

# Vibrant and Connected Places

Quality of life and quality of place have a central role to play in community and economic development. Research from the Knight Foundation – part of which was conducted in Greater Columbus – revealed that regions with high levels of “community attachment” tend to do better economically than those where residents do not feel a strong connection with the place they live. Among the top factors that influence attachment are things like community aesthetics (how a place looks) and social offerings (things to do, places to gather, and so forth). The success of Uptown Columbus and the effusive praise that area residents heaped on it throughout the input process suggest that the region is hungry for vibrant neighborhoods and corridors. In addition to furthering Uptown’s transformation, a logical place to begin is with the region’s greatest natural resource, the Chattahoochee River, and the many areas on both of its banks that are ripe for redevelopment and activation. Interstate accessibility and workforce quality are two of the most important factors that businesses consider in their location decisions, and both are weak points for Greater Columbus. But the region has a realistic opportunity to “wow” business leaders with a dynamic core, attractive and affordable neighborhoods, and a rare blend of cultural opportunities – all of which are connected and accessible through a variety of transportation modes.

## KEY FINDINGS FROM RESEARCH AND INPUT:

-  Residents contacted through the input process generally held favorable views about Greater Columbus as a place to live.
-  Input participants view the Chattahoochee Riverfront as one of the region’s key assets.
-  Stakeholders consistently identified the transformation of Uptown Columbus into a vibrant mixed-use district as the most positive development related to quality of life and place in recent years, and many expressed a desire to see this momentum carried toward even greater improvements, both in the region’s core and elsewhere.
-  Traffic is not a significant concern in Greater Columbus, and the region is easy to navigate for individuals who travel by car. But survey participants held negative views about the frequency, connectivity, and quality of local public transit. Stakeholders noted that this presents a significant barrier to accessing jobs and amenities for low-income residents. Input participants also expressed support for improved infrastructure for walking and biking – both for transportation and recreation.
-  While housing is generally affordable in Greater Columbus, input participants noted that there are a significant amount of distressed or unsafe residential properties and neighborhoods that appear “run down” throughout the region. Additionally, stakeholders said that there is a limited supply of rental product in and around Uptown Columbus that young professionals would find appealing and affordable.
-  Input participants noted that many parts of the region could use aesthetic improvements. Many neighborhoods are struggling with disinvestment, and the region’s “entrance points” – the major highway access points through which most people arriving to the community pass – are often unattractive or lined with abandoned or unsightly properties. As one participant said, “I almost want to blindfold visitors that I bring to town until we get downtown and it looks nice. There’s no good entrance to Columbus.”

## OBJECTIVE 4.1: MAXIMIZE THE IMPACT OF THE REGION'S GREATEST NATURAL RESOURCE – THE CHATTAHOOCHEE RIVER

As frequently noted during the input process, the Chattahoochee River is the region's greatest natural resource. In a previous era, the river helped establish Greater Columbus as a textile hub. And while industry has long since evolved in a different direction, the river can continue to power economic growth by serving as an amenity and focal point around which people can gather. By continuing to develop and activate its riverfront, particularly the geologically stunning stretches through the core of the region, Greater Columbus can significantly improve its ability to attract and retain talented individuals, the most important growth consideration in the modern economy. Decades of public and private investments in Greater Columbus have significantly improved the river, its surroundings, and the ability of individuals to access and enjoy them. Greater Columbus now has an opportunity to go even further to differentiate its riverfront from those of other regions, which could in turn help to address or overcome other challenges and shortcomings, such as low growth rates, limited Interstate connectivity, and a lack of external awareness.

### 4.1.1 Collaborate across state lines to further promote activation of the Chattahoochee Riverfront through the region's core.

Many public and private investments are in various stages of planning or implementation along the Chattahoochee Riverfront, and some new activity will certainly occur without any sort of intervention. But the river is also notable as a political dividing line within the region; an ideal outcome is one in which riverfronts in both Alabama and Georgia are thriving. Collaborating across state lines would therefore be about more than a symbolic show of regional cohesion and unity, though this would certainly be a welcome byproduct. It would also be a practical means to coordinate events and festivals, share resources to the mutual benefit of all, and navigate any potential issues that are beyond the scope of any one organization, entity, or government. Accordingly, through implementation of this strategy, the region should establish a framework through which local governments and authorities, booster organizations, private landowners, and others can work together toward the creation of a dynamic and uniting center for the region. This framework would not supplant or duplicate the work of any existing organization or entity but instead be a catalyst for aligning and strengthening ongoing efforts.

#### **Potential Actions:**

-  Identify appropriate partners and frameworks for collaboration
-  Work with property owners, development professionals, economic developers, and public officials to identify opportunities and potential incentives for riverfront development – particularly uses such as retail and restaurants that can “activate” the riverfront throughout the day and night
-  Support the advancement of planned and ongoing developments such as City Village and the Brickyard and Riverview sites
-  Coordinate with partners to identify and expand event programming opportunities – e.g. “food truck days” or a replication of the successful “lantern parade” along the Atlanta BeltLine
-  Work with appropriate partners to implement additional public safety patrols and increase routine cleaning and maintenance of RiverWalk facilities to address public concerns

- 👥 Convene and work with organizations and leaders from neighborhoods and districts fronting or in close proximity to the river – including Uptown, Midtown, City Village, the Liberty District, South Columbus, and Phenix City – to coordinate and advance efforts and ensure improvements extend into these areas
- 👥 Evaluate the potential to develop a major new outdoor recreation amenity (e.g. marina or flatwater race course) to piggyback on the success of the whitewater course and enhance the region’s “outdoors” image

**BEST PRACTICE:** Riverfront Recapture (Hartford, CT)

## OBJECTIVE 4.2: PROMOTE VIBRANT AND ATTRACTIVE NEIGHBORHOODS, CORRIDORS, AND ACTIVITY CENTERS

As previously stated in this document and prior research deliverables, the transformation and revitalization of Uptown Columbus received near universal praise during the public input process. Stakeholders cited it as one of the region’s key strengths and most positive changes to occur in recent years, and they expressed a strong desire to see the vibrancy now present in that neighborhood spread throughout the region. These sentiments reflect the importance of quality of life and place when it comes to issues of community attachment and, ultimately, economic growth. But stakeholders with direct knowledge of Uptown’s transformation were quick to point out that the neighborhood’s success was anything but organic – it came about through numerous sizeable public and philanthropic investments and decades of hard work on the part of dedicated staff and volunteers. Greater Columbus has numerous other neighborhoods, corridors, and activity centers that already demonstrate the kind of vibrant “cool factor” found in Uptown. This objective focuses on ways in which the community can take deliberate action to further activate these areas and promote quality of place enhancements throughout Greater Columbus.

### 4.2.1 Pursue policies and develop incentives to activate underutilized commercial, industrial, and neighborhood properties.

A consistent theme that stakeholders expressed during the input process was a need for redevelopment and revitalization of underutilized, abandoned, and distressed properties throughout developed areas of Greater Columbus. Input participants noted that vacant or outdated retail properties and commercial buildings, surface parking lots, and even distressed or vacant homes and residential properties have a significant negative impact on the community. A strong consensus emerged from public input that catalyzing the redevelopment of these properties will be a key priority in improving prosperity in the region given the importance of quality of life and place in community and economic development. But stakeholders with knowledge of local real estate development conditions noted that there is insufficient market pressure to support purely private-driven redevelopment of most of these properties in the near future. In order to increase its competitive position through quality of place enhancements, Greater Columbus must consider a range of incentives that are supportive of redevelopment efforts. Redevelopment incentives come in a variety of forms, from federal and state tax credits to local financing mechanisms or statutory density bonuses. The Potential Actions listed here represent a partial list of approaches that Greater Columbus may take, but it is by no means comprehensive. In addition to considering the following steps, the community should also convene an array of public, private, and nonprofit partners – especially those that participate in or have knowledge of issues of redevelopment – to consider the most appropriate combination of incentives to catalyze redevelopment in Greater Columbus.

**Potential Actions:**

- 👉👉 Advance the adoption and activation of tax allocation districts (TADs) in Columbus-Muscogee; prioritize an initial project with a high probability for success to establish “proof of concept” (based on feedback received from individuals in the development community); evaluate prospects for near-term expansion to other key districts and corridors such as Midtown
- 👉👉 Identify potential corridors and districts that could benefit from the application of a community improvement district (CID) – or business improvement district (BID) in Alabama – and gauge interest from local property owners; leverage CID funding to finance improvements such as infrastructure, signage, beautification, and public safety that can catalyze private investment
- 👉👉 Work with local officials and state agencies such as the Georgia Department of Community Affairs to develop strong local knowledge of state and federal tax credits (e.g. historic preservation) and develop an assistance program for developers seeking to navigate these processes
- 👉👉 With philanthropic community, banks, and other corporate partners, evaluate the feasibility of establishing a local loan fund to provide no- or low-cost financing to worthy small-scale redevelopment projects
- 👉👉 Evaluate ways in which the Columbus-Muscogee County Land Bank Authority (LBA) can be further capitalized to acquire, hold, improve, and revitalize distressed residential properties – both to aid with the provision of additional housing and improve existing neighborhoods where blight is a concern

**4.2.2 Catalyze the development of new housing options and supportive neighborhood retail in the region’s core neighborhoods.**

The public input process revealed a desire on the part of many residents for additional housing options in walkable, amenity-rich environments close to jobs and services. Stakeholders generally singled out Uptown Columbus as a prime and highly desirable area for residential development, but potential also could exist in Midtown and emerging redevelopments around Phenix City and City Village, among other places. Participants specifically mentioned additional rental apartments as the most desired housing option, with a particular preference for products that are geared toward and affordable to young professionals. These requests are consistent with the preferences of many millennials (both surveyed and “revealed”) and national trends of multifamily construction in and around historic downtowns and activity centers. Development is mostly a market-based activity and Greater Columbus has seen at least some building activity along these lines. But residents and some members of the local real estate development community suggested that the local supply is not consistent with the actual demand and that catalytic actions are needed in order to spur development.

**Potential Actions:**

- 👉👉 Ensure that zoning and development regulations are optimized for redevelopment and evaluate potential development incentives (see 4.2.1) to defray development costs related to hardscapes, parking infrastructure, utility upgrades and/or relocations, and so forth on qualified products
- 👉👉 Leverage economic development staff capacity to assist prospective developers in pursuing commercial tenants or retailers such as grocery stores to promote additional residential development in key areas

- ☞ Prioritize mixed-use projects that promote a “downtown” or “walkable” character that appeals to the professional and young adult market segments
- ☞ Consider developing incentives for projects that set aside a percentage of residential units at below-market rates to provide options for entry-level workers and other individuals

#### **4.2.3 Create a formal partnership to promote a vibrant Downtown Phenix City.**

The transformation of Uptown Columbus into a vibrant mixed-use neighborhood and destination was perhaps the most commonly cited “positive” for the region during the input process. Stakeholders expressed a strong desire to see this momentum continue in Uptown and spread to other neighborhoods and districts within the region. Moreover, participants suggested that revitalization should be a key priority on both sides of the Chattahoochee River (see 4.1.1). In downtown Phenix City, there are multiple signs of gathering momentum – the Troy University Campus, the development of the Courtyard Columbus Phenix City hotel, the 3rd Avenue streetscape improvements, the proposed redevelopment of the Riverview housing complex, and renewed interest from private investors, among others. Harnessing and sustaining this momentum toward a full-scale revitalization will require a deliberate, collaborative effort similar to those that have helped facilitate similar transformations. Accordingly, community stakeholders should establish a partnership to promote a vibrant downtown Phenix City.

##### **Potential Actions:**

- ☞ Convene a coalition of property owners, business owners, elected officials and public employees, real estate and development professionals, Troy University, the Phenix City-Russell County Chamber, and other interested parties to establish a partnership
- ☞ Investigate the most practical corporate structure, likely a 501(c)(3) capable of receiving grants and other private donations; as the organization matures, evaluate the potential to establish a business improvement district (BID) – similar to a CID in Georgia – to fund infrastructure, signage and streetscapes, and a range of other services and amenities
- ☞ Focus initially on addressing common issues such as public safety and beautification that will help create a more attractive environment for private investment

#### **4.2.4 Maximize community attachment and neighborhood beautification by fostering the creation and enhancement of spaces that are high in quality, beautiful, and designed for people.**

As discussed in the Competitive Assessment, a 2010 study evaluating 26 communities around the country found that residents of Greater Columbus feel above-average levels of community attachment. This is consistent with feedback gathered through the input process, where residents generally had high praise for the region as a place to live and raise a family. But stakeholders noted that there is significant room for improvement when it comes to community aesthetics – one of the three most important factors influencing attachment. Participants noted that many neighborhoods, particularly in Columbus-Muscogee, are struggling with blight, disinvestment and crime and are in need of additional safe, quality workforce housing. Participants also noted a more widespread need for quality design of public spaces. Greater Columbus can address these issues through a multi-pronged approach of targeted beautification efforts and support for ongoing housing efforts and newly developed urban design guidelines.

**Potential Actions:**

-  Launch a “micro-targeted” campaign of neighborhood beautification and revitalization modeled after the 5x5 program in Macon; convene volunteer teams and identify two to four “pilot neighborhoods” to test the concept
-  Continue to support efforts to provide quality workforce housing; including but not limited to the NeighborWorks Columbus homeowner education and counseling program, the Home for Good plan to end homelessness in Columbus-Muscogee, and plans by the housing authorities of Columbus-Muscogee and Phenix City to redevelop aging public housing into mixed-income communities
-  Support the widespread adoption of public space design criteria that Gehl Studio developed for the community, through promotion tactics, development incentives, and (if appropriate) inclusion in overlay zoning districts for key activity centers such as Midtown, Uptown, etc.

**BEST PRACTICE:** 5x5 Program (Macon, GA)

**4.2.5 Beautify gateways into the region to make a positive first impression on visitors and enhance the built environment for the community**

The key highways and arterial roads by which most visitors travel to get to places such as Fort Benning, Columbus State University, Uptown Columbus, and other key attractions and districts are frequently unattractive and lined with distressed properties. This is a significant competitive concern given the importance of first impressions in business recruitment, talent recruitment, and destination marketing. These roads are also important to local residents and businesses. Consider the two corridors that stakeholders most frequently mentioned as needing improvements: 2nd Avenue and Macon Road/Wynnton Road. These corridors front the campuses of TSYS and Aflac, respectively, and transect neighborhoods that are vibrant or primed for redevelopment. Making these corridors more aesthetically pleasing would provide a tremendous benefit to the community and have the potential to attract additional private investment.

**Potential Actions:**

-  Support the ongoing beautification work of Columbus Gateways and broaden the coalition of partners working for improvements in these areas
-  Work with local and state Departments of Transportation and over government entities to develop long-range corridor improvement plans to focus on aesthetic improvements such as streetscapes, landscaping, signage and wayfinding, lighting, litter prevention, road maintenance, and utilities (preferably underground when financially and operationally feasible)
-  Consider the viability of one or more “signature” beautification projects at key interchanges, similar to the installation at the intersection of Interstate 185 and US Highway 280 near the entrance to Fort Benning
-  Explore the feasibility of various redevelopment funding models (see 4.2.1) to resource improvements and upkeep of corridors
-  Commission local artists to develop murals and other art installations along key corridors

#### 4.2.6 **Develop an Artist Relocation Program to expand and diversify the community's arts capacity.**

The Artist Relocation Program model is a neighborhood revitalization approach that was pioneered in Paducah, KY in 2000 and has since been emulated in other communities. In Paducah, the program successfully attracted artists to revitalize a neighborhood in the city's core by offering incentives such as low interest loans from a local bank to finance purchase of property, free lots for new construction, and financial assistance for architectural and other professional services, among other benefits. A similar program in Greater Columbus could offer an array of subsidized housing and services to entice individuals to move to the community and expand its arts scene. It should be noted that this tactic could theoretically be utilized to attract other types of in-demand workers or individuals, such as cybersecurity experts or young professionals. But it is particularly well-suited to supporting the arts given the financial constraints and independent nature of many artistic endeavors and the agglomerative benefits of creating a physical "artistic community" in a centralized locale.

##### **Potential Actions:**

-   Convene appropriate partners, including elected officials and government staff, banks and financial lenders, foundations and non-profit groups, and a broad array of representatives from the arts community
-   Become familiar with existing programs to determine the right mix of incentives and programs for Greater Columbus
-   Identify an appropriate neighborhood or adjoining set of neighborhoods in which to focus the program
-   Identify potential funding sources and capitalize the program
-   Publicize the program as part of overall talent marketing efforts

**BEST PRACTICE:** Artist Relocation Program (Paducah, KY)

### **OBJECTIVE 4.3: CONNECT PEOPLE AND PLACES WITH EXPANDED OPPORTUNITIES FOR WALKING, BIKING, AND TRANSIT USE**

Research revealed that Greater Columbus has relatively short average commute times and limited traffic congestion, and input participants generally agreed that the region is easy to navigate in a private automobile. But stakeholders expressed a strong desire to see the range of transportation options expanded. Communities around the country are making improvements to bicycle and pedestrian (bike/ped) infrastructure to achieve a range of goals including enhancing neighborhood vitality, expansion of recreation options, and the promotion of healthy lifestyles, among others. For an increasing number of individuals, living in a built environment that offers walkable access to shops and restaurants is a strong preference to which markets have only started to respond. And for individuals without access to a private automobile, walking, biking, and using transit are the only ways to access jobs and services. Greater Columbus should therefore pursue expanded transportation options as a means to increase the community's quality of life and economic prosperity.

#### 4.3.1 **Advance ongoing and develop future efforts to improve walking and biking connectivity.**

Many input participants expressed a strong desire to see Greater Columbus develop better connectivity and infrastructure for walking and biking, and as previously stated, there are many benefits to pursuing such an

approach. The region is fortunate to have significant efforts already underway to improve the community's bike/ped environment. The Minimum Grid project aims to enhance connectivity between key districts at the region's core (mostly in Uptown and Midtown), and the Columbus River Link Trail master plan developed with the PATH Foundation seeks to expand the region's network of multi-use paths. The community should support the advancement of these initiatives and evaluate future prospects for similar or expanded efforts.

**Potential Actions:**

-   Convene partners such as neighborhood organizations, employers, and other advocacy organizations and community groups that can build support for the plans
-   Identify public and private funding sources for implementation
-   Work with state and local departments of transportation to overcome barriers to implementation, particularly when plans call for interaction with state highways
-   Potentially with a broader network of partners such as the PATH Foundation, identify additional ways in which bike/ped connectivity might be enhanced in the community, such as sidewalk or bike lane improvements on neighborhood streets and, potentially, multi-use trails and connections in portions of the region outside the core of Columbus-Muscogee
-   Communicate significant successes in talent marketing campaigns and earned media strategies (see 5.2.1)

**4.3.2 Evaluate options to expand public transportation coverage, frequency, and operating hours to connect residents to jobs and amenities.**

When asked to rate various aspects of quality of life in Greater Columbus, input participants gave overwhelmingly poor marks to the coverage, frequency, and quality of public transportation in the region. Yet many residents, particularly those with disabilities or from low-income households, rely on public transportation because they lack access to a private vehicle. If these individuals cannot move around the community in a timely manner – if at all – their employment prospects are damaged (affecting employers by extension) and their quality of life is reduced. Additionally, some individuals who do have access to a car may prefer to travel using another mode if it was available and convenient. With the acknowledgement that not all areas of the region are sufficiently populated to support regular transit service, Greater Columbus should seek to expand transit options within the community. A welcome recent development is the \$22.4 million in funding that Columbus-Muscogee's Metra bus service is slated to receive from the Transportation Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (TSPLOST).

**Potential Actions:**

-   Continue discussions involving Metra, business community, nonprofit service providers, and riders to identify the greatest needs and opportunities for improvement
-   Establish a "business case for improved transit connectivity" touting improved workforce and economic benefits that could be expected with expanded or improved services
-   Identify possible sources of additional funding, including private grants and federal assistance
-   Maximize the efficiency of inter-county and inter-state connections on the region's public transportation systems

