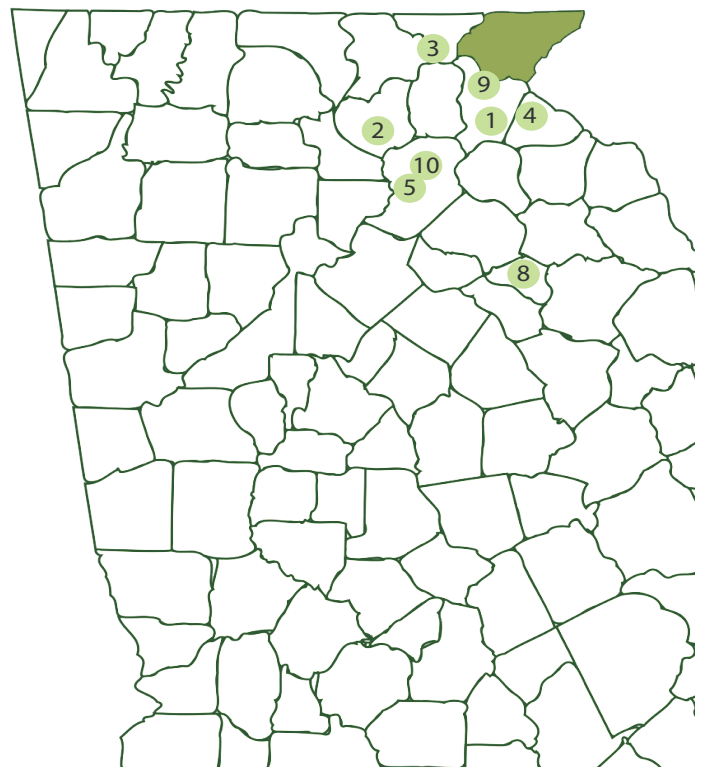
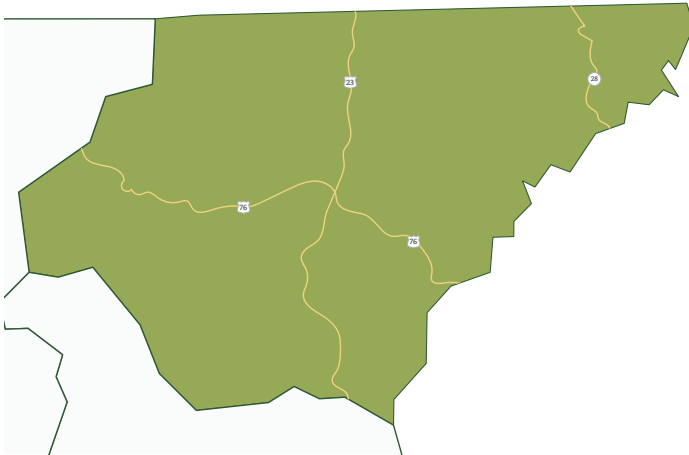


Figure 27. Travel routes throughout Rabun County



Geographic Location And Access

- One-day round-trip proximity to Gainesville (56 miles), Atlanta (113 miles), Asheville (96 miles), and Greenville/Spartanburg (87 miles). Access to north metro Atlanta in just over one hour via I-985 and I-85.
- Located on 4-lane US 23/441, primary route for commercial and tourist travel to points in western North Carolina, including the cities of Franklin, Waynesville, and Asheville; from there connecting east/west locations via I-40; and the tourist destinations of Great Smoky Mountain National Park and Nantahala National Forest.
- Average annual daily traffic count on US 23/441 of approximately 20,000 vehicles.
- East-west access via US 76.

Good Business Climate

- Business owners interviewed praised Rabun County as a good business location with low regulation and a supportive, positive attitude toward businesses.
- One business owner stated that he saved \$60,000 per year in business regulatory fees compared to his prior Atlanta location.
- Private sector support for businesses through Forward Rabun, the Chamber of Commerce, the Clayton Merchants and Business Association and the Downtown Development Authority, and other organizations with programs such as the Business Expo.

Low Property Taxes

- Estimated average county property tax rate (across all jurisdictions) of 0.630% (SmartAsset.com), translating to annual property taxes of \$1,575 for a home valued at \$250,000. This compares to estimated average property taxes of \$2,275 and \$2,775 on the same house for Georgia and the nation, respectively.
- The 2021 Rabun County M&O millage rate was 9.678 (one mill equals \$1 of tax per \$1,000 assessed real property value), up from 9.14 in 2016, but down from 10.01 in 2020. The county school millage rate is 9.072, for a combined total millage rate of 18.21. According to the Georgia Department of Revenue, the average county and municipal millage rate in the state is 30 mills.



Work Ethic

- Through the focus groups, individual interviews and other public input, business owners generally reported that older, established workers in Rabun County have a good work ethic (productive and reliable).
- However, some business owners reported that the work ethic among some younger, entry-level workers is not as good (less productive, less reliable, high turnover).
- As noted in the Data Analysis section of this report, the labor force participation rate for all adults in Rabun County is 45.2 percent, compared to 63.0 percent for the state. While part of that can be explained by the county's higher share of older residents, the participation rate among prime working-age residents (25-54) is also lower in Rabun County than the state (70.2 percent and 80.9 percent, respectively). The labor force participation rate (percent of residents in a particular age group employed or looking for a job) is sometimes used by companies to gauge the work readiness of a community's labor force.

Good County Fiscal Condition

- Assets for Rabun County exceeded liabilities at the end of FY 2020 by \$56,329,282, according to county auditors Rushton & Company.
- High bond ratings for the Rabun County School District: recent Aa1 and As2 bond ratings from Moody's Investor Services
- Hotel/motel tax revenues of \$230,000 in FY 2022.



Increased Intergovernmental Cooperation

- In the last few years, there have been frequent news reports concerning disputes between the City of Clayton and the county, and the Water and Sewer Authority over water and sewer services, SPLOST taxes and other issues. As a result of these disputes, for several years there was no valid intergovernmental Service Delivery Strategy (SDS) in place. An SDS is required by the Department of Community Affairs for eligibility for certain state grants and loans.
- Companies searching for new facility locations often view intergovernmental disputes as warning signs of future public service delivery issues, and this can lead to a community being eliminated in the site selection process.
- A new SDS agreement has recently been reached by all parties, and hopefully, this issue will remain in the rearview mirror as the county and its cities move forward.
- Forward Rabun, 501 (c)(6) public-private partnership established several years ago, now offers the county and its cities a platform for jointly planning and working on community and economic development issues. Forward Rabun is supported by hotel/motel tax revenue contributions from the county and all applicable cities, and from private contributions. Its board of directors includes representatives from all local governments as well as the private sector.

Figure 28. Cities in Rabun County



Weaknesses

Limited Land For Development

- The total acreage in Rabun county is 241,300, making it the 67th largest county in terms of acreage out of the 159 Georgia counties. Of that total acreage, the Chattahoochee/Oconee National Forest occupies 148,684 acres (61.6 percent), and Georgia Power owns hundreds more acres, leaving limited acreage for private or local government ownership.
- Much of the remaining acreage owned by the private sector or local governments is hilly terrain that is more difficult and expensive to develop. As noted above, Rabun County has four of the highest ten mountain peaks in Georgia.

Available Industrial/ Commercial Sites And Buildings

- Following the sale of the Rabun Business Park (a one million square foot renovated former textile plant) to Elk Industries, there are no commercial/industrial sites or buildings available in the county meeting current industrial standards (size, location, utilities, ceiling height, docks, etc.).
- When new space is required, most businesses, small or large, prefer to find an available building they can move into quickly or an available, development-ready site that they can quickly develop to their specifications. Industrial companies are not real estate developers, and having to do so introduces delay and risk to their business plans.
- Lack of suitable available sites or buildings can very quickly eliminate a community from consideration in a company's location search.

Housing Availability And Affordability

- The lack of available and affordable housing for working individuals and families was perhaps the number one issue raised in the public input phase of this strategic plan. Local businesses and other organizations (e.g., public and private schools in the county) frequently stated that the extremely limited supply and expense of housing in the county put them at a significant competitive disadvantage in hiring and retaining employees.
- Several employers stated that they have resorted to providing hotel accommodations for some of their workers as a temporary solution. They also reported that many of their new hires are finding living accommodations in surrounding counties and incurring significant commuting costs.
- As noted in the Data Analysis section of this report, measures of housing affordability in Rabun County are not good. Both the median estimated house value (Census Bureau) and the median sales price (Zillow) are almost the same for Rabun and the state. However, the median household income in Rabun County is significantly lower than the state, making the housing affordability measures much worse for the county.

Labor Availability

- Many employers reported significant difficulty in finding and retaining workers at all levels – from young to experienced workers, and from low-skilled to high-skilled professional workers.
- Interviewees cited the need for more professional services in the county, including engineers, architects, skilled construction trades workers, and skilled construction and office management personnel.
- Employers pointed to housing availability and affordability as a key issue making it difficult to find and retain workers. In addition, as noted in the Data Analysis section of this report, the labor force participation rate in Rabun County is lower than the state's rate for all working-age adults, and also for the prime working-age residents 25 to 54 years old.
- Many employers also reported that drug use presents a significant problem for them in terms of hiring and retaining workers, and that they have to administer drug tests on a regular basis.

Water and Sewer Service

- Municipal water service is provided in the county by the Rabun County Water and Sewer Authority (RCWSA), the City of Clayton, and the City of Sky Valley. After years of negotiations between Clayton and the RCWSA, an agreement has not been reached for RCWSA to acquire the City's system. However, a recent agreement was made for the City to purchase treated water from RCWSA.
- The City of Clayton's water system has a high water loss rate. Several interviewees noted that water outages and boil water advisories cause hardships for businesses, especially restaurants.
- Many portions of the county (especially the south county) do not have water or sewer service. This is a very significant impediment to development in the county, and it encourages the proliferation of less dense, more sprawling development (with septic tanks and wells) instead of more dense development that would help preserve Rabun County's scarce land resources.
- The RCWSA has expansion plans, including the construction of a new low-profile surface water tank in the north county already underway. In addition, land has been acquired to build a water treatment plant in south county, and future plans call for water lines to be run along south US 23/441.

Lack Of Childcare Facilities

- According to many interviewees, there is a chronic shortage of child care facilities in Rabun County, and this makes it more difficult for some parents to work. This makes it more difficult for some parents to work, and this could be one reason that the labor force participation rate is lower in Rabun County compared to the state.
- One employer stated that if childcare were available for his employees, he would have a waiting list of qualified workers.
- Childcare facility licensing requirements are strict, increasing the start-up and operating cost and risk.





Distance To Commercial Airports

- Several employers and residents cited the distance to commercial airports as a relative disadvantage for doing business and living in Rabun County. The closest commercial airports and driving times from Rabun County are as follows:
 - Atlanta Hartsfield-Jackson (118 miles, just over 2 hours)
 - Greenville-Spartanburg Airport (96.4 miles, 1 hour and 52 minutes)
 - Asheville Airport (96.2 miles, 1 hour and 42 minutes)
 - Athens-Ben Epps Airport (80.9 miles, 1 hour and 31 minutes)
- Of course, the drive times can be much longer with traffic congestion.
- Rabun County does not have a public general aviation airport. Nearby general aviation airports include:
 - Habersham County Airport (23.9 miles, 30 minutes)
 - Toccoa-Stephens County Airport (34.8 miles, 52 minutes)
 - Macon County (NC) Airport (26.5 miles, 41 minutes)
- Lack of a close public general aviation airport could make Rabun County a less attractive location for small technology businesses or higher-income individuals that utilize private aircraft.

Health Services

- Many interviewees acknowledged that healthcare is limited in rural areas typically to primary care and that Rabun County is no exception. They acknowledged the new Mountain Lakes Medical Center hospital facility; however, they expressed the desire to move up the ladder to higher-level secondary care with more specialists available in the county so they wouldn't have to travel significant distances for some of those services.
- Many business owners expressed the need for more mental health care and drug abuse treatment and counseling.

Limited Planning For Growth

- Participants in the interviews, focus groups, town hall meetings and the survey often commented that the county and cities have no public long-term growth plans or goals. As one participant stated, “that increases the level of anxiety about the future and questions about any new development that comes along...”
- Several participants also stated that the lack of full-time planners for the county and the cities make development planning very difficult and can put the developers in an advantageous situation.

Broadband Availability

- The leading providers of broadband internet service in Rabun County include Windstream, TruVista (Habersham EMC), HughesNet (satellite provider) and T-Mobile. High-speed internet service suitable for business purposes, including video calling and personal streaming uses, has come to many parts of the county only recently but suitable service is still not available in some parts of the county.
- Many participants expressed the view that, in order to diversify and strengthen the local economy, it is important to continue to improve the cost, availability and quality of broadband throughout the county.
- It was noted in the Data Analysis section that Census Bureau data shows that Rabun County is not that far behind the state in the percent of households with a computer (85.9 & vs. 92.0%, respectively) and the percent of households with a broadband subscription (77.2% vs. 84.4%, respectively). However, it should still be a top priority to continue to expand and upgrade commercial and residential broadband availability to help strengthen and diversify the local economy in the new age of remote working.