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ECONOMIC AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

“Economic growth doesn’t mean anything if it leaves people out.”

~Jack Kemp

The Economic and Workforce Development Subcommittee (EWD) labored to ensure that our vulnerable populations can actively participate in Tuscaloosa's current and future economy and equitably benefit from the quality of life improvements. For the EWD, this work included seeking ways to remove historical barriers to accessing capital, encouraging and supporting entrepreneurship, defining pathways to higher education and employment, and finally, retaining and promoting a local workforce that is prepared for the opportunities of today and tomorrow.

The International Economic Development Council defines economic development as " the intentional practice of improving a community's economic well-being and quality of life." This summarizes the EWD's approach to economic and workforce development. In the spirit of collaboration, subcommittee members sought to provide a roadmap for industry, government, and varied community stakeholders and organizations to work in concert and create a Tuscaloosa that is the best city to live, work, and play.

Create the “Miracle Mile” for West Tuscaloosa

Implementation Time-frame:	Short-Term
Project UNITY Subcommittee(s):	Economic and Workforce Development
Lead Organization:	City of Tuscaloosa
Potential Partnerships:	Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama, Regional Planning Commission, Industrial Development Authority, Tuscaloosa Transit Authority, The EDGE, Diverse Business Council, various small businesses

The idea of a "Miracle Mile" is not a new concept to economic and urban developers across the United States. In the 1920s, Los Angeles' Wilshire Boulevard became the first recognized ideation of the "Miracle Mile" concept, which is the intentional development of businesses and services along a specific corridor. Over the years many cities have replicated this model, including Stockton, CA; Long Island, NY; Coral Gables, FL; and Las Vegas, NV to name a few.

The EWD recommends reimagining this concept in West Tuscaloosa, where small, innovative businesses and service providers can reinvest and spur the growth of West Tuscaloosa.

Key Elements of the Recommendation

1. Development of Miracle Mile

The EWD advocates the creation of the Miracle Mile in West Tuscaloosa to include the following components:

- a. **Location Identification**
- b. **Infrastructure and technology plan**
- c. **Identification of Transit accessibility**
- d. **Identification and recruitment of missing services**

Close the Digital Divide

Implementation Time-frame:	Short-Term
Project UNITY Subcommittee(s):	Economic and Workforce Development, Education
Lead Organization:	City of Tuscaloosa
Potential Partnerships:	internet providers, Infrastructure and Public Services Department, Information Technology Department, Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama, Tuscaloosa Public Library, Gateway, Tuscaloosa City Schools

The Digital Divide refers to the growing gap between those who have access to technology, namely a computer and the internet, and those who do not. Populations most negatively affected by the digital divide are largely low-income persons, the elderly, rural and disabled. The economic effects of COVID-19 brought Tuscaloosa's own digital disparities to light, especially as children and youth began to return to school, and many employees began to work from home. In 2021, when learning activities, job applications, and even work are overwhelmingly digital, not having access to a computer and the internet put individuals and families at a disadvantage.

Key Elements of the Recommendation

- 1. Potential Partnership with service providers of technology and infrastructure for education, quality of life, and underserved communities. For example, Small Town Rural (STR)**
- 2. Partnership with local schools**
- 3. Increase the Tuscaloosa Public Library's capabilities and efforts with internet access, allowing the library to expand its service to each community**

Invest in growing Tuscaloosa's Workforce Development Programs

Implementation Time-frame:	Short-Term
Project UNITY Subcommittee(s):	Economic and Workforce Development
Lead Organization:	City of Tuscaloosa
Potential Partnerships:	West Alabama Works, Tuscaloosa City Schools, Department of Labor, Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama, West Alabama Regional Planning Commission, Industrial Development Authority, Shelton State Community College, various businesses across Tuscaloosa

During the Economic and Workforce Development Subcommittee meetings, members emphasized wanting to capitalize on the success of existing programs and services. Workforce Development is one of those key areas the EWD wanted to continue to expand. Tuscaloosa is home to a regional epicenter of higher education and industry as well as a key component of regional growth, West Alabama Works. In order to continue the keep our current and future economy moving forward, the EWD recommends investing in the expansion of the workforce development programs.

Key Elements of the Recommendation

1. Expand outreach and marketing to non-traditional students

The EWD recommends expanding the outreach and marketing efforts of West Alabama Works and other workforce development programs to target various populations. Some focus demographics are:

- a. **Non-traditional students-** students that are homeschooled, enrolled in a GED program, or an adult learner
- b. **Underemployed-** persons working part-time and not enrolled in a program of study
- c. **Unemployed-** persons entering the workforce from stays in an institution, persons recently laid-off
- d. **Older workers-** persons over the age of 50 that may be seeking a job change, supplemental retirement income, or cannot find work due to stagnant experience
- e. **Single parents, recipients of WIC, TANF, or SNAP benefits**

Expanding outreach and marketing to non-traditional students will require creativity in its methodology to reach the desired audience. For instance, to reach single parents, especially mothers experiencing underemployment or unemployment, West Alabama Works could set up interviews or market at doctor's offices.

2. Nurture Partnerships for Job Training

The EWD recommends researching new partnerships for workforce development and supporting existing partnership networks. In particular, EWD seeks to:

- a. **Grow West Alabama Works Partnership to expand reach and programs**
- b. **Continue to develop programs with TCS for workforce training**



Supporting Economic Development

Implementation Time-frame:	Short-Term
Project UNITY Subcommittee(s):	Economic and Workforce Development
Lead Organization:	City of Tuscaloosa
Potential Partnerships:	Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama, Regional Planning Commission, Industrial Development Authority, The EDGE, University of Alabama, Stillman College, and Shelton State Community College

Support for Economic Development looks many different ways. For the Economic and Workforce Development Subcommittee, support is synonymous with creating accessible, uncomplicated, and generally appealing financial assistance to businesses in need.

Key Elements of the Recommendation

The EWD recommends the following actions to support economic development:

- 1. Identify grant opportunities for economic development and/or minority business development**
- 2. Develop funding options to stimulate small businesses**
- 3. Pooling of federal and city funding**
- 4. Create a profit share model**
- 5. Readily available funding for small business owners and entrepreneurs**

Develop Workforce Housing Plan

Implementation Time-frame:	Short-Term
Project UNITY Subcommittee(s):	Economic and Workforce Development, Neighborhood Revitalization and Housing
Lead Organization:	City of Tuscaloosa
Potential Partnerships:	Alabama Housing Finance Authority, Office of Community and Neighborhood Services, Urban Development Department, Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama, Regional Planning Commission

Communities across the U.S. are facing a crisis in affordable housing. This long-standing issue has been magnified by the COVID -19 pandemic. According to the S&P CoreLogic Case-Shiller National Home Price NSA Index, housing prices increased by an average of 9.5% from November 2019 to November 2020. At the current rate of purchase, the supply of single-family homes for purchase will be exhausted in a few months. If the trend continues, a significant percentage of eligible homebuyers will be priced out of homeownership. Of these homebuyers, it lack of affordable housing will disproportionately affect younger people and African Americans. Additionally, Tuscaloosa has experienced a decrease in available and affordable multifamily housing options as well. During the discourse in the Economic and Workforce Development subcommittee meetings, access to affordable, quality housing was one of the main concerns voiced by economic and industrial leaders. If the trend is not reversed immediately, Tuscaloosa will no longer be able to attract or retain industry.

Key Elements of the Recommendation

1. Workforce Housing- Coordinate a Workforce Housing Plan

The EWD recommends building upon the findings and recommendations of the 2018 Housing Study commissioned by the Office of Community and Neighborhood Services. This Workforce Housing Plan will provide supplementary guidance that targets a growing segment of Tuscaloosa's economy. This plan will include engage industrial leaders within Tuscaloosa and potentially assist in crafting industrial housing incentive packages.

2. Identify areas that have the infrastructure and schools for diversity of housing

The EWD recommends compiling key criteria for potential workforce housing and utilizing the Framework Comprehensive Plan to identify areas that are poised for development.

Expand Entrepreneur Ecosystem

Implementation Time-frame:	Intermediate
Project UNITY Subcommittee(s):	Economic and Workforce Development, Education
Lead Organization:	City of Tuscaloosa
Potential Partnerships:	Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama, Regional Planning Commission, Tuscaloosa City Schools, The EDGE, Small Business Development Center, Small Business Administration

Starting a business or becoming an entrepreneur entails understanding and dealing with many issues--legal, financing, sales, marketing, intellectual property protection, liability protection, human resources, and more. But, despite the steep learning curve, interest in entrepreneurship is at an all-time high. To maximize the economic potential in our community, we must expand the entrepreneur ecosystem to ensure all small businesses have a chance of success.

Key Elements of the Recommendation

1. Target and promote youth entrepreneurship

The EWD endorses the development of infrastructure and programming to promote youth entrepreneurship. Examples of outreach and programming for youth include:

- a. Supporting industry mentorships through Future Business Leaders of America and/or creating a middle/high school mentorship program for Tuscaloosa city youth
- b. Sponsoring Youth Entrepreneurship Days like Lemonade Day/ Community Coffee
- c. Creation of a Tuscaloosa Teenpreneur Festival that has youth vendors on Government Plaza (similar to Druid City Arts Festival, but with only youth-owned businesses and makers)
- d. Partner with Tuscaloosa City Schools to identify teens that have small businesses and connect those students to mentors, funding, etc.
 - Utilize Tuscaloosa City School surveys and guidance/school counselors to assist with student entrepreneur identification

2. Solidify small business network, especially for microbusinesses, disadvantaged entrepreneurs

The EWD recommends supplementing the existing small business support network by creating focused programs that provide access to services for start-ups, microbusinesses, sole proprietors, and disadvantaged entrepreneurs. At a minimum, these services should include

- a. Access to attorneys, training, patent guideline workshops
- b. Creation of a Start-up Studio, which will be a boot camp for creating a business from concept to launch
- c. Website and design assistance

3. Create diverse funding types that are transparent and accessible funding

The EWD recommends creating funding sources for small business owners and prioritizing transparency and accessibility. To achieve this, EWD supports

- a. Provide fair and equitable access to funding
- b. Funding specifically for minority and women-owned businesses
- c. Small business “Pop-ups”, “Shark Tank”, and “Micro Grant” opportunities focusing on innovation but are grounded in sound business practices. Examples:
 - Small Business Relief Fund
 - Food Trucks to Brick and Mortar

4. Identify needs for diverse business interests

The EWD endorses the identification of gaps in current offerings for diverse business interests. In this instance, diverse business interests represent a wide cross-section of industries and business types. For instance, based on the number of emerging restaurants, catering companies, and other food and beverage businesses, there may be a need for Tuscaloosa to develop a commercial kitchen incubator or some hybridization of such.

Create a Pro Start-up community

Implementation Time-frame:	Intermediate
Project UNITY Subcommittee(s):	Economic and Workforce Development
Lead Organization:	City of Tuscaloosa
Potential Partnerships:	Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama, Regional Planning Commission, Tuscaloosa City Schools, United Way of West Alabama, Tuscaloosa Community Foundation, Character Council of Tuscaloosa,

Preparing Tuscaloosa's economy for current and future growth means forecasting emerging trends in industry. The gig economy is one of these rising economic trends. A gig economy is distinguished by temporary, flexible independent contractors or freelance work as opposed to full-time employees. As more businesses become decentralized and digital, the stronger the gig economy becomes.

Another current and persistent trend is the increase in entrepreneurship, in particular, start-ups. While the term is often used to describe tech/digital companies, start-ups can refer to any business that is in its infancy of development. In order for Tuscaloosa to compete regionally and nationally, the EWD recommends the City adopt a pro-start-up and gig economy approach to economic development.

Key Elements of the Recommendation

- 1. Advocate for policy change to reduce barriers for economic development**
- 2. Identify the opportunities within the Gig economy**

Increase Awareness for Dual Enrollment

Implementation Time-frame:	Short-Term
Project UNITY Subcommittee(s):	Economic and Workforce Development, Education
Lead Organization:	City of Tuscaloosa
Potential Partnerships:	Tuscaloosa City Schools, Shelton State Community College, University of Alabama, Stillman College

The success of the dual enrollment programs created by ELEVATE Tuscaloosa warrants the expansion of the programs to include as many children and youth as possible.

Key Elements of the Recommendation

1. Reach Middle School/ High School Students before senior year

The EWD recommends promoting dual enrollment as a viable option for Tuscaloosa City School students as soon as possible.

- a. Representatives from each college university begin visiting classrooms talking about dual enrollment as early as sixth grade
- b. Students that complete dual enrollment courses are celebrated by the district, the college/university, and their home school faculty and staff
- c. Encourage current or past dual enrolled students to talk about the process and experience with classmates to demystify the ordeal

2. Reach the Average Student

The EWD recommends that dual enrollment program managers/representatives encourage all academically viable students to participate in the program. To this end, the EWD encourages universities/colleges to develop an audit course specifically designed to prepare/orient high school students to the dual enrollment program. Additionally, transportation remains a deterrent to some students participating in the program. To alleviate this barrier to participation, EWD supports universities/colleges or Tuscaloosa City Schools developing a closed-route that transports dual enrollment students from their respective high schools to the colleges' campus and back again.

3. Work closely with Guidance Counselors/Post-Secondary Counselors

The EWD recommends City and University/College staff working closely with guidance counselors to adequately promote dual enrollment. This partnership will be able to educate school faculty, staff, families, and students on the potential benefits of participation.

Enhance Transit

Implementation Time-frame:	Intermediate
Project UNITY Subcommittee(s):	Mayor's Alliance for Opportunity and Advancement
Lead Organization:	Tuscaloosa Transit Authority
Potential Partnerships:	City of Tuscaloosa, Tuscaloosa County Commission

One of the reasons transit systems succeed is because they act as an economic development driver. An entire region can benefit from transit for multiple reasons. First, a healthy transit system helps reduce congestion and road maintenance costs due to fewer cars being on the road. Second, the amount of parking diminishes due to fewer drivers. Third, studies have shown property near transit lines benefit from increased property values due to improved mobility options. Finally, quality public transit can also create jobs and keep dollars circulating in the local economy. (Why Transit Matters: The Effects on Economic Development 10/4/2013)

Key Elements of the Recommendation

The EWD firmly believes that improving Tuscaloosa's public transit is a crucial component of Tuscaloosa's economic success. The EWD supports the efforts of the Tuscaloosa Transit Authority and recommends the below actions to enhance the Transit's current and future offerings

- 1. Increase awareness and reduce barriers to access**
- 2. Utilize ongoing Transit Study results to prioritize decision-making**
- 3. Collaborate with universities, local governments, and employers**



Implement Innovation Initiatives

Implementation Time-frame:	Intermediate
Project UNITY Subcommittee(s):	Economic and Workforce Development
Lead Organization:	City of Tuscaloosa
Potential Partnerships:	Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama, Regional Planning Commission, Industrial Development Authority, The EDGE, Small Business Resource Center,

Innovation districts facilitate the creation and commercialization of new ideas and support metropolitan economies by growing jobs in ways that leverage their distinct economic attributes. These districts build on and revalue the intrinsic qualities of cities: proximity, density, authenticity, and vibrant places. Given the proximity of many districts to low-income neighborhoods and the large number of sub-baccalaureate jobs many provide, their intentional development can be a tool to help connect disadvantaged populations and underserved communities to employment and educational opportunities.

Key Elements of the Recommendation

The EWD recommends embracing innovation as a tool of economic development and when coupled with the other recommendations, an instrument to foster equity. To accomplish this, EWD endorses:

- 1. Partnership/ engagement with the Alabama Innovation Commission (Innovate Alabama) on Innovation Initiatives**
- 2. Creation of an Innovation District- Identify Potential Properties**

Develop an Economic Development Plan

Implementation Time-frame:	Short-Term
Project UNITY Subcommittee(s):	Economic and Workforce Development
Lead Organization:	City of Tuscaloosa
Potential Partnerships:	Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama, Regional Planning Commission, Industrial Development Authority, Tuscaloosa City Schools, University of Alabama, Shelton State Community College, Stillman College, Non-Profit Council of Tuscaloosa, Diverse Business Council

When planning for economic development, the goal is to create and maintain a strong, vibrant local economy. The economic development plan will supply a comprehensive overview of the economy, sets policy direction for economic growth, and identifies strategies, programs, and projects to improve the economy.

Key Elements of the Recommendation

The EWD recommends the creation of a comprehensive Economic Development plan. At a minimum, the plan must address the following:

- a. Reflective of post-pandemic shifts
- b. Must be intentional and city-specific

In addition, the plan must utilize the following best practices in the development of its recommendations, objectives, goals, strategies, and/or tactics:

- a. Must prioritize and incorporate input from community panels reflective of each community
- b. Must be comprehensive in nature and utilize engagement best practices to ensure quality feedback and engagement
- c. Effectively position the plan to utilize federal funding, grants, and opportunity zones
- d. Must identify and balance community wants and needs with overall city economic development
- e. Must incorporate panel driven with representatives from each community