



# **A Strategic Plan for Economic Development in Rabun County Interim Report: Vision and Summary**

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# Project Overview

Rabun County is a special place – a land of scenic rivers, lakes and mountain vistas, rich with history and tradition. For generations, these natural assets have attracted visitors, seasonal residents and newcomers to the county, fostering growth in the hospitality, construction and specialty agriculture industries. Textile and apparel manufacturing also provided jobs for county residents in years past, but these industries faded as companies moved offshore.

Rabun County is now at an economic crossroads. Skilled service and technology-based industries that are driving economic growth in the nation are not represented in Rabun County. The question is: should the county continue to depend on tourism, construction and related industries, or should efforts be made to diversify the local economy and enhance job opportunities for future generations?

Development pressures in the county are intensifying, both from external sources as Georgia and the Atlanta metro area grow, and from internal sources as our local economy grows. Further development is inevitable in Rabun County; the real question, as the saying goes, is will growth happen to us or for us. Will the future of the county be just “growth” with more congestion or will it be real economic development with better jobs and a higher standard of living for all residents? Forward-thinking communities across the nation work to help ensure the latter, and therefore that growth happens for them. First, they establish a “vision”- what they (the residents) would like the community to “look like” in the future. Then, they adopt proactive community and economic development strategies and policies to guide them toward that vision.

To accomplish this for Rabun County, Forward Rabun is undertaking an economic development strategic planning project. Forward Rabun, a 501(c)(6) organization with financial support and participation from the county, its cities and the private sector, was established to provide an inclusive and transparent platform for community and economic development collaboration and planning in Rabun County. To gain an experienced and objective perspective for the strategic planning project, Forward Rabun engaged a team of professional consultants to lead the project including Rock Paper Scissors and Tucson Atlantic Consulting. These outside consultants are working closely with Forward Rabun staff and selected board members who are themselves experienced in economic development strategic planning and also familiar with Rabun County.



# A Plan for All the County

Throughout this report when we use the term “county” we are not implying that this strategic plan for economic development only applies to the county and not its cities. Economic development strategic planning is normally done at the county or even regional level. The reasons are simple. First, many of the inputs and factors of production companies use such as labor, transportation networks, and often raw materials are sourced at the county or regional level. Even for large metro areas, local labor markets do not end at the city limits sign. Second (the flip side of the coin), many policies and programs such as workforce development are usually done at the country or regional level, and infrastructure such as water and sewer systems frequently serve multiple cities. Third, traditional economic development functions such as recruiting new companies, retaining/expanding existing companies and administering start-up business assistance programs are normally done at least at the county level, and for certain activities, at the regional level.

One of the main motivations for creating Forward Rabun is that, for reasons stated above, most community and economic development planning and policies should take place at the county level, especially in rural areas. Of course, municipalities within a county are free to enact their own economic development programs as well, but hopefully to support and complement and not contradict the overall county or regional programs.



# Elements of a Strategic Plan for Economic Development

Experience has shown that successful economic development strategic plans include the following components:

- 1. A vision for the future.** Without some degree of consensus on shared objectives and community priorities for the future, it is difficult to get local residents working together toward common goals instead of working independently towards often conflicting goals. Based on the broad public input and situation assessment described just below, a very clear economic development consensus vision emerged for Rabun County.
- 2. Public input.** An economic development strategic plan must be based on broad and deep public input; it should not be the product of one or a few organizations or officials. Public input encourages broader support and enthusiasm. Public input for this project included:
  - A survey with over 400 respondents
  - Two open town hall meetings that were well attended and engaging.
  - Four focus groups of 10 to 15 people each including local business leaders, local government officials, representatives from community organizations, high school students and various other community leaders
  - One-on-one confidential interviews with over 40 community and business leaders.
- 3. Situation assessment.** To understand a community's potential for the future and to develop the best path for getting there, it is critical to understand where the community currently stands. What are the community's strengths or assets to build on and relative weaknesses or threats that need to be addressed? To provide this information and a base to work from, an economic analysis and a strengths and weaknesses assessment of Rabun County were undertaken. These were based on demographic and economic data from several sources, the public input enumerated above, and the consultants' experience in working with communities across the nation.
- 4. Gap Analysis.** Components 1-3 above provide the foundation for the last two components. The purpose of the gap analysis is to identify impediments and gaps that need to be bridged to get from the current situation to a consensus vision for economic development.
- 5. Plan of Action.** Develop a plan to address the gaps and pursue the vision for the future. What are the priority needs and gaps that should be addressed and strengths and assets to leverage to get the most return from economic development efforts? All strategic plans should be revisited from time to time to reflect: 1) changing external and internal conditions; and 2) what has been learned about what works well and not so well.

# Benefits

A strategic plan for economic development offers many benefits including:

- Helps unite the county and cities towards common goals for community and economic development
- Fosters better intergovernmental relations and planning
- More “bang for the buck” by orchestrating all economic development efforts in a targeted consensus manner
- Shapes the economic development future for Rabun County in a preferred, not random, way
- Helps guide governmental budget decisions – does this budget item support our community and economic development vision, goals and objectives?

## Interim Report

This interim report addresses the first three strategic planning components above - vision, public input and situation assessment - and lays the foundation for the final report to come which will address the last two components - the gap analysis and plan of action. This document, the Vision and Executive Summary, provides an overview of the results to date. The companion to this summary, the Public Input, Situation Assessment and Strengths and Weaknesses, contains the full detail and data generated by the project to date.

It is important to note that the scope of this project is to create an overarching strategy for economic development focusing on a vision for the future and overall economic development policy. Detailed recommendations on, for example, housing policy or water and sewer infrastructure are not within the scope of this report - these issues will need to be addressed by parties with expertise in those areas.

# A Vision for Rabun County's Future

Based on extensive public input, data analysis, and status assessment, a consensus “vision” for the future of Rabun County was generated. Opinions on the preferred future direction of the county as well as its challenges and opportunities were obtained from hundreds of residents through surveys, focus groups, town hall meetings and individual interviews as described in more detail below. Of course, opinions were varied, but a clear consensus emerged – protect the natural resources, “small town” appeal and heritage of Rabun County, but also encourage economic diversification to enhance job opportunities for all county residents.

## Vision Statement

*Above all, we, the residents of Rabun County, are committed to preserving the natural resources and scenic beauty and the traditions of "small-town" living that make Rabun County a great place to live, work and play.*

*At the same time, we envision a future with a strong, diversified economy featuring good jobs at all skill levels that will provide improved career opportunities for all residents, including young adults entering the workforce.*

*We believe that as we work to attain our vision for the future, Rabun County will serve as a model for rural development that balances preservation and tradition with economic growth.*

# Attaining Our Vision

To attain our vision for the future, we will follow these guidelines:

- Follow our strategic plan for community and economic development, with regular annual updates.
- Promote continued cooperation for planning and managing development among the county, its cities and the private sector.
- Be open to new ideas and concepts for managing growth and development, and to subject matter experts that can provide useful information.
- Be open to increased density in the cities to preserve undeveloped land.
- Welcome all new residents, including those with the skill sets and experience to help diversify the local economy.
- Support the retention and expansion of existing businesses and industries already in the County.
- Help stimulate entrepreneurial activity and new business start-ups.



# Interim Summary: Public Input, Data Analysis and Strengths and Weaknesses

## Public Input

The above vision statement was not initiated by the Forward Rabun staff or board, or by the consultants - it represents a clear consensus of the people of Rabun County from the extensive public input for this project.

## Meetings and Interviews

Altogether, over 200 people participated in the town hall and focus group meetings, and the one-on-one confidential interviews. Their comments closely agreed with the comments and opinions of the survey respondents summarized below. Of course, there were many diverse opinions and ideas, as you would expect with such a large group.

We greatly appreciate the time that all residents of the county put into the meetings and the survey, so we wanted to provide full access to their input, which is found in the Supporting Documentation report.

## Survey

Over four hundred residents completed the online survey to answer questions concerning growth and development and the future of Rabun County. Most respondents were pleased with the quality of life, scenic beauty, and schools in Rabun County. However, respondents indicated that higher wage jobs, more affordable housing, and more entertainment activities are needed in the county.

## Open-Ended Questions

The survey included three “open-ended” questions about life in Rabun County and the respondents’ vision for the future of the county. Below are some representative responses to these questions. More responses are included in the Supporting Documents part of this report.

### 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

### What is your "vision" for the future of Rabun County?



"Better paying jobs, with less new tourist attractions and big developments."

"Sustained growth, reaching a balance of agriculture, tourism and industrial jobs."

"Would like more skilled industry, while keeping small-town charm and values."

"Affordable housing opportunities with high paying jobs to support young families wishing to stay and live in Rabun County."

"Would like our county to be a place where the younger generation can raise their families with successful opportunities for employment."

"Thriving, but not just a tourist venue."

"Maintain the small-town feel with managed growth and improved economy for people who live here."

"A place where all classes of people can live and work with the possibility of upward mobility within the county."



**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.

## Closed-Ended Questions

The survey also included several “closed-ended” questions about growth and development, the economy, and the quality of life in Rabun County. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with questions and statements on these topics in the following manner:

**Please indicate if you agree or disagree with each of the following statements by rating them on a scale of 1 to 5:**

- 1: Strongly disagree
- 2: Disagree
- 3: Neutral: don't know or not relevant
- 4: Agree
- 5: Strongly agree

A copy of the survey is contained in the Supporting Documentation report. Below is a summary of the results from the closed-ended questions:

### Growth and 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 believe that growth is not enhancing the quality of life in Rabun County as opposed to 21% who believe it is.** 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 Economy

- **A majority of the respondents (53%) believe that good jobs are not 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.
- **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.**
- **74% believe that salaries and wage rates are not 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 too seasonal, and 30% believing that it is not too seasonal.

## 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% believe that good medical care is not available in Rabun County
- 66% believe that more national retail stores and restaurants would not be a good thing for Rabun County

## Respondent Profile

- The vast majority of respondents (91%) reported that they live full time in Rabun County.
- The median number of years full-time resident responders have lived in Rabun County is 28 years, while the median number of years for part-time resident responders is 18 years.

**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 (people working below their skill levels) in Rabun County. These results are totally consistent with the respondents' vision for the future - better economic opportunity for all residents.



# Situation Assessment

The quote “To know your future you must know your past” 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. The full data analysis section of the report contained in the Supporting Documentation paints a 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.

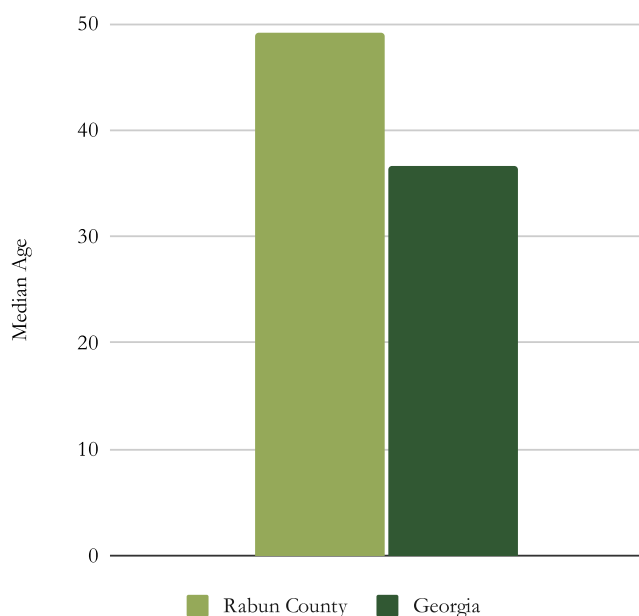
Data for this section come from various sources including Chmura.com (JobsEQ), EMSI and other commercial sources that package data from the Census Bureau (including the American Community Survey). Unless otherwise noted, the data are for various dates between 2020 and 2022. Below is a summary of some of the key findings from the data analysis.

## Data Analysis

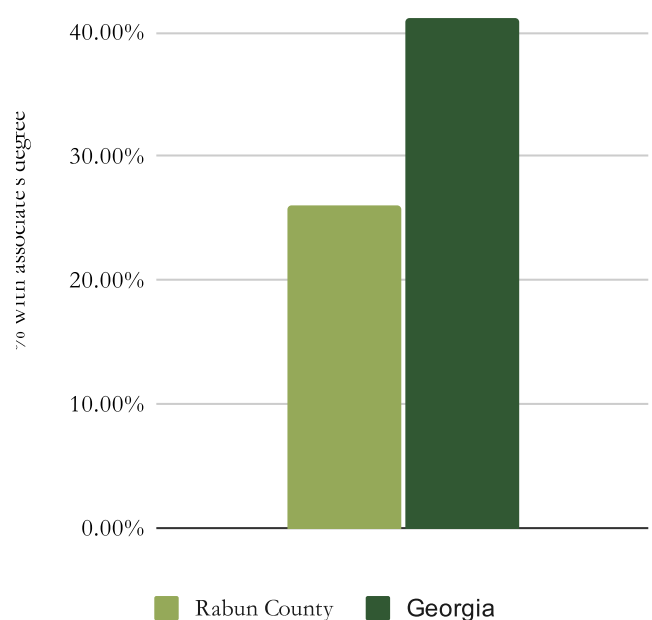
**Rabun County’s population is older than the state population** (median age of 49.2 vs. 36.7 years, respectively.)

**Educational attainment is lower in Rabun County** compared to the state: 26.1% of Rabun residents have an associate degree or better compared to 41.1% for the state. See Figure 2.

**Figure 1. Median Age of Rabun County and Georgia**



**Figure 2. Percent of Population with Associates Degrees**



**The population in Rabun County reached 18,144 in 2021,** representing an increase of 11.4% from 2010, very close to the state's 11.6% increase over that time period.

**Housing affordability in Rabun County is lower (worse) than the state** by several measures.

**The major sectors with the highest level of employment in Rabun County include the tourism-related industries** of Retail Trade (17.9% of employment) and Accommodation and Food Services (14.8%). Health Care, Construction and Manufacturing also employ a larger number of workers in Rabun County.

**Wages are lower in Rabun County compared to the state.**

The average annual wage in Rabun County is \$35,472 compared to \$55,075 for the state. This wage discrepancy is due in part to Rabun's large hospitality industries, and the lower labor force participation rate.

**Total employment in Rabun County has increased 16.4% from 2010** to approximately 6,300, slightly higher than state's increase since 2010 of 14.8%

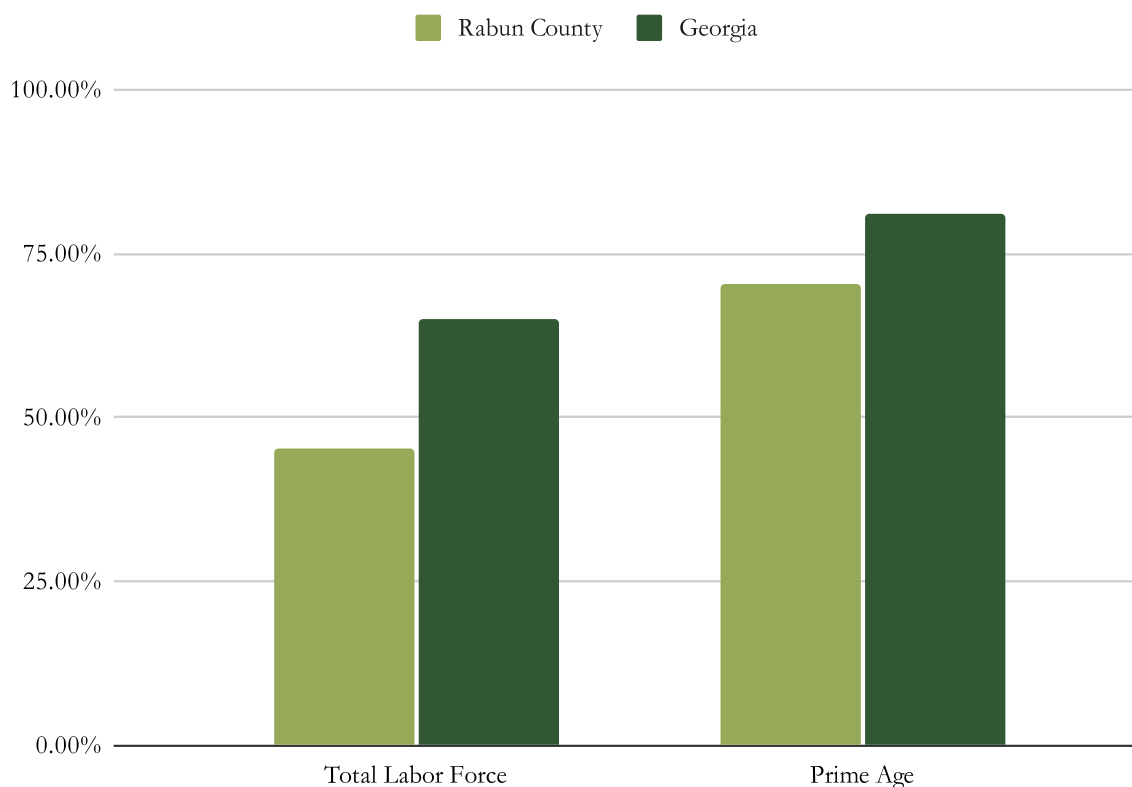
**71% of the jobs located in Rabun County are filled by Rabun County residents.**

The other 28.1% of jobs in Rabun County are filled by commuters from other counties.

### Labor force participation rates in Rabun County are lower than the state:

45.2% vs. 63.0%, respectively, for all ages (undoubtedly due in part to the county's higher concentration of older retired workers). But for the key prime working ages of 25-54 years, the labor force participation rate is still lower in Rabun County (70.2%) than in the state (80.9%). This is a contributing factor to the County's labor shortage. The civilian labor force in Rabun County is 6,422.

Figure 3. Labor Force Participation Rate



**79.4 percent of Rabun County residents who are employed work in the county.** The other 20.6% commute to other counties, and represent a loss of workers who could meet local job vacancies and 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.

**Computer use and broadband access in Rabun County is slightly behind** but not dramatically different from the state.

**Rabun County is ranked as one of the best high schools in the State of Georgia.** and the two private schools place most of their graduates in College.

# Strengths and Weaknesses Assessment

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 is based on three things:

- **Public input.** Residents know their communities better than anyone, and we have found that most of them are happy to share what they consider to be the assets as well as liabilities of their communities. Key strengths and weaknesses can be identified based on the frequency they are mentioned in the public input, and by their significance.
- **Data analysis.** Identifying trends, good or bad, and comparing Rabun County to the state provides an outside perspective.
- **Professional judgment.** The consultants for this project together have evaluated hundreds of communities from the “inside out” and from the “outside in” when helping companies look for the best communities and sites for new facilities.

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 SWOT (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.

Below is a list of the community and economic development strengths and weaknesses for Rabun County. Information on why these factors were identified as strengths or weaknesses is included in the Supporting Documentation.



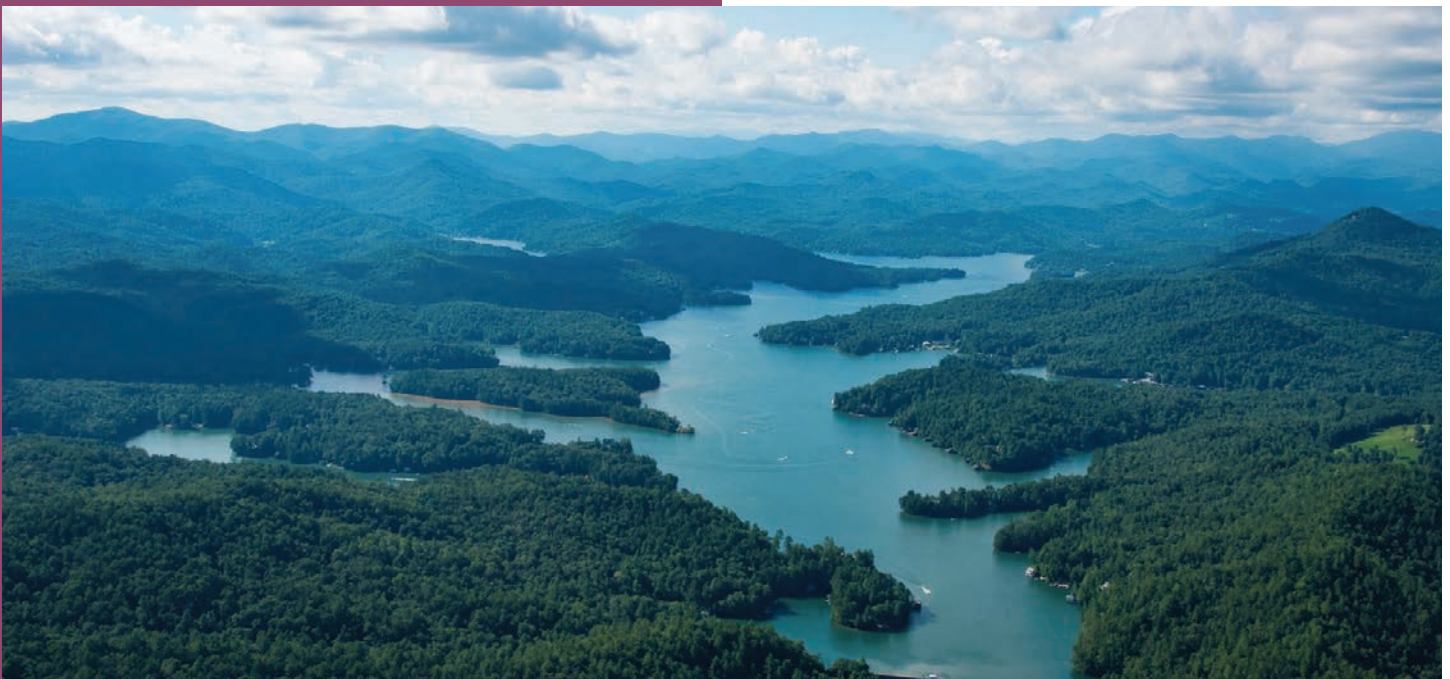


## Assets to Build on for the Future

- Scenic beauty and outdoor recreation
- Strong community spirit
- Safe environment with low crime rate
- Strong tourism, retirement and second home economy
- Attractive community
- Strong brand and identity
- Farm to table state designation and associated brand
- Schools/K-12 education
- Access to higher education
- Geographic location and access
- Good business climate
- Low property taxes
- Work ethic of labor force
- Good county fiscal condition
- Increased intergovernmental cooperation
- Lake communities add taxes and business expertise to the county.

## Relative Weaknesses

- Limited land for development
- Availability of industrial/commercial sites and buildings
- Housing availability and affordability
- Labor availability
- Water and sewer availability and service
- Lack of childcare facilities
- Distance to commercial airports
- Health services
- Limited planning for growth
- Broadband availability
- Lack of a marketing plan to attract high wage tech businesses
- Prevalence of drugs among youth



# Evaluation and Comparison with Existing Local and Regional Plans/Studies

The consulting team completed evaluations of some of the most recently completed local and regional strategic plans/studies including: Georgia Mountains Regional Commission Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS), Rabun County Georgia Comprehensive Plan, Appalachian Regional Commission Strategic Plan, and the City of Clayton, GA Master Plan. This is important because 1) there can be much information relevant to the present project in these studies, and 2) it is good to check for consistencies or inconsistencies in these previous studies compared to the present project.

We found that these previous studies for the most part supported our findings and, importantly, our recommendations in this project. Some distinct commonalities were identified between these plans and the Forward Rabun Strategic Planning Project. The key commonalities identified include:

## **1. Natural and Cultural Resources**

Common Goal: To enhance, conserve, protect and promote the natural and cultural resources of the region (objectives should include current land-use strategies that will better support protection of the natural environment, while continuing to support high-tech low impact economic development and tourism (tourism is identified as a major industry within the region).

## **2. Economic Development, Business and Industry**

Common Goal: To create a clean, high-tech business environment that will stimulate and strengthen the regional economy (diversification) through a collaborative effort embracing global trends resulting in job creation/retention, capital investments and infrastructure (including broadband connectivity), which will enhance the local tax base and quality of life in the region (recognize and support tourism as a key industry in the region).

## **3. Education, Workforce Development and Affordable Housing**

Common Goal: To attract and retain business and industry by promoting a superior educational system in tandem with a world-class workforce development strategy complemented by the coordination of sensible housing development with planning for adequate infrastructure focused on overall long-term community development/sustainability.

## **4. Sense of Place**

Common Goal: Promote and enhance the community's unique qualities. Preserve the downtown areas as a focal point of the community; promote compact, green, walkable, mixed-use development; protect and revitalize historic areas of the community; encourage new development that is compatible with the traditional features of the community, and protect scenic and natural features that are important to defining/preserving the community's unique character.

The conclusions and recommendations from these studies are consistent with and support the above vision statement for Rabun County.

# Next Step: Final Rabun County Strategic Planning Project Report

As noted at the beginning of this document, a strategic plan for community and economic development normally contains five components:

1. Public input
2. Situation assessment
3. Vision for the future
4. Gap analysis
5. Plan of action

This document (Interim Report) has covered the first three components which are critical for completing the final two components:

(4) Gap analysis to identify impediments and gaps that need to be bridged to get from the current situation to a consensus vision for economic development; and

(5) Plan of action to address the gaps and pursue the vision for the future.

The final report that will be issued in the Fall will address components 4 (Gap Analysis) and 5 (Plan of Action) and will also include this Interim Report (with any relevant updates) for a complete project report. To keep up with project progress and news, we have created a web site, [forwardrabun.com/strategicplan2022](https://forwardrabun.com/strategicplan2022).

The consulting team wishes to thank everyone who participated in the Interim Report, including all those who provided public input, and the Forward Rabun staff. We note that in our previous community strategic planning work, rarely have we seen such a strong consensus on a vision for the future. Furthermore, we say again that Rabun County is at an economic development crossroads. Because the county is transitioning, there are many things to work on to achieve the vision including infrastructure, business sites and buildings, housing and workforce development. We believe Rabun County has very strong assets to help reach its vision, but it will be a long-term process that will require commitment and patience.

