



# Creating our Future: A Strategic Plan for Economic Development in Rabun County

Prepared by:  
Forward Rabun  
Rock Paper Scissors  
Tucson Atlantic Consulting





Founded in 2019 as a public-private partnership for community development and economic development.

Brings economic development, chamber, tourism under one roof for more efficient operation and better coordination.

Provides a platform for the county, cities and the private sector to plan and work together for a prosperous future.



"Run to meet the future or it's going to run you down."

# Creating the Future

- Smart communities don't let the future "happen" to them; they make their own future
- Communities need a strategy and a plan
- All stakeholders must work together for success
- A strategic plan for all the county



# Strategic planning.....

is the process of defining the goals of your organization (community) for the future and the strategies by which these goals will be achieved and resourced.

—Consciousgovernance.com



# Project Overview



# Why a Strategic Plan for Economic Development in Rabun County?

- “Traditional” manufacturing has gone offshore
- Skilled service and tech jobs driving prosperity in the U.S. are not present in Rabun County; result is lower incomes, young talent leaving county
- Development pressures increasing

**Rabun County is at an Economic Development Crossroads**



# Questions We Must Address

- What kind of future do we want for Rabun County?
- Should we diversify our economic base and enhance opportunities for future generations?
- Will we let growth happen “to” us or will we make it happen “for” us?



# Benefits of a Strategic Plan

- 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” - coordination and cooperation
- Shapes the economic development future in a preferred, not random, way
- Helps guide government budget decisions



# Project Team

Experienced: Numerous strategic planning projects across the nation

## Internal Team



**Robert Pittman**

Economic Development  
Consultant

**Volunteer – No Compensation**

Vice-Chair, Forward Rabun



**Mickey Duvall**

**Staff Member**

Forward Rabun, Inc.

## External Team



**Amanda Sutt**

**Branding & Marketing**

CEO, Rock Paper Scissors

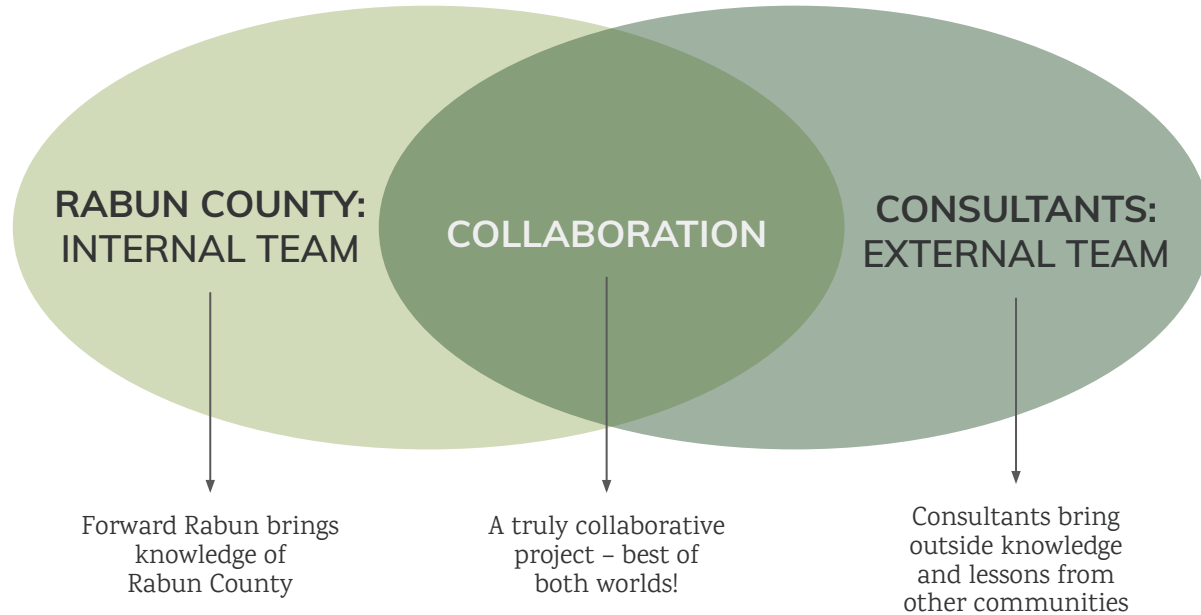


**Tucson Roberts**

**Economic Development Consultant**

Tucson Atlantic Consulting

# Best of Both Worlds



# Whose Plan Is It?

- Not the consultants', not just the elected officials' plan; **it's what the people of Rabun County have said they want!**
- Based on extensive public input
  - All voices heard - everyone has a chance to comment
  - A consensus of what the Rabun County residents want
  - Critical for buy-in and support
  - Everyone must work together to implement - a community effort!

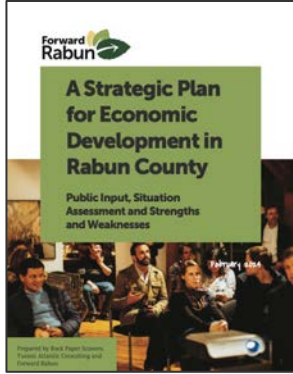


# Survey Respondents: Full-Time Residents

- 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
- The median number of years for part-time resident responders is 18 years.



# Elements of a Strategic Plan for Economic Development



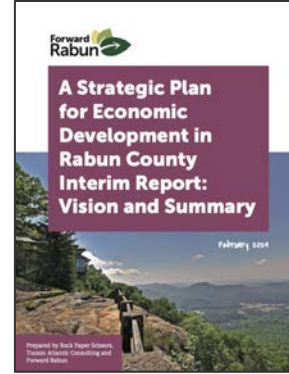
## Part I of Project

### Where are we now?

- Situation assessment
- Strengths and weaknesses

### Where do we want to be?

- Vision for the future



## Part II of Project

### How do we get there?

- Bridging the Gap
- Creating the Future
- Recommendations
- Implementation



# Steps in a Strategic Plan for Economic Development

## 1. Where are we now?

- Public input
- Situation assessment - demographics, economics, trends
- Strengths and weaknesses

## 2. Where do we want to be?

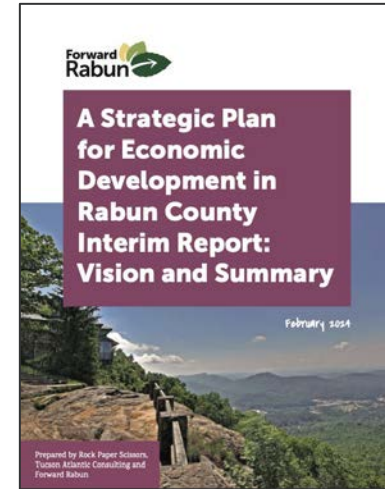
- Vision for the future
- What would you like the County to “look like” in the coming years?



# Steps in a Strategic Plan for Economic Development

## 3. Achieving the Vision: how do we get where we want to be?

- Bridging the gap
- Addressing the weaknesses and building on the strengths
- Recommendations - the plan!
- Implementation





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

February 2024

Prepared by Rock Paper Scissors,  
Tucson Atlantic Consulting and  
Forward Rabun

# Summary of Part I



# Part I: Input, Assessment, Vision

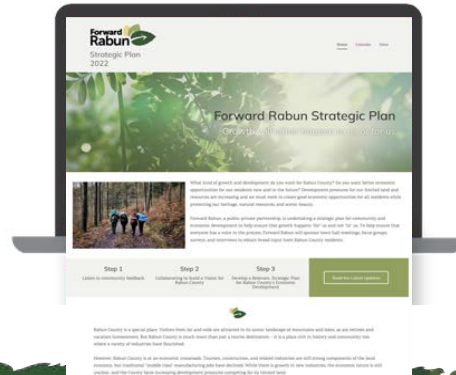
## Step 1: Obtain Public Input and Review Existing Studies

## Step 2: Situation Assessment

- Economic trends, demographic workforce, social factors
- Strengths and weaknesses

## Step 3: Establish a Vision for Rabun County

- What would you like the County to “look like” in the coming years?
- Input from Steps 1 and 2



**Note:** For more detail on Part I results, see two documents they can all be found on [ForwardRabun.com/strategicplan2024/](https://ForwardRabun.com/strategicplan2024/)



# 1. Where Are We Now?



# Survey Results: Growth and Development

- 68% believe the County is growing too quickly
- 78% believe stronger growth regulations are needed
- 55% believe that growth is not enhancing the quality of life
- However, 46% (plurality) believe that growth enhances economic opportunities

Is there a contradiction? – growth enhances opportunities but not the quality of life?



**Challenge:** Find a way for the County to grow without diminishing the quality of life



# Survey Results: The Economy

Do You Agree or Disagree With These Statements?	Strongly Agree Or Agree	Strongly Disagree Or Disagree
Good jobs are <u>not</u> easy to find in Rabun	53%	23%
Jobs do <u>not</u> meet the skills of the workforce	44%	19%
More jobs with higher pay are needed in Rabun County	72%	6%
Salaries and wage rates are <u>not</u> adequate to live in Rabun County	74%	9%
It is important to grow and diversify the local economy to make it stronger	55%	22%

Note: Percentages do not sum to 100 because some respondents chose response #3 Neutral

## Conclusion:

Many Rabun County residents are underemployed and want better jobs and higher incomes



# Survey Results: Quality of Life

Do You Agree or Disagree With These Statements?	Strongly Agree Or Agree	Strongly Disagree Or Disagree
K-12 Education is good in Rabun County	78%	5.4%
Housing availability is good in Rabun County	4.6%	83.6%
Good medical care is available in Rabun County	13.3%	60.4%
More national retail stores and restaurants would be a good thing for Rabun County	19.5%	65.6%

Note: Percentages do not sum to 100 because some respondents chose response #3 Neutral



# Survey: What Do You Like About Living in Rabun County?

- Rural, small-town feel
- Natural beauty
- Scenery - lakes and mountains
- Schools
- Climate
- Outdoor recreation



# Survey: What Would Make Living in Rabun County Better?

- Affordable housing for workforce
- More healthcare options; more specialists; mental health care
- Better jobs with higher pay
- A comprehensive growth plan
- Managed development to protect natural resources
- Better internet
- Ordinances to protect the small-town charm
- Larger and better workforce



# First and Foremost: Public Input

- Survey with over 500 responses
- 2 town hall meetings
- 5 focus groups
- 40 one-on-one interviews

See all public input and comments (over 30+ pages) at:  
**[ForwardRabun.com/strategicplan2024/](https://ForwardRabun.com/strategicplan2024/)**



# Bottom Line from Public Input

- Rabun County residents 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.

## Mission Impossible?

Forward Rabun and the Consulting Team say this *IS* possible with the right strategy and plan!



# Situation Assessment:

## Data Analysis

## Strengths and Weaknesses

## Existing Studies

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Where are we now?



# Situation Assessment: Some Key Measures

**Employment is not diversified:** 42% of employment in Rabun County is concentrated in two tourism-related industries and construction:

Retail Trade	17.8%
Accommodation and Food Service	14.8%
Construction	10.3%

Add another two industries [Health Care (10.5%), Educational Services (9.0%) and over 62% of employment in Rabun County is concentrated in just six sectors.

**Lower wages:** the County average annual wage of \$39,052 is far below the State average of \$64,948 (Source: GA Labor Market Explorer)



# Strengths and Weaknesses

- Rabun County has economic development challenges, including:
  - Land – limited availability and topography
  - Water/sewer availability and capacity
  - Workforce housing
  - Labor availability
- These are long-term community and economic development challenges that must be addressed to meet the vision
- **In the near term, Rabun County has strong economic development assets to help achieve its vision**



# Building a Better Economic Future

Data analysis shows that current economic conditions in Rabun County, including heavy reliance on just a few industries and relatively low incomes, do not support the public input of a diversified economy and better jobs.

**What are some economic development strengths to build on for the future and some weaknesses to address?**



# Economic Development Strengths and Weaknesses Assessment

- **Strengths:**

Assets to build on to attain the vision

- **Weaknesses:**

Obstacles to attaining the vision that need to be addressed; basis for gap analysis



## Strengths and weaknesses based on:

- Public input
- Data analysis
- Consulting team's professional experience and judgment

**Note:** See the Part I documents for full explanation of strengths and weaknesses



# Strengths: 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 associate brand
- Schools/K-12 education
- Access to higher education
- Geographic location and access
- Good business climate
- Low property taxes
- Work ethic of experienced labor force
- Good county fiscal condition
- Increased intergovernmental cooperation
- Vacation home and retiree communities add taxes and business expertise to the County

**Note:** For explanation and information on strengths, see Part I report



# Economic Development 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 businesses
- Use of drugs among some youth

**Note:** For explanation and information on weaknesses, see Part I report



# Existing Studies

Existing Plans reviewed by the Project Team:

- Georgia Mountains Regional Commission Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS)
- Rabun County Georgia Comprehensive Plan
- Appalachian Regional Commission Strategic Plan
- City of Clayton Master Plan



# Existing Studies

The Existing Plans reinforced our findings regarding:

1. The enhancement, conservation, protection, and promotion of Natural and Cultural Resources Create a clean, high-tech business environment that will stimulate, diversify and strengthen the regional economy through collaboration, resulting in job creation/retention and capital investment in infrastructure which will enhance the local tax base and quality of life.
2. Attract and retain clean high-tech business/industry by promoting a superior educational system in tandem with a world-class workforce development strategy complemented by sensible housing development/sustainability.
3. Promote and enhance the community's sense of place by promoting downtown and historic areas, walkable green-space, mixed-use development, and scenic/natural areas of the community.



# Existing Studies

**The Existing Plans** we examined were more generalized in scope and recommendations regarding economic development.



**This Strategic Plan** focuses more detail on specific economic development issues in Rabun County.



# 2. Where Do We Want to Be?

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Vision for the Future



# A Clear Vision for Rabun County's Economic Future

- The consensus vision expressed by the public was very clear – one of the strongest ever encountered by the consultants
- The Vision Statement is an expression of public sentiment and serves as an overarching guide for the economic future of Rabun County



# 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 the Vision

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

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

# Part II: Bridging the Gap And Creating the Future

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How Do We Get There?



# Part II: Bridging the Gap - Strategies and Actions

## Step 4: Gap Analysis

- Understanding key weaknesses to achieving the economic development vision
- Recommendations and priorities for addressing them

## Step 5: Strategy and Recommended Actions

- Recommendations for community and economic development strategies to achieve the vision statement
- Roadmap for the future



# 3. Achieving the Vision

How Do We Get Where We Want to Be?



# Bridging the Gap: Build on strengths and address weaknesses

- Specific recommendations in **Summary of Recommended Programs and Actions**
- Forward Rabun has already established several Working Groups to address opportunities and issues - e.g. childcare, healthcare
- More Working Groups to form - need more professionals and volunteers to help
- A community-wide, public-private effort



# Limited Land for Development

**Because of 3rd party land ownership (U.S. Forest Service and GA Power) and mountainous topography, there is limited land for development, land and development costs are relatively high.**

Development moratoria will not achieve the vision of protecting the County's natural resources while also creating better jobs. Population growth and development pressures will continue, so the choice is simple: build up in certain locations or build out and consume more land.

Public input favors directing development where possible to the 441/23 corridor and cities while preserving the “small town, main street” charm. To accomplish this, any constraints to denser development in cities should be identified and addressed, and master plans should be developed.



# Limited Land for Development

For economic development, less land-intensive industries should be emphasized; office or home-based “white collar” jobs will serve the vision’s dual purpose of protecting natural resources and providing better jobs (see target industry section below).

Comprehensive land use plans for the County and its cities are needed to guide future development to attain the vision.

- The Comprehensive Plan (2019) identifies “character areas” in the County - this is a start.
- The County has a Land Use Application form, but this mainly applies to re-zoning.

There are tools to help preserve rural agricultural land, such as conservation easements, transfers of development rights, and land trusts, that can be used to help preserve rural and undeveloped land in the County.

**A Land Use Planning Working Group should be established.**

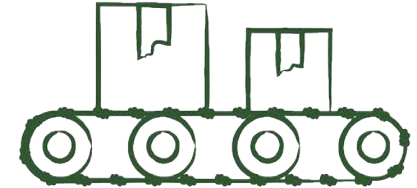


# Available Industrial/Commercial Sites and Buildings

There is a lack of suitable development-ready sites and buildings in the County. Most businesses prefer development-ready sites (all utilities, good access, proper zoning, etc.) or buildings; lack of them can be a “fatal flaw” and drive businesses elsewhere.

## Recommended Actions:

- Identify suitable individual sites (3-5 acres) and potential larger sites (20 or more acres) meeting modern business standards.
- Identify sites/buildings for office space.
- Investigate the feasibility of developing a shared office work facility (see Small Business/Entrepreneurial recommendations below).
- Pursue private developers and public/private partnerships for site and building development.
- Consider expanding the County GIS system to help identify sites.



The Development Authority of Rabun County will continue to be responsible for industrial sites and buildings.



# Housing Affordability and Availability

**Housing availability and affordability for the County's labor force is a major obstacle to attaining the economic development vision.**

Denser housing options such as multi-family housing and townhomes are needed. The model of minimum one-acre lots for single-family housing for all the County is not necessarily suitable for many working-age people that help diversify Rabun County's economy (e.g., young single workers); and is not compatible with the vision of planned growth and better jobs.



Denser housing in the cities is more compatible with the vision and helps protect undeveloped areas.

- Land use and master development plans can facilitate denser housing options in cities in an acceptable way.
- Barriers to denser housing from current zoning and other regulations should be identified and addressed.



# Housing Affordability and Availability

Cities and towns across the nation (such as Gainesville, GA) are embracing new alternative types of housing, such as townhomes, duplexes, apartments, and modular homes, to increase affordability and availability of housing (see Rope Roberts Georgia Power presentation to Forward Rabun, February 9, 2022).

Participation in the Urban Land Institute (ULI) Technical Assistance Program will bring useful outside knowledge and experience to bear on the problem.

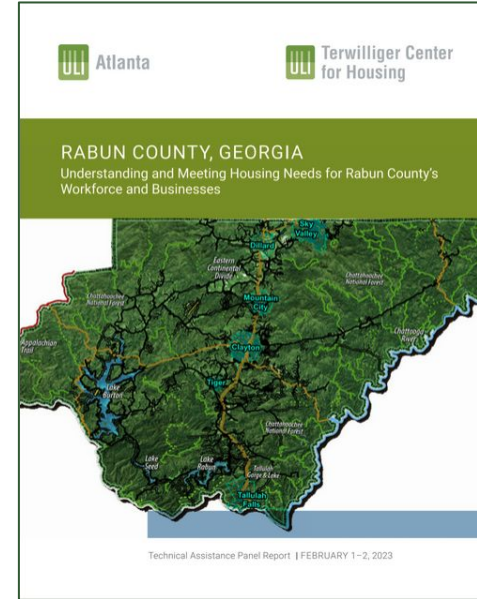


**A Housing Working Group should be established.**



# Housing Affordability and Availability

- One-third (32%) of county population cannot afford basic rental costs (30% of income) (2023 ULI study)
- Forward Rabun secured competitive Technical Assistance Program on Housing from the ULI Group
  - Panel of national experts visited Rabun County
  - Detailed recommendations on creating more affordable housing

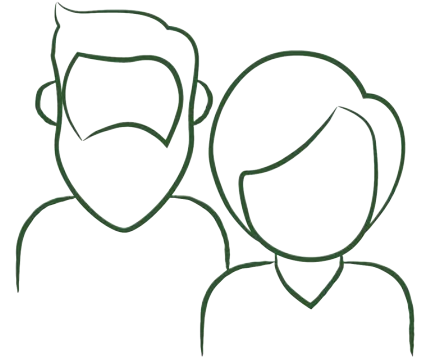


# Labor Availability

**Labor availability is a major problem, according to business owners and managers in the County. The labor force participation rate in Rabun County (45%) is significantly lower than the State (63%); for the prime workforce age (25-54), the rate is 70% for the County compared to 81% for the State.**

Better, higher-paying jobs will encourage more County residents to become productive members of the County labor force. This is the recommended economic development strategy in this report.

Many business owners stated that more available child care would increase their labor pool and help reduce turnover. Encouraging more childcare services in Rabun County should be a high priority (see childcare discussion for recommendations).

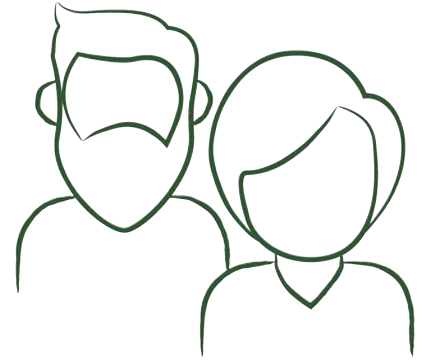


# Labor Availability

Recruiting remote workers and new businesses will increase the supply of skilled labor; this will stimulate the hiring of Rabun County residents.

The “Bring a Generation Back Home” campaign (see below) over time will encourage some Rabun County natives living and working elsewhere to move back home.

Almost 21% of Rabun County residents work outside of the County. Many of these out-commuters are in high-skilled “white collar” occupations such as Commuter and Mathematical Operations that can help diversify and strengthen the local economy (see data in the presentation by Rope Roberts of Georgia Power to Forward Rabun, February 9, 2002).

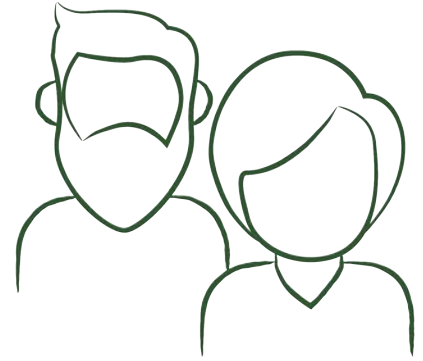


# Labor Availability

Creating better jobs in the County, along with a campaign to encourage out-commuters to work where they live, will increase the labor supply.

Industry skills needed in the County should be closely aligned with workforce training at regional technical colleges.

**A Labor Force Working Group should be established.**

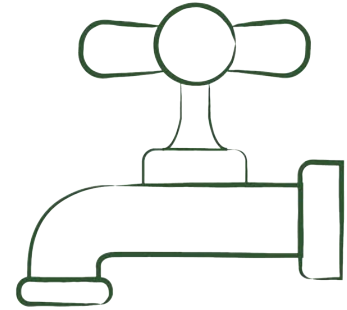


# Water and Sewer Availability and Service

Limited water and sewer infrastructure limits where development can occur and the type of development in the County. The Rabun County Water and Sewer Authority (RCWSA) has plans to increase capacity in the County, including providing service along the 441/23 corridor in south Rabun County.

Future development of water and sewer infrastructure should be coordinated with a comprehensive land use plan to facilitate the type and location of development to help attain the vision.

Completion of a plan to consolidate Clayton's water system with the RCWSA system will greatly facilitate future economic development in Rabun County to attain the vision and address some of the Clayton system's service problems mentioned by interviewees, including very high rates of water loss and frequent service interruptions.



# Childcare Services

**Rabun County has historically experienced a chronic shortage of childcare facilities. Limited childcare options, as well as cost, makes it harder for parents to work, with some choosing to stay home with their children over working.**

In addition, the State has strict licensing requirements for childcare facilities, which increases start-up and operating costs and risks for the facilities.

However, there are local employers who know if they could offer childcare to their employees, they would have a waiting list of qualified workers.



# Childcare Services

## Recommended Actions:

- Establish a Childcare Working Group.
- Establish a task force to address the issue and conduct a survey to gauge demand for childcare.
- Begin more extensive research to determine the exact needs for childcare in Rabun County (e.g., Infant through 4 years, early learning & education, after-school care for ages 5 and up, etc.)
- Meet with the YMCA of Metro Atlanta to learn how they are currently integrating into Rabun County beyond their Lake Burton facility and how Rabun County can partner with them to expand services.
- Contact successful childcare facilities and ask how they started.
- Contact some national franchise childcare companies to see what they need to get started.
- Explore options for a public-private partnership to bring resources for funding and a childcare facility to Rabun County.
- Discuss with Rabun County Schools to explore opportunities to expand early learning services.
- Encourage local governments, the business community, and the general public to view childcare as “business imperative” for the County and invest more resources in building out a childcare infrastructure.



# Healthcare

Mountain Lakes Medical Center is a 25-bed acute care facility in Clayton.

**Healthcare options in Rabun County are limited. Survey respondents expressed a strong desire for more specialty medical providers in the County.**

Residents must travel into neighboring counties, Metro Atlanta, Asheville, or Greenville to find providers.

Countyhealthrankings.org, from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, offers comprehensive data and measures of health outcomes, health factors, and healthcare for all counties in the nation.

Health outcomes include mortality rates and health indicators from various sources. The **health outcomes** measure for Rabun County is relatively good - ranked **36th out of 159 Georgia counties**.



# Healthcare

Measures of health factors that help determine health outcomes include health behaviors (e.g., alcohol use); clinical care (e.g., access to care); social and economic factors (e.g. income); and physical environment (e.g. air and water quality).

Rabun County's measure of **health factors** is relatively good - **39th out of 159 counties**. Rabun County ranks above the median county rank (80th) in all factors and very high in some (e.g., physical environment, #2) except for access to care which includes measures such as physicians per capita and various measures of healthcare availability.

## Recommended Actions for the Healthcare Committee to Consider:

1. Expand the current Forward Rabun Healthcare Committee into the Healthcare Working Group.
2. Conduct a feasibility/market study for healthcare in Rabun County given surrounding healthcare facilities in Habersham and Hall counties and Macon County, NC
3. Some additional ideas for the Healthcare Committee to consider:
  - a. Telehealth
  - b. Partnerships for mobile clinics
  - c. Rural Hospital Stabilization Grant



# Limited Planning for Growth

According to the information collected from interviews, surveys, and town hall meetings, the lack of long-term growth plans or goals creates uncertainty and confusion.

Zoning is being updated with the Pond Study, but there is no underlying land use plan.



# Limited Planning for Growth

## Recommended Actions:

- The Strategic Plan will provide roadmap for future growth in Rabun County.
- Develop a comprehensive land use plans for the County and cities.
- Provide budget and staff resources to proactively support land use plans.

## The Benefits:

- More efficient use of scarce land
- Guide zoning/re-zoning decisions
- More transparency and certainty



# Broadband Availability

Reliable and affordable high-speed internet e-Connectivity is fundamental for all economic activity in the economy of the 21st Century. Rabun County is fairly well served, but service is spotty, with slow speeds in some areas.

- According to a recent Georgia Department of Community Assistance (GDCA) 2022 Broadband Study, Rabun County has approximately 13% unserved locations compared to the National Average of 22.3% unserved (based on broadband fixed terrestrial service with 25 Mbps down/3 Mbps up).
- According to the Census Bureau, 77.2% of Rabun County's households have a broadband subscription compared to 84.4% for the State.



# Broadband Availability

In 2018 the Georgia General Assembly passed SB402 (Achieving Connectivity Everywhere) and thereby created the Georgia Broadband Deployment Initiative, which promotes the deployment of broadband services to unserved areas within the State.

It is important to establish a Broadband Working Group to continue to pursue every opportunity (federal/state grants) to upgrade and expand broadband coverage to all unserved locations in Rabun County.



# Creating the Future



# Community Development.... Like Home Improvement?

You want to improve your home - new bedroom, home office, sunroom - you have a vision for what you want your home to look like.

But you don't have the time or money to do everything immediately, so you do higher priority projects first and begin planning for others in the future. You celebrate and enjoy each home improvement, knowing you want to do more.

Your situation changes over the years, so you modify your home improvement plans over time.

So it is with community development... continuous improvement and adjusting to changes.



# Diversifying and Strengthening Rabun County's Economy

- Higher-skilled white collar or technology-related jobs and small goods- and service-producing firms can help meet the vision of diversifying the economy and preserving Rabun County's lifestyle and natural resources.
- These jobs will also support building, retail, restaurant and related industries in the county on a **year-round** basis



# Diversifying and Strengthening Rabun County's Economy

Proactive communities that want to shape their economic future seek to recruit and grow the kinds of **industries that will help achieve their vision.**

But for this strategy to succeed, they should also choose **industries for which they have a competitive advantage.**

Industries that meet these two criteria are often referred to as “target” industries. They help attain the community's vision and increase the chances of successful recruitment.

## Benefits:

- Underemployed residents can move up to these jobs
- Employ local graduates
- Higher-income jobs will stimulate demand for the retail/restaurant sector and make them less dependent on the season



# Target Industries

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Creating Intentional Jobs to Meet Our Vision



# “White Collar” Occupations and Industries

Identify “white collar” occupations (SOC - Standard Occupation Codes) from sources such as Onetonline.org. For example, search for “technical” occupations:

- Computer user support specialists
- Software developers
- Project managers

Identify industries that are high in these white-collar occupations (perform a data run showing SOC classifications in NAICS industries)

Use these industries in the marketing program (below).



# White Collar Industries and Occupations in Rabun County

Rabun County already has some of these technical industries and occupations and they are growing!

NAICS Industry	2021 Employment	10-yr Growth
Management, Scientific & Tech Consulting	28	93%
Other Professional, Scientific & Tech Services	56	80%
Architectural, Engineering & Related Services	21	17%

Source: Part I Report



# Some Technical Occupations in Rabun County

SIOC Occupations	2021 Employment	10-yr Growth
Business & Financial Operations Occupations	172	34%
Computer & Mathematical Occupations	36	42%
Life, Physical, & Social Science Occupations	25	94%

Source: Part I Report



# Some Additional “White Collar” Target Industries

NAICS	Job Classification
541519	Computer Related Service
541511	Custom Computer Professional Service
511210	Software Publishers
541513	Computer Systems Design Services
541512	Other Computer Systems Design Services

Making Rabun County “remote work ready” will help current residents and companies become more familiar with remote work and help attract more remote workers and companies to the County. A partial checklist of remote work-ready factors to be evaluated and worked on includes:

Telecom infrastructure and service:

- Number of internet providers, geographic coverage, and customers served
- Plans for future expansion and upgrade of internet service



# A Remote Work “Ready” Community

## Community support for remote work:

- Declaration of support for remote work
- Remote work seminars
- Shared work facilities with support services for remote workers (part of the new business start-up plan)
- Task Force dedicated to improving remote work environment (the Broadband Work Group)

### Some top remote work occupations:

- Software developers
- Project management specialists
- Management analysts

### Some top remote work industries:

- Software publishers
- Computer systems design
- Consulting services



# “Lifestyle” Industries

Some communities select target industries based on lifestyle and community identity.

Lifestyle products and target industries for Rabun County include

- Food products - already present; move up the supply chain from crops to food products
- Outdoor recreation and sports products: camping, hiking products; mountain bikes



# Creating Target Industry Jobs



# Creating Target Industry Jobs

- Three ways to create jobs in a community:
  - Recruitment of new firms
  - Retention and expansion of existing firms (BRE)
  - New business start-up
- In most communities, BRE and new business start-ups account for the majority of new jobs
- Recruitment, however, can be more important when working to diversify the local economy



# Business Retention and Expansion

The re-alignment of business retention and expansion (BRE) under Forward Rabun with the Chamber offers the opportunity to efficiently administer and coordinate economic programs to better support the evolving Rabun County economy.

Forward Rabun/Chamber have already expanded BRE programs including seminars and speaker programs that have been well attended

Recommended additional components of a BRE program include:

- A regular Industry Visitation Program that will identify the issues and needs of local businesses that can be addressed.
- A resource guide for local businesses - for example, help them identify sources of marketing information and assistance.
- A forum (perhaps lunch meetings?) for local business owners and managers to network, learn from peers, and learn from occasional speakers.



# New Business Start-Up and Entrepreneurial Assistance

There are no comprehensive entrepreneurial assistance programs in the County even though there is lots of potential for new business start-ups.

A Small Business and Entrepreneurial Working Group should be established; it should include representatives from the many successful working or retired business executives who live in the County. The Working Group should consult with UGA Small Business Development Center (SBDC) and other outside resources to develop program priorities.

Conduct a feasibility study for a small business/entrepreneurial assistance facility. Many communities have such facilities. This facility could include shared workspace, shared support services (administrative assistance, office machines, meeting space, etc.), office space for rent, and other services. Some communities are expanding these facilities to serve as a “gathering place” for entrepreneurs to exchange ideas, network, and host training programs and seminars.

Establish a business mentoring program like SCORE (Service Corp of Retired Executives); Rabun County is fortunate to have lots of local resources for this (e.g., retired successful business executives).



# New Business Start-Up and Entrepreneurial Assistance

Learn from the experience of other communities in creating new business start-up and entrepreneurial assistance programs. Examples include the Asheville food product incubator, Gwinnett Entrepreneurial Center, and Hart County Recreational Economy Program.

Recruit Rabun County natives who have successful businesses elsewhere to move their businesses back “home” (see “Bring a Generation Back Home” below).



# Retail Development

- Establish a Retail and Conference Working Group.
- Conduct a retail market study to identify retail “gaps” and opportunities. This will be helpful to local entrepreneurs who want to start a retail business and in recruiting selected new retail businesses to Rabun County.
- Marketing to retail prospects is much like marketing to industrial prospects; communities show that they are a good location for the particular retailer with available sites, the proper demographics, traffic counts, and other key factors.
- Retail development will enhance Rabun County’s attraction as a tourist destination and serve the local population.
- Care must be taken to target retail services not offered by local owners, as expressed in the public input.



# Conferences and Meetings

With its scenic beauty and two-hour drive access to three larger metro areas, Rabun County is a good location for smaller business conferences, trade shows, and exhibitions.

The Retail and Conference Working Group should survey and interview conference planners and consultants to determine how to increase conference business and also to assess existing facilities and what additions might be needed.

The upcoming renovation of the Dillard House and Conference Center by new owners will make Rabun County more competitive for conferences and meetings.



# Recruiting Target Industries & Marketing Rabun County

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# Economic Development Marketing

**Establish an Economic Development Marketing Committee:** The Committee should include active and retired business executives with a presence in Rabun County.

Develop a marketing program to attract target industries and occupations (white-collar jobs, remote work residents, and other target industries) to Rabun County. Program elements should include:

- Marketing message and brand for the target industries;
- Database of small, growing firms in the target industries working with companies such as Dun & Bradstreet;
- Program of regular contact with these target firms;
- Other standard marketing components, such as trade show attendance and targeted advertising;
- “Internal marketing” program to part-time county residents who own businesses in Atlanta and elsewhere or know of others who do, such as available space signage with vision and developer/investor events;
- Other marketing techniques to attract the attention of business owners and executives passing through Rabun County on their way to/from North Carolina resort towns including a business incubator.



# Securing the Necessary Workforce

Who will fill the new target industry jobs created to realize the vision of a diversified economy?

- Some workers will move to Rabun County with their relocating new firms.
- Higher-paying jobs will stimulate the local labor supply and help increase the labor force participation rate.
- As was the case in the past with the apparel industry, workers will commute from surrounding counties for good jobs; the labor force for Rabun and adjacent counties is over 105,000.
- Rabun County is a very attractive place to live - skilled workers from other counties will be tempted to relocate here.
- Local high school graduates will have better job opportunities and more incentives to stay in the County.
- Some residents of Rabun County who commute out to jobs in other areas (approximately 1,200 workers) will likely decide to work instead in Rabun County if comparable good jobs are available.



# “Bring a Generation Back Home”

One of the biggest benefits of diversifying the economy and creating higher-skilled jobs may be the opportunity for natives of Rabun County to move back home.

**Many current high school students and recent graduates expressed a strong preference in the public input phase to remain in Rabun County if there were sufficient job opportunities.**



# Joint Tourism and Economic Development Marketing

- Some of Rabun County's tourists are business owners and executives that might be open to locating their businesses or residences in Rabun County. A best practice is to combine economic development and tourism marketing to get this message out for cost-effective marketing.
- Economic development marketing under strategic plan and tourism marketing should work together closely



# A Menu of Options

- The strategic plan contains numerous strategies and recommended actions.
- Priorities will have to be set based on:
  - Community resources, interest, and energy
  - Ongoing assessment of what is working and what isn't.
- This is not a one-off, short-term plan; it is a roadmap for Rabun County's economic future.
- The plan must be evaluated and updated every year.



## Vision for the Future of Rabun County: An Economic Development Strategic Plan

### Summary of Recommended Programs and Actions

Strategic Plan Element	Recommendations and Action Items	Responsibility	Notes	Priority*
<b>Start Up</b>				
<b>Steering Committee</b>	Establish public/private Steering Committee reporting to Forward Rabun (FOR) with responsibility to prioritize, implement and monitor strategic plan recommendations including establishing Working Groups	FOR		Start-Up Necessity
	Add a full-time Forward Rabun staff person to support the Steering Committee	FOR		Start-Up Priority
	Secure funding commitments to kick off and sustain the strategic plan	Steering Committee and FOR		Start-Up Necessity
	Meet quarterly to evaluate progress and re-prioritize as necessary	Steering Committee and FOR		On-Going Necessity
<b>Bridging the Gap: Addressing Economic Development Weaknesses and Achieving the Vision</b>				
<b>Limited Land for Economic Development</b>	Establish Land Use Planning (LUP) Working Group	FOR and Steering Committee		
	Adopt comprehensive land use plan	Contract with land use planning firm	A key component to meeting the vision of protecting Rabun County's natural resources and creating better jobs	Start-Up Priority
<b>Available Industrial Sites and Buildings</b>	Identify and prioritize potential individual smaller industrial/commercial sites	DARC		
	Identify and prioritize potential larger business park sites	DARC		
	Investigate feasibility of a shared office work space facility	Small Business Working Group and DARC	See New Business Start Ups and Programs below	
	Identify potential developers for above sites and facilities	DARC		
	Consider increasing capability of county GIS to help identify sites and implement land use plan	County and FOR		
<b>Housing Affordability and Availability</b>	Establish Housing Working Group	County and FOR	A major obstacle to attracting and increasing skilled workforce in	
	Participate in GHIC and ULI TAP studies and learn from other sources and examples	Housing Working Group and FOR		
	Develop recommendations and implement policies based on these studies as soon as practicable	Housing Working Group and FOR		

## Steps to address weaknesses and build on strengths

## Steps to diversify and strengthen economy while maintaining heritage and lifestyle

<b>Implementation</b>				
<b>Create Rabun 2030 Theme</b>	Create theme for building a better future and achieving the vision	Steering Committee and FOR		Start-Up Necessity
<b>Rabun 2030 Annual Conference</b>	Create Rabun 2030 Annual Conference including meetings and collaboration among Working Groups and banquet to report progress and present the next year's program priorities	Steering Committee and FOR and outside assistance as necessary		On-Going Priority
<b>Communications and Messaging</b>	Establish program of regular messaging and communication for Rabun 2030	Steering Committee and FOR		On-Going Priority
	Establish Rabun 2030 website for communications, messaging and on-going public input, as well as a platform for the working groups	Steering Committee and FOR	Can enhance website already in place for the strategic plan study	Start-Up Priority
<b>Staff and Resources</b>	Solicit public and private funding to kick-off Rabun 2030 and establish the Steering Committee	FOR		Start-Up Necessity
	Add a full-time Forward Rabun staff person to support the Steering Committee	FOR		Start-Up Priority
	Revisit staff needs as programs take off			On-Going Priority
	Working Groups establish priority action items and develop program budgets in respective areas	Steering Committee and all Working Groups		On-Going Priority
	Utilize outside resources and expertise as necessary to implement	Steering Committee and all Working Groups		On-Going Activity
<b>Pursue Grant Funding</b>	Identify and apply for grant assistance to implement Rabun 2030 recommendations	Steering Committee, Working Groups and FOR		On-Going Priority
<b>Leadership and Community Education</b>	Expand current leadership programs to include working age adults	Current Education/Youth Leadership Committee, Steering Committee and FOR		On-Going Activity
	Develop programs to educate Rabun County residents on community and economic development and how to participate in Rabun 2030	Current Education/Youth Leadership Committee, Steering Committee and FOR		On-Going Activity
	Train the next generation: develop programs in Rabun County schools to increase knowledge and awareness of community and economic development and create enthusiasm for Rabun 2030 and achieving the vision	Current Education/Youth Leadership Committee, Steering Committee and FOR		On-Going Activity



# Who Benefits from This Plan and a Stronger Economy?

- Current residents of Rabun County who will hold higher-skilled, better-paying jobs .
- High school and college graduates who can move back or remain in the County due to better economic opportunities.
- Retail, restaurant, and service firms of all types will benefit from the increased incomes and purchasing power in the County.
- Enhanced tax revenues will help keep tax rates down and facilitate more infrastructure and public services.



# Implementation



# Implementing the Plan

- Volunteer and financial support from public and private sectors
- Staff and budget resources
- Forward Rabun will be developing an implementation plan over the next few months

Plans are only good intentions  
**unless** they **immediately**  
degenerate into hard work.

- Peter F. Drucker

# Steering Committee

A first step will be to establish a public/private Steering Committee reporting to Forward Rabun (FOR) with responsibility to prioritize, implement and monitor strategic plan recommendations, including establishing Working Groups.

Steering Committee members should include:

- Representatives from the Forward Rabun Executive Committee and Board
- A representative from all working groups (e.g., housing, education, marketing)
- Private sector representatives



# Funding the Strategic Plan

A primary duty of the Steering Committee and Forward Rabun will be to secure resource commitments to kick off and sustain the strategic plan. **Most businesses and individuals are more inclined to contribute when they see a good plan in place.**

The ability to direct their contributions to certain parts of the plan and working groups will likely increase sponsorship (for example, realtors, banks and builders may want to earmark contributions to the housing effort).

The efficacy of hiring a professional community and economic development fundraising consultant should be investigated.



# Resources Needed

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This is an **investment**, not a sunk cost.

Creating our future is not cheap,  
but **it will pay off.**

**The time is now!**



# Theme: Rabun 2030

Create a brand and theme to implement the plan and achieve the vision.

- Launch “Rabun 2030” or a similar theme to implement the strategic plan.
- The Steering Committee for the strategic plan will oversee Rabun 2030 activities and help coordinate community and economic development efforts under the plan.
- Meet quarterly to coordinate efforts and share progress and concerns
- Produce quarterly Rabun 2030 newsletter with community and economic development news relevant to the plan.

Launch program at the first annual Rabun 2030 Conference in 2023 (see below)

Create a 501(c)(3) foundation at Forward Rabun for tax-deductible charitable contributions to encourage all contributions, including those for Rabun 2030.



# Rabun 2030 Annual Conference

## Establish the annual Rabun 2030 conference:

**Day 1:** Half day of committee meetings open to the public for progress reports, speakers, and plans/ideas; review what worked and what didn't.

**Day 2:** Banquet with keynote speaker (brief!), Rabun 2030 status and progress report (State of Rabun), and awards for outstanding volunteers and participants; open to the public, fee to cover costs; solicit sponsors.

- Could be condensed to one day with banquet in the evening
- Include awards and recognition of outstanding local businesses
- Annual report (one of the quarterly newsletters) summarizing the conference
- After the annual conference, Steering Committee recommends changes in programs and priorities for next year.
- Engage professional help to plan the annual conference and produce the annual report.



# Broad Support and Participation

Widespread community support and participation in the strategic plan for economic development in Rabun County is critical - it must be a community-wide effort.

Volunteer participation - Steering Committee and Working Groups

Financial support

- Contributions from the private sector - Sustaining Members
- Public support through budget allocations



# Messaging

Regular communication and progress reports are critical and will help maintain momentum.

Change can be alarming to some people. Messaging is important, including the following elements:

- Growth and change are inevitable in Rabun County.
- Rather than be passive and let change happen “to” us, we should plan our future and let change happen “for” us. Doing nothing is not an option.
- Rabun County residents’ vision for the future is clear: protect our natural resources but provide more economic opportunity.
- The strategic plan is a roadmap for achieving the vision **one step at a time**.
- The plan is a community-wide call for action; one organization cannot do it alone - it will succeed only to the extent that it becomes a community project.

Celebrate the small accomplishments along the way - shows progress and sustains morale.



# Messaging

This is the most important message of all:

Rabun 2030 has been launched to achieve what the residents of Rabun County have said they want, a clear vision for the future overwhelmingly expressed through surveys, town hall meetings, focus groups, and interviews - a stronger, more diversified economy with better jobs, but one that also preserves the County's heritage and natural resources.

Creating that future cannot be done by any one organization such as Forward Rabun; it will require a total effort from all stakeholders in Rabun County and many volunteers to serve on Working Groups and **do the work!**



# Staff and Resources

This strategic plan is an investment for the future that will pay great dividends; it is not just a cost item.

Public funding from the County and cities and local private funding should be solicited; grant funding will be available and should be pursued to meet the vision of making Rabun County a model for sustainable rural economic development.

The program will succeed only to the extent the entire community gets behind it and provides the necessary resources.

Implementation should proceed **ONE STEP AT A TIME** - forming the Steering Committee is the first step. The Steering Committee will set program priorities and time frames, then a budget and staffing requirements will be formulated for the priority programs in conjunction with the Working Groups.



# Staff and Resources

Current Forward Rabun staff and organization are busy with the Chamber, tourism, and many community development activities. Additional resources will be necessary to implement Rabun 2030.

An additional full-time staff person to support the Steering Committee will be required.

Occasional assistance will be needed from outside consultants with particular expertise.

**THE ELEMENTS OF THIS STRATEGIC PLAN CAN NOT BE IMPLEMENTED WITHOUT THE APPROPRIATE STAFFING AND FUNDING. CREATING THE FUTURE IS NOT EASY AND IT REQUIRES A COMMUNITY-WIDE COMMITMENT.**



# Pursue Grant Funding

Many of the strategic planning elements are eligible for grant funding. For example, the U.S. Dept of Agriculture funds small business centers.

The fact that Rabun County has a comprehensive strategic plan and wants to become a model for sustainable rural economic development may well provide an advantage in the competition for grant funding.

Identify and engage grant writers to help with a comprehensive grant application program.

In many cases, local matching will be necessary.



# Leadership and Community Education

Good community leaders (in addition to elected officials) and an informed public are keys to community and economic development progress.

## **Reinstate Leadership Rabun program:**

- As before, hold leadership program training sessions on key topics (develop curriculum including community and economic development).
- Specify criteria for certification, including public service commitments.
- Encourage the Leadership Program participants to serve on Working Groups.

## **Offer opportunities for residents to learn about community and economic development:**

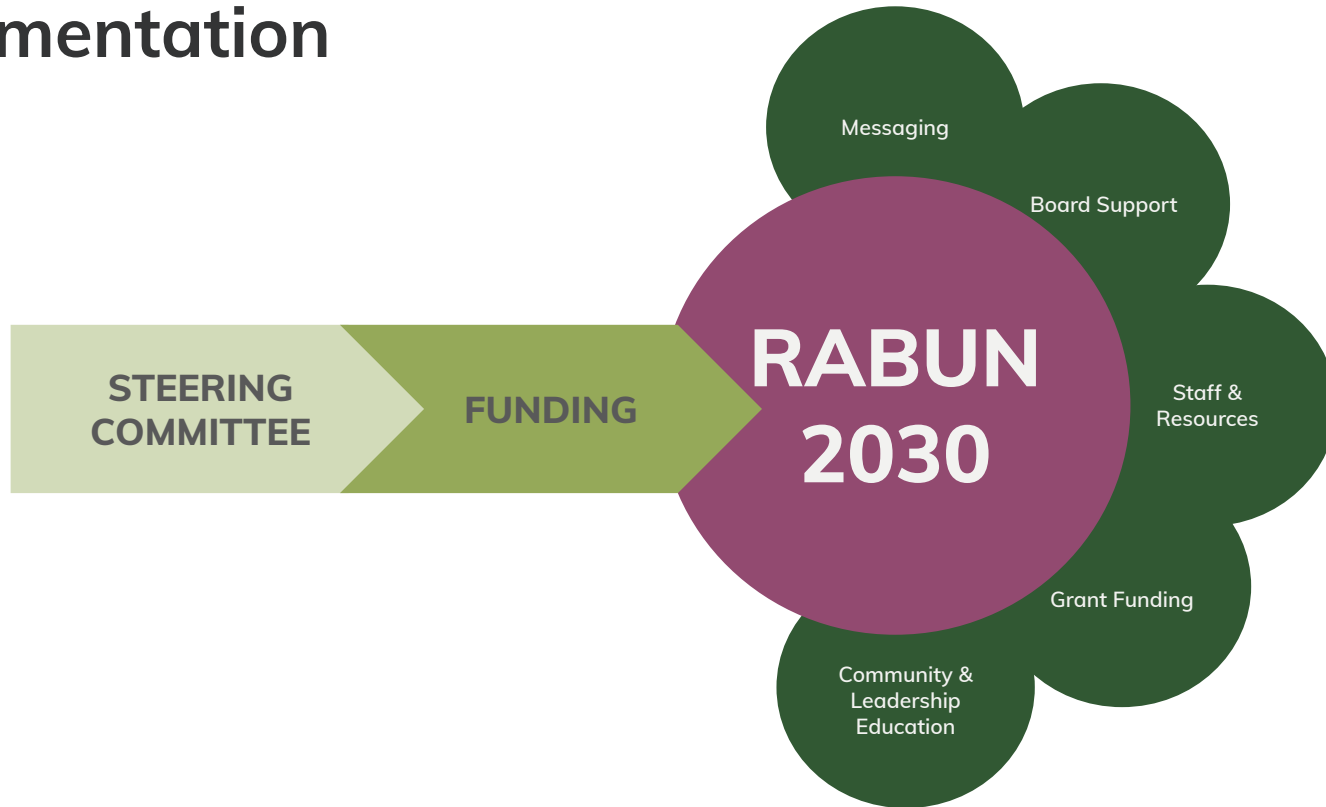
- Open leadership training sessions to the public; leadership program participants stay after the open program to discuss and ask questions.

## **High school education program:**

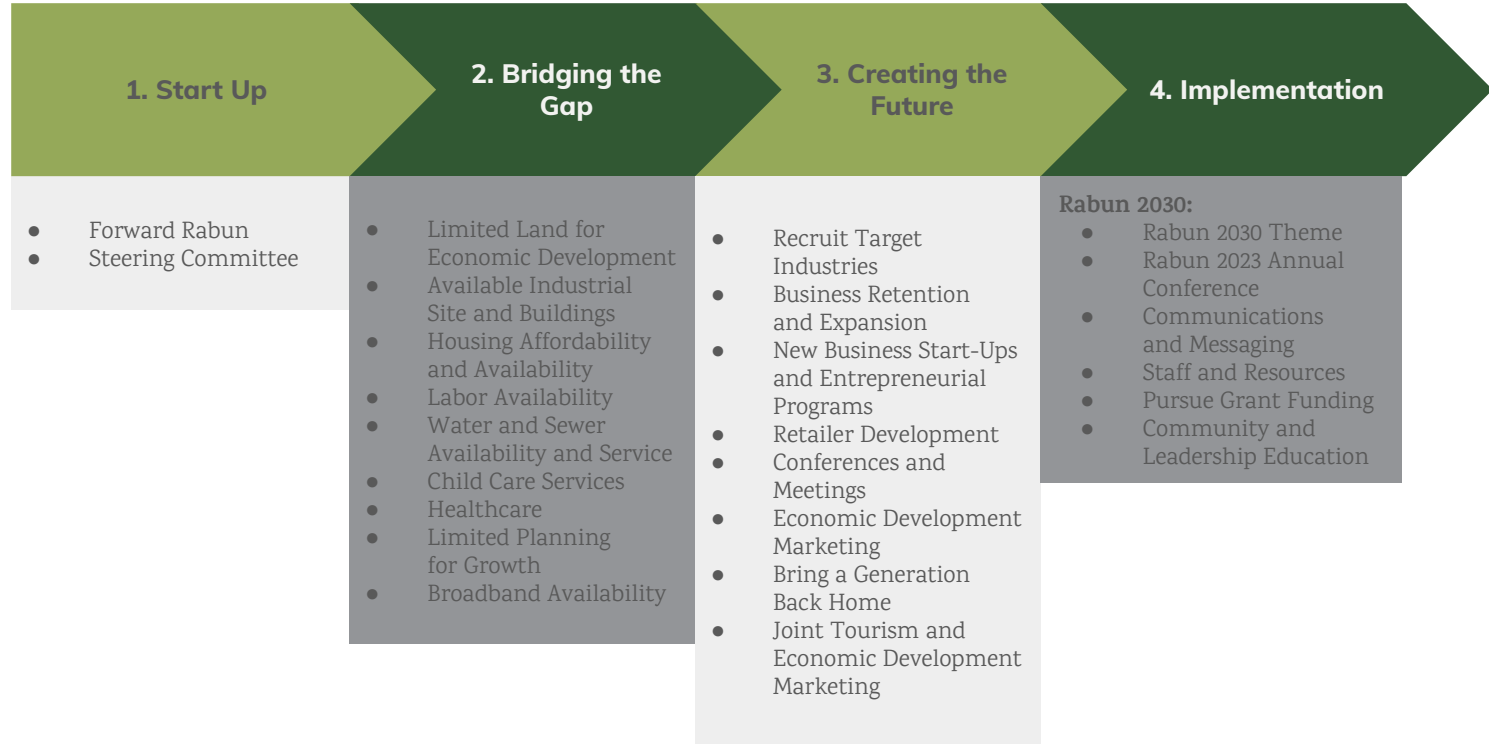
- Find opportunities for guest speakers to discuss Rabun 2030 and community and economic topics in classes.
- Consider creating a community and economic development course.



# Implementation



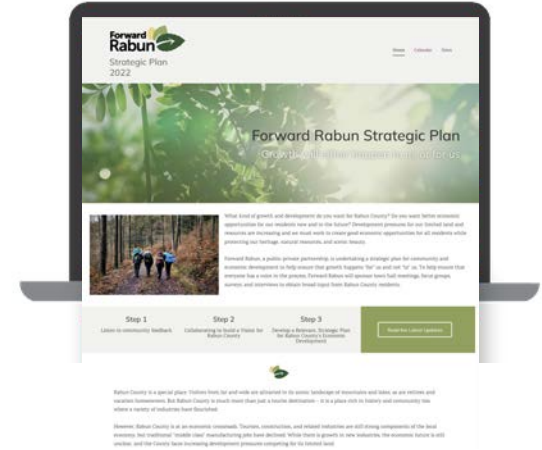
# Vision for the Future of Rabun County



# Supporting Resources

To keep the public informed of our plan and provide updates, as well as share background information, research and reports, we have developed a Strategic Plan website. We encourage all Rabun County residents and business people to visit the site regularly as it is our clearing house for ongoing updates.

Visit [ForwardRabun.com/StrategicPlan2022/](https://ForwardRabun.com/StrategicPlan2022/)



In addition, our future plans include producing a podcast of results, in which our Strategic Plan Project Team, other expert guests, and members of the Rabun County community will discuss the results of our research and the recommended plan for community and economic development. We intend to post the podcast episodes on the Strategic Plan website.



# A Bright Future Ahead With Your Help!

Rabun County residents have clearly stated what their vision is for the future.

## How Can You Help?

- Review the strategic plan at [www.forwardrabun.com/strategicplan2022](http://www.forwardrabun.com/strategicplan2022)
- Comment on the plan
- Spread the word about the plan
- Volunteer to help - leave comment on website, email or talk to a Forward Rabun staff or board member.

