Economic Development Strategic Plan

Revised 08.27.2020

GRAY SWOOPE
PRESIDENT & CEO
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Thank you for making us a part of your team.

Thank you for the opportunity to be your partner in the development of an economic development strategic plan to assist the Chamber and the community move in a new direction. It has been a pleasure to work with your leadership, staff and community stakeholders.

The Chamber and its leadership have a successful history of advocating for the development of community assets to enhance economic development. Investments in the Port of Rosedale, The GRAMMY Museum, downtown Cleveland, Delta State University are just a few examples of strategic assets in the county. While these are tremendous assets to support economic development, the community will never optimize the true value without proactive alignment.

Reset. We heard this term often and it is a critical component of the mindset needed moving forward to implement this plan. We observed an excitement among community members to chart a new course for the future – one that capitalizes on all that makes the community what it is. The community and its residents are ready for a change.

The only pathway to success is to embrace a new approach to economic development that involves tangible collaboration with multiple partners. The creation of the plan aims to combine resources and bring focus to the economic development efforts, which is an important step in the right direction.

The biggest challenge to success is the lack of cohesion between entities to maximize the collective value of the efforts already taking place. Moving forward, stakeholders must be engaged at a higher level. Without unified and engaged leadership, it will be challenging for the Chamber to reset the direction of Bolivar County and its communities.

If selfless, engaged leaders work together to align the assets of the county, they will generate economic prosperity for everyone. And I know you will do just that!

Sincerely,

Gray Swoope
President & CEO
Project Approach

In the heart of the Delta, Bolivar County is fortunate to have a number of unmatched assets ranging from Delta State University and its music institute to industry partners such as Baxter Pharmaceuticals – not to mention the region’s strong agricultural heritage and its burgeoning arts and culture scene. All with the geographic advantage of sitting adjacent to the Mississippi River. The opportunities to be leveraged are numerous.

As the Cleveland-Bolivar Chamber of Commerce seeks new leadership, now is the time to set a new economic path forward and design programs that create a culture of collaboration offering greater prosperity for residents and businesses alike. VisionFirst was grateful to be the community’s partner in developing a strategic plan for moving forward.

To develop a meaningful and implementable plan, with a high probability of success, it is important to not only gather data and trends, but to seek stakeholder input from a variety of voices. This feedback provides valuable context to the current situation and formulation of the plan. VisionFirst Advisor’s project approach included:

- Gathering feedback through video calls with numerous community leaders, business leaders and staff regarding the community’s current economic development efforts and suggestions for moving forward;
- Conducting a digital online survey of community leaders;
- Analyzing data trends and projections regarding the county’s growth, gaps and opportunities as compared to the region, state and nation;
- Assessing the county’s assets both tangible and intangible; and
- Developing a suite of goals and strategies for the county to use for increased economic prosperity.

Based on interviews along with desktop analysis and VisionFirst’s knowledge of the region and the organization, the following pages outline a strategic plan that identifies foundational activities, outlines stretch goals and provides suggested metrics for the Chamber to implement on a path to long-term success.

*It is also important to note, while COVID-19 has taken place during the development of this plan, the recommendations remain unchanged as they are foundational to any community’s economic development resiliency and sustainability; however, the leadership of the chamber will need to adjust to the ever-changing landscape of doing business in the pandemic.*
Data At-A-Glance »

The Current Situation - When evaluating any community either for strategic plans, communications or site selection, VisionFirst Advisors conducts a high-level data analysis of the county and region. Emphasis is placed on labor force participation rates, educational attainment, talent pipeline, industry location quotients and leading industries. This data provides a baseline of information to educate and inform decisions and better position the community. VisionFirst compiled data from numerous trusted state and national sources.

FIGURE 1: COMMUNITY MARKETING & POSITIONING //

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BOLIVAR COUNTY</th>
<th>45-MINUTE REGION</th>
<th>MISSISSIPPI</th>
<th>USA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>32,592</td>
<td>174,177</td>
<td>2,988,762</td>
<td>323M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civilian Labor Force (16 &amp; Over)</td>
<td>12,061</td>
<td>67,007</td>
<td>1,338,573</td>
<td>162M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor Participation Rate (16 &amp; Over)</td>
<td>47.6%</td>
<td>49.7%</td>
<td>57.2%</td>
<td>63.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prime-Age Labor Force Participation Rate (Civilian Population 25-54)</td>
<td>67.2%</td>
<td>66.1%</td>
<td>76.6%</td>
<td>81.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Age</td>
<td>35.2</td>
<td>35.2</td>
<td>37.2</td>
<td>37.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population Annual Growth</td>
<td>-1.2%</td>
<td>-1.5%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Commute Time (Min.)</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>26.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual Average Wage</td>
<td>$36,806</td>
<td>$35,313</td>
<td>$39,614</td>
<td>$57,413</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost of Living Index</td>
<td>74.8</td>
<td>74.8</td>
<td>84.6</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Attainment (Age 25-64 with H.S. Diploma or Equivalent)</td>
<td>79.1%</td>
<td>79.5%</td>
<td>85.9%</td>
<td>88.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Attainment (Age 25-64 with Associate Degree or Higher)</td>
<td>32.1%</td>
<td>26.4%</td>
<td>33.0%</td>
<td>42.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spending Per Pupil</td>
<td>$9,746</td>
<td>$9,598</td>
<td>$8,692</td>
<td>$11,841</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty Level (of all people)</td>
<td>34.6%</td>
<td>34.2%</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children in Single Parent Families (% of all Children)</td>
<td>63.8%</td>
<td>70.1%</td>
<td>45.8%</td>
<td>34.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union Membership (Private)</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union Membership (Mfg)</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 JobsEQ 2019 Q4
- The labor force participation rate, and the prime-labor force participation rates are lagging considerably compared to the state and national average. As the nation and communities recover from the pandemic, the community should work with education workforce officials to identify opportunities to help reengage residents who may face additional hardships from the pandemic. The goal should be to meet or exceed state and national rates.
- Total employment for Bolivar County has declined 1.6% over the year ending 2019Q4. A concerning number, as it is nearly three times higher than the decline of the workforce within a 45-minute drive-time. Mississippi has increased employment by 0.4% over the past year.
- Whereas employment has decreased, average annual wages per worker have increased 1.1% over the preceding four quarters – yet still lagging in wage growth compared to a 45-minute drive-time (1.6%) and the state (1.7%).
- A key selling point in the community is the low cost of living – at 25.2% lower than the national average, this should be promoted to prospect from larger markets. According to the Tax Foundation’s 2019 report, the relative value of $100 translates to $116.69 in Mississippi. Comparatively the real purchasing power is 35% greater in Mississippi than New York.
- Bolivar County’s percentage of children in a single parent family (63.8%) poses a potential obstacle, as it is nearly double the rate of the US (34.8%). For decades, the share of US children living in single parent families has been on the rise. Industry typically views this high percentage as a non-reassuring figure as it is an indicator of decreased productivity and increased attrition – due to the standard burden’s placed on a single parent.
- As outlined in the chart below, 33.5% of the jobs in the county require a two-year degree or higher, as compared to 26.3% of the population having a higher education. If Bolivar county wants to continue to attract higher-educated citizens, it must work with educational partners and residents to increase those skill sets and degrees. Pursing retail will only create low-wage/low-skilled jobs and overall decrease the county average annual wage.

**FIGURE 2: INDUSTRY SNAPSHOT CLUSTERS (TOP FIVE – 2019 Q4)**

A cluster is a geographic concentration of interrelated industries or occupations.
In looking at the top industries for the county and the region, both have a strong presence in Health Care and Social Assistance, yet manufacturing leads the top industry from a salary standpoint. Stakeholder interviews expressed the need to highlight tourism, retail trade and food services for the area. Although an attractive suite of businesses, the average annual wages fall short of the average county wage ($36,806) and the regional wage ($35,313).
FIGURE 3: INDUSTRY CLUSTERS – 10-YEAR FORECAST (2019Q4-2029Q4) //

A cluster is a geographic concentration of interrelated industries or occupations. There are 22 industry clusters defined by JobsEQ. Industry clusters can form and grown because of a region’s competitive advantages – resources such as location, trained labor and education systems. Location quotient and average wage data are derived from the Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages, provided by the Bureau of Labor Statistics -- imputed by Chmura where necessary -- and updated through 2019Q2 with preliminary estimates by Chmura updated to 2019Q4. Forecast employment growth uses national projections from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

To identify and/or validate target industries from a county perspective, the community should consider three factors:

1. Industries projected to grow over the next 10 years. (Typically, as a measure, the county would use the state as a baseline for growth – however, Mississippi is expected to decline by -0.1% annually.)

2. Industries that the county boasts a high location quotient (at least greater than 1.00 but ideally 1.25 of higher).

3. Industries that have a higher average annual wage than the county ($36,910).
On a county level, no industries meet that criterion. The industries expected to grow are market-driven based on growth of the economy, however other opportunities exist in:

- Pharmaceutical, agriculture, freight transportation, metal & product manufacturing which are expected to decline but have a high LQ. Location quotient is a measurement of concentration in comparison to the nation. Industries that are expected to decline, but have a low LQ – yet are still above the county average annual wage include machine manufacturing.

**WITHIN A 45-MINUTE DRIVE-TIME OF BOLIVAR COUNTY**

Based on Bolivar County’s low labor force (12,061) it is important to consider a larger labor draw. A 45-minute drive-time increases the labor force and industry opportunities. To identify and/or validate target industries from a regional perspective, the community should consider three factors:

1. Industries projected to grow over the next 10 years. (Typically, as a measure, the region would use the state as a baseline for growth – however, Mississippi is expected to decline by -0.1% annually.)
2. Industries that the county boasts a high location quotient (at least greater than 1.00 but ideally 1.25 of higher).
3. Industries that have a higher average annual wage than the region ($35,313).

On a county level, no industries meet that criterion. Industries are market-driven based on growth of the economy, and other opportunities exist in:

- Industries in the county that are expected to decline but have a high LQ – and are still viable: Pharmaceutical, agriculture, health care, machine manufacturing.
• Industries that are expected to decline, but have a low LQ – yet are still above the county average annual wage: Machine manufacturing, freight transportation, metal & product manufacturing.

**FIGURE 4: CAREER CLUSTERS**

The National Career Clusters® Framework provides a vital structure for sorting out and conveying CTE programs through learning and comprehensive programs of study.

The National Career Clusters® Framework fills in as a sorting out device for Career Technical Education (CTE) programs, educational program plan and guidance. There are 16 Career Clusters in the National Career Clusters® Framework, speaking to 79 Career Pathways to assist students with exploring their approach to more noteworthy achievement in school and profession. The structure additionally works as a helpful guide in creating projects of study spanning auxiliary and postsecondary frameworks and for making singular understudy plans of study for a total scope of profession choices. It assists students with finding their interests and engages them to pick a pathway that can lead to achievement in school and in a career.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INDUSTRY GROUP</th>
<th>AVERAGE ANNUAL EMPLOYMENT FORECAST RATE(%)</th>
<th>AVERAGE WAGES</th>
<th>LQ</th>
<th>EMPLOYMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Science, Technology, Engineering &amp; Mathematics</td>
<td>-0.97</td>
<td>$77,900</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>-1.31</td>
<td>$56,500</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Science</td>
<td>-0.46</td>
<td>$54,700</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>1,096</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education &amp; Training</td>
<td>-1.17</td>
<td>$44,000</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>1,190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government &amp; Public Administration</td>
<td>-1.31</td>
<td>$44,000</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts, A/V Technology &amp; Communications</td>
<td>-2.37</td>
<td>$41,800</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business, Management &amp; Administration</td>
<td>-1.93</td>
<td>$41,300</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>1,791</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture, Food &amp; Natural Resources</td>
<td>-1.44</td>
<td>$39,700</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>533</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law, Public Safety, Corrections &amp; Security</td>
<td>-1.38</td>
<td>$38,000</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation, Distribution &amp; Logistics</td>
<td>-1.58</td>
<td>$37,600</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>993</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architecture &amp; Construction</td>
<td>-0.98</td>
<td>$37,300</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>582</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>-1.76</td>
<td>$37,300</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>1,084</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing, Sales &amp; Service</td>
<td>-1.82</td>
<td>$34,400</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>1,430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Services</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>$27,800</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>639</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitality &amp; Tourism</td>
<td>-0.73</td>
<td>$21,400</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1,506</td>
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<tr>
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<td>INDUSTRY GROUP</td>
<td>AVERAGE ANNUAL EMPLOYMENT FORECAST RATE(%) 2019 Q4-2029 Q4</td>
<td>AVERAGE WAGES</td>
<td>LQ</td>
<td>EMPLOYMENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>------------</td>
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<td>0.61</td>
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<td>Health Science</td>
<td>-0.46</td>
<td>$54,700</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>1,096</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Several years ago, the Brookings Institute identified high-value industries that offer communities sustained growth and higher wages. Below is a representation of those industries in Bolivar County, the associated employment, wage and growth.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAICS</th>
<th>INDUSTRY</th>
<th>EMPL</th>
<th>AVERAGE ANN WAGES</th>
<th>LQ</th>
<th>5-YEAR HISTORIC EMPLOYMENT GROWTH</th>
<th>PROJECTED ANN % GROWTH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3254</td>
<td>Pharmaceutical and Medicine Manufacturing</td>
<td>672</td>
<td>$97,111</td>
<td>29.08</td>
<td>-1.7%</td>
<td>-1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3363</td>
<td>Motor Vehicle Parts Manufacturing *</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>$43,042</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>-1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3391</td>
<td>Medical Equipment and Supplies Manufacturing</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>$71,604</td>
<td>5.30</td>
<td>-5.2%</td>
<td>-1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5173</td>
<td>Wired and Wireless Telecommunications Carriers</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>$60,802</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>-4.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3271</td>
<td>Clay Product and Refractory Manufacturing</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>$40,039</td>
<td>11.03</td>
<td>-7.9%</td>
<td>-2.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5413</td>
<td>Architectural, Engineering, and Related Services</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>$44,010</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>-1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5416</td>
<td>Management, Scientific, and Technical Consulting Services</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>$48,467</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>-0.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>5191</td>
<td>Other Information Services</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>$22,962</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2211</td>
<td>Electric Power Generation, Transmission and Distribution</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>$59,854</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>-0.5%</td>
<td>-2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3333</td>
<td>Commercial and Service Industry Machinery Manufacturing</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>$54,843</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>-2.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5415</td>
<td>Computer Systems Design and Related Services</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>$40,383</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3241</td>
<td>Petroleum and Coal Products Manufacturing</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>$61,341</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>-2.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>5182</td>
<td>Data Processing, Hosting, and Related Services</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>$10,725</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-29.9%</td>
<td>-0.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>3331</td>
<td>Agriculture, Construction, and Mining Machinery Manufacturing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$45,847</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-36.2%</td>
<td>-2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3399</td>
<td>Other Miscellaneous Manufacturing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$18,666</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-16.4%</td>
<td>-1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6215</td>
<td>Medical and Diagnostic Laboratories</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$23,036</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>-13.4%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>5112</td>
<td>Software Publishers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>0.00</td>
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<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6380</td>
<td>Advanced Industries - Brookings</td>
<td>1,212</td>
<td>$76,828</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>-0.6%</td>
<td>-1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total - All Industries</td>
<td>11,966</td>
<td>$36,806</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>-1.1%</td>
<td>-1.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Commuting Patterns »

FIGURE 6: COMMUTING DATA 2019Q4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Residents of Bolivar County and where they Work</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>County</td>
<td>Commuters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolivar County</td>
<td>9,827</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunflower County, Mississippi</td>
<td>617</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington County, Mississippi</td>
<td>412</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leflore County, Mississippi</td>
<td>266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coahoma County, Mississippi</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL COMMUTERS OUT</td>
<td>2,229</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Workers in Bolivar County and where the Live</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>County</td>
<td>Commuters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolivar County</td>
<td>9,827</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunflower County, Mississippi</td>
<td>508</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington County, Mississippi</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coahoma County, Mississippi</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL COMMUTERS IN</td>
<td>2,130</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The commuting numbers do not reflect the percentage of workers commuting to DeSoto County. Current data reflects 2011-2015 5-year commuting flows. The Census Bureau produces county and MCD-level commuting flow tables every five years, using non-overlapping 5-year ACS estimates. For more information on sampling and estimation methods, confidentiality protection, and sampling and nonsampling errors, see the American Community Survey Multi-year Accuracy of the Data (5-year 2011-2015).
In Your Words - VisionFirst hosted nearly 40 stakeholder meetings over several days with more than 50 elected officials, existing business leaders, small businesses and community members.

WE NEED TO STOP COMPARING OURSELVES TO OTHERS DELTA COMMUNITIES.

Conversations with the professional staff members allowed VisionFirst to gain a better understanding of current operations, programs, products and services as well as some of the challenges faced due to macro-economic trends and local issues especially as the nation and community begin to recover and reopen from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Meetings with business and community leadership and stakeholders allowed VisionFirst to gain insights through the lens of each groups’ focus and how the Chamber and its economic development team can find long-term success. All the stakeholder meetings produced productive dialogue about the county’s future, identifying both critical issues and vital opportunities. During the planning sessions, VisionFirst sought answers to questions centered on such topics as:

- What is the definition of economic development for Bolivar County?
- Who is the Chamber’s internal and external customers?
- What are the barriers to success?
- Who are the partners for the county’s economic development efforts?
- What belongs to the Chamber?
- What is the community’s unique story? How can the Chamber leverage assets to grow the economy?
- What does success look like for the Chamber?
- How will the organization measure success?

Key findings from the meetings are presented in aggregate on the following pages and have been grouped by the main themes that resulted from the stakeholder conversations. Although the meetings focused on the Chamber and its role in leading local economic development, the discussion also covered the needs in the broader community. While outside the direct purview of the Chamber, these issues are vital to the county’s overall competitiveness.

The comments listed are a sampling of the meeting outcomes from local leaders and do not reflect VisionFirst’s opinion.
EDUCATION IS A PRIORITY ISSUE FOR THE COMMUNITY

• The history surrounding the school systems remains an issue for many in the community.
• Higher educational assets of Delta State University, Mississippi Delta Community College and Coahoma Community College are regarded in the community, but residents would like more coordination.
• Workforce training needs more coordination from the K-12 level through technical schools, colleges and universities.
• There needs to be investment in the programming and the people who are coming out of Delta State in order to keep them in the community.

DELTA STATE IS AN UNDER-MARKETED ASSET

• Delta State has state-of-the-art equipment, students and professors that most people outside of the region do not know about.
• There needs to be additional coordination on initiatives and programs between the university and the Chamber.
• Commercial aviation, geospatial and outdoor recreation are few of the unique departments and the careers associated with those programs offer recruitment opportunities.
• "Cleveland is only as good as Delta State, and Delta State is only as good as Cleveland."

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION EFFORTS NEED TO BE DEFINED

• The community would like to see projects that have impacts on a cross section of the Delta.
• Bolivar County and the Delta overall have not attracted the projects that many of the other parts of the state have been able to win.
• Recruitment and retention efforts need to be more coordinated and more aggressive in leveraging partners.
• There are opportunities beyond the traditional sectors of manufacturing for the community including agribusiness and the music industry.
• Business formation and entrepreneurship are a critical component to recruitment and retention efforts.

CREATIVE ECONOMY OFFERS UNMATCHED ASSETS

• The GRAMMY Museum is not widely known outside the region and an underutilized asset as a draw to the community.
• Delta State’s recording studios and capacity offer significant value to an expanding music industry.
• The region’s music and artistic history draw visitors from around the world and should be leveraged for broader economic development efforts.
• The community hosts a number of events and festivals that draw visitors, but it has not turned into entrepreneurship or a significant portion of the community’s economy.
• There is a mystique to the Mississippi Delta and people want to see that authenticity – both domestically and internationally.
COMPETITIVE ISSUES NEEDS TO BE ADDRESSED

- Existing industry is an asset to be leveraged to improve community competitiveness.
- There is a lack of housing stock for the professional workforce.
- Internet speed is an issue both on campus of DSU and the community overall.
- There is a need for more consistent marketing efforts to better position the community.

WORKING TOGETHER IS CRITICAL TO SUCCESS

- There are numerous legacy issues that continue to hold the community back from economic progress.
- Stakeholders need to volunteer to work together and tackle difficult issues, serving as advocates for the county's competitiveness.

CHAMBER NEEDS A DEFINED PROGRAM OF WORK

- The Chamber needs to articulate its initiatives better to residents, so they understand it is for the entire county.
- Success must go beyond new projects announced and focus on services to existing business.
- The Chamber needs a leader who has the respect of the officials and has a love of the community with a broad range of experience to implement the plan.
Community Online Survey

Beyond key stakeholders in the economic development process, it was important to provide a mechanism for interested community members to give input. Resident input is essential for not only the development of the strategic plan but to build a base of understanding and support to accomplish the goals which are laid out. Community feedback provides what perceptions around the strategic plan process exist, what type of growth and industry is wanted, residents’ thoughts about the region’s future and how they feel about the quality of life that they currently enjoy.

To that end, VisionFirst Advisors, along with the Cleveland-Bolivar County Chamber of Commerce sought public input through an online survey completed by 317 people. Below are the results of the survey.

1. **From an economic development standpoint, where would you like to see the Bolivar County in five years? (Check the top three)**
   - A diverse range of job opportunities that offer upward mobility: 59.62%
   - A community that offers high-achieving educational options from Pre-K through the community/technical college level: 58.36%
   - A community with vibrant downtowns and neighborhoods that appeal to young business leaders and families: 51.10%
   - Increase per capita income: 24.29%
   - Home to diverse industry: 18.61%
   - Support of start-ups and entrepreneurs: 14.83%
   - Reduce population losses: 14.20%
   - Increase visitors to the county: 13.88%
   - Provide value-added opportunities for agriculture: 10.41%
   - Other (please specify): 4.73%

*Other responses included comments such as:*
- Greater support of all PreK-12 public schools
- Municipal funding of events and units at Delta State University.
- A community that welcomes people of color and works towards equality for all.
- A university that works harmoniously and synergistically with the community
2. **To what extent do you agree or disagree with the statement about your county/regional economy?** *(Agree, Neutral, Disagree)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All residents have equal access to economic opportunity</td>
<td>44.79%</td>
<td>23.34%</td>
<td>31.86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wages and salaries make it possible to maintain my standard of living</td>
<td>29.65%</td>
<td>26.18%</td>
<td>44.16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and job training are available to residents who want or need it</td>
<td>24.92%</td>
<td>29.97%</td>
<td>45.11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Businesses are growing</td>
<td>28.39%</td>
<td>38.17%</td>
<td>33.44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneurs can start and succeed</td>
<td>15.46%</td>
<td>38.17%</td>
<td>46.37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources and support to start a business</td>
<td>25.55%</td>
<td>52.37%</td>
<td>22.08%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The community attracts businesses or is seen as a business destination</td>
<td>44.16%</td>
<td>31.55%</td>
<td>24.29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The communities attract visitors or is seen as a visitor destination</td>
<td>13.25%</td>
<td>22.08%</td>
<td>64.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local government and business cooperate on community and economic development initiatives</td>
<td>19.24%</td>
<td>38.49%</td>
<td>42.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The overall mix of employers (manufacturing, professional, retail business, etc.) is adequate</td>
<td>55.84%</td>
<td>26.81%</td>
<td>17.35%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. **What do you see as the region’s greatest strengths and biggest weaknesses?** *(Rank the following on a scale of 1 = Weakness; 2 = Not a strength; 3 = Strength; 4 = Substantial Strength)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Weakness</th>
<th>Not a strength</th>
<th>Strength</th>
<th>Substantial strength</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for higher education including technical training</td>
<td>19.56%</td>
<td>25.87%</td>
<td>42.90%</td>
<td>11.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affordability</td>
<td>16.72%</td>
<td>31.23%</td>
<td>44.16%</td>
<td>7.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Available sites/buildings for new industry or expansions</td>
<td>18.30%</td>
<td>26.50%</td>
<td>47.32%</td>
<td>7.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative economy</td>
<td>11.67%</td>
<td>28.71%</td>
<td>52.37%</td>
<td>7.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality education (public and private)</td>
<td>30.91%</td>
<td>33.12%</td>
<td>28.71%</td>
<td>7.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ease of doing business/regulatory environment</td>
<td>5.68%</td>
<td>23.97%</td>
<td>64.35%</td>
<td>5.99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connectivity – location, traffic and roadways</td>
<td>19.24%</td>
<td>27.76%</td>
<td>47.00%</td>
<td>5.99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare</td>
<td>25.55%</td>
<td>31.86%</td>
<td>37.22%</td>
<td>5.36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of life amenities</td>
<td>12.93%</td>
<td>30.60%</td>
<td>51.10%</td>
<td>5.36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime and personal safety</td>
<td>13.88%</td>
<td>27.76%</td>
<td>53.00%</td>
<td>5.36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access and affordability of high-speed internet for home and business</td>
<td>31.86%</td>
<td>34.38%</td>
<td>29.34%</td>
<td>4.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organized business leadership</td>
<td>10.73%</td>
<td>32.49%</td>
<td>52.37%</td>
<td>4.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A shared vision of where the region is going</td>
<td>22.08%</td>
<td>40.38%</td>
<td>34.38%</td>
<td>3.15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tax environment</td>
<td>11.67%</td>
<td>41.96%</td>
<td>43.53%</td>
<td>2.84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for existing industry growth and expansion</td>
<td>14.51%</td>
<td>35.96%</td>
<td>46.69%</td>
<td>2.84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workforce costs</td>
<td>13.56%</td>
<td>38.80%</td>
<td>45.11%</td>
<td>2.52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing options (rental and home ownership)</td>
<td>30.28%</td>
<td>36.59%</td>
<td>30.91%</td>
<td>2.21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Workforce skills and availability                        37.85%  41.64%  18.93%  1.58%
Technical support of entrepreneurs and small business    17.35%  49.53%  31.86%  1.26%

4. **When it comes to the availability and quality of infrastructure, business and community services, how would you rate the following?** *(Meets our needs; Improvements are necessary, Serious problems exist, No opinion)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Meets our needs</th>
<th>Improvements are necessary</th>
<th>Serious problems exist</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arts/cultural programs/facilities</td>
<td>64.98%</td>
<td>25.24%</td>
<td>3.47%</td>
<td>6.31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four-year college/university</td>
<td>64.98%</td>
<td>24.29%</td>
<td>8.20%</td>
<td>2.52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilities</td>
<td>59.62%</td>
<td>35.33%</td>
<td>3.47%</td>
<td>1.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cell phone service</td>
<td>59.31%</td>
<td>32.49%</td>
<td>7.57%</td>
<td>0.63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail and shopping services</td>
<td>51.42%</td>
<td>41.01%</td>
<td>6.94%</td>
<td>0.63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>River port availability</td>
<td>46.69%</td>
<td>17.98%</td>
<td>5.05%</td>
<td>30.28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall community appearance</td>
<td>46.69%</td>
<td>46.69%</td>
<td>5.99%</td>
<td>0.63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to healthcare services</td>
<td>40.38%</td>
<td>41.96%</td>
<td>15.77%</td>
<td>1.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment, nightlife, and dining</td>
<td>38.17%</td>
<td>45.43%</td>
<td>14.83%</td>
<td>1.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizen involvement</td>
<td>33.75%</td>
<td>45.74%</td>
<td>17.03%</td>
<td>3.47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Park/recreation/trail offerings</td>
<td>33.12%</td>
<td>53.94%</td>
<td>11.67%</td>
<td>1.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing/assisted living home units</td>
<td>29.34%</td>
<td>36.59%</td>
<td>11.36%</td>
<td>22.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-K - 12 opportunities/choices</td>
<td>26.50%</td>
<td>35.02%</td>
<td>31.86%</td>
<td>6.62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet/broadband services</td>
<td>26.18%</td>
<td>45.43%</td>
<td>28.08%</td>
<td>0.32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daycare options</td>
<td>24.29%</td>
<td>36.28%</td>
<td>14.51%</td>
<td>24.92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical training and two-year certificate opportunities/choices</td>
<td>18.93%</td>
<td>48.90%</td>
<td>21.45%</td>
<td>10.73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability of housing options</td>
<td>18.93%</td>
<td>48.26%</td>
<td>29.65%</td>
<td>3.15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall condition of housing stock</td>
<td>17.67%</td>
<td>57.10%</td>
<td>21.77%</td>
<td>3.47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall affordability of housing</td>
<td>17.35%</td>
<td>41.64%</td>
<td>38.17%</td>
<td>2.84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future interstate access</td>
<td>13.88%</td>
<td>41.01%</td>
<td>22.71%</td>
<td>22.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County/city road and streets</td>
<td>6.94%</td>
<td>32.81%</td>
<td>59.62%</td>
<td>0.63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rail availability</td>
<td>6.94%</td>
<td>13.25%</td>
<td>32.49%</td>
<td>47.32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. **What type of new businesses and industry do you want to see in the region?** *(Check all that apply.)*

- Advanced manufacturing/light industry (distribution/warehousing operations, advance manufacturing, etc.): 70.98%
- Home-grown/local entrepreneurial businesses: 67.51%
- Creative economy: 52.05%
- Tourism: 51.74%
- Retail: 48.90%
- Service providers (medical, financial, higher education, etc.): 47.95%
- Advanced agriculture: 37.85%
• Back-office type operations (call centers, accounting, financial services, etc.): 29.34%
• None, I prefer to keep the existing level of business and industry: 0.95%

Other comments included:
• Find a way to tie in Cleveland to the river, lakes, fishing, boating.
• Demolition and rural blight removal services.
• Dog Park. Chain retail stores. Chain food restaurants that are not fast food. Movie theater (was the popular choice). Walking trails.
• We need business that can compliment our other industries such as another manufacturer similar to Baxter HC, not to compete for products but compete for workers. We need additional industries to grow our area, grow neighborhoods, schools system, and tax base. We have great people on our county and we need to use them to attract business and industry to our area.

6. **In rural communities, the issue of retaining young professionals and attracting new residents is a concern. What do you believe are the biggest challenges to retaining and attracting new talent?**
   • Lack of jobs with upward mobility: 53.00%
   • Lack of entertainment and social options that appeal to a younger demographic: 32.81%
   • Lack of awareness of what the region has to offer: 7.26%
   • Inability to engage in leadership positions within the region: 3.79%
   • Business environment challenges to start a new business: 3.15%

7. **What should be the region’s top priorities for economic development? (What would the region like to achieve?) Please select up to three strategies.**
   • Help improve local schools: 56.15%
   • Increase job skills of local labor force: 35.96%
   • Attract and retain young professionals and families: 35.65%
   • Diversify the economic base and create new higher-paying jobs: 33.44%
   • Encourage the growth of existing businesses and industries: 27.44%
   • Improve the quality of life and regional amenities such as livability and recreation: 26.81%
   • Improve availability of a range of housing options: 23.03%
   • Create a unified vision and strategy for regional growth: 18.93%
   • Improve access and affordability of high-speed internet for home and business: 16.09%
   • Create a strong entrepreneurial climate: 6.62%
   • Encourage downtown revitalization: 5.68%
   • Improve government cooperation on a regional level: 1.89%

Other comments included:
• There are several areas of Cleveland, from the Highway 61 corridor to neighborhoods on the Eastside, that have become significantly blighted. Public Works projects like better drains, sidewalks & street curbs for all of Cleveland, not just Downtown, are much needed. Also, we will not reverse depopulation, so eliminating blighted and abandoned buildings can go a long way to improving neighborhoods. Sidewalks, better drainage, and curbs are not “sexy,” and won’t get us in “Garden & Gun,” but they show a commitment from our municipal leaders to the average Clevelander.
• Eliminate racism and fight for equal opportunity for people of color.
• We need a Small Business Incubator to help new entrepreneurs to start businesses, grow their business and secure financing to build a permanent place to house their business.
• Schools, schools, schools. Middle class citizens cannot afford to send their kids to a private school to get the kind of education wanted. Public schools in Bolivar county are headed in the wrong direction.
• On question #6 above- you should have had a question about housing. We do attract a good number of young professionals, and unfortunately, they cannot accept jobs, or we have lost people because they cannot find housing.

QUESTIONS 8, 9, 10 AND 11 WERE INCLUDED TO PROVIDE DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ABOUT THE RESPONDENTS.

8. What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?
   • Graduate degree: 44.79%
   • Bachelor’s degree: 29.97%
   • Some college but no degree: 12.93%
   • Associate degree: 8.52%
   • High school degree or equivalent (e.g., GED): 3.47%
   • Workforce Certification (include type): 0.32%

9. What is your age?
   • 30-44: 38.17%
   • 45-59: 32.18%
   • 60+: 20.50%
   • 18-29: 9.15%

10. Please note the sector in which you are currently employed (mark only one response).
    • Private business employee: 28.71%
    • Government employee (municipal, county, state, federal): 23.34%
    • Private business owner: 20.50%
    • Non-profit/community organization employee: 11.99%
    • Retired: 11.36%
    • Not currently employed: 4.10%

11. How long have you lived in the region?
    • Entire life: 41.01%
    • More than 10 years: 39.75%
    • 5-10 years: 11.04%
    • Less than 5 years:
    • 8.20%
**SWOT Analysis**

Based on the conversations with stakeholders and desktop research, VisionFirst identified the region’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats regarding the community’s economic development efforts as well as the area’s competitiveness overall. This analysis relied heavily on qualitative input as well as industry knowledge.

**STRENGTHS**
- A desire to bring the community forward through positive change
- Delta State University (DSU)
- Community Colleges
- Baxter Pharmaceuticals
- DSU’s programs in Aviation, Music, Outdoor & GIS with online programming
- Strong music heritage that attracts talent and tourism
- Music institute with three recording studios
- The GRAMMY Museum
- Regional center in the Delta
- Rosedale Bolivar County Port

**WEAKNESSES**
- Racial divide
- Lack of trust among the community
- No formalized BR&E program
- Lack of proactive economic development activities
- Lack of a coordinated effort to move the community forward
- Lack of coordinated programming efforts
- Local school district performance
- 15 municipalities
- Awareness of assets to external audiences

**OPPORTUNITIES**
- Creative economy around music, arts, culture and downtown renewal
- Reorganization of the Chamber
- Utilize the current national conversation to host meaningful conversations on race and educational disparities
- Engaged stakeholders who want to work together
- Renewed interest to work together
- Tell unified story
- Mississippi River and Terrene Landing

**THREATS**
- Do nothing to bring the community forward
- Lack of partner engagement and the ability to work together
- Declines in student population at Delta State University
- A singular approach to improvement
- Desire to compare community to only other Delta communities
- Lack of a unified vision to optimize strategic assets
Leverage Points »

Far too often SWOT analyses are conducted for discovery purpose only. VisionFirst goes beyond the initial step of conducting the analysis. VisionFirst develops strategies that help leverage or capitalize on each strength or opportunity and to minimize or mitigate weaknesses and threats. These strategies or "leverage points" help to illustrate the timeliest, most important calls-to-action for the county to execute to strengthen its position, achieve its mission and move the community to a greater competitive stance for jobs and investment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strength</th>
<th>Leverage Point</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher Educational Institutions</td>
<td>• Utilize programs at both Delta State University and Mississippi Delta Community College to attract and retain talent and highlight as part of recruitment efforts to demonstrate the available talent pipeline.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weakness</td>
<td>Leverage Point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Formal BR&amp;E Program</td>
<td>• Formalize a business retention and expansion program to support recruitment efforts while also encouraging existing industry to expand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity</td>
<td>Leverage Point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The GRAMMY Museum</td>
<td>• Utilize The GRAMMY Museum, DSU recording studios and history of music to leverage existing creative economy into a pillar of business within the community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threats</td>
<td>Leverage Point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do Nothing</td>
<td>• Utilize the strategic plan along with the honest conversations that have taken place to develop an implementation structure for moving the recommendations forward.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Key Recommendations »

1. Build a Culture of Engagement & Communications
2. Refine Cleveland-Bolivar County Chamber of Commerce’s Purpose
3. Drive Business Recruitment, Retention & Expansion
4. Foster Entrepreneurship & Business Formation
5. Improve Community Competitiveness
Strategies & Tactics »

To develop the key objectives, VisionFirst reviewed Cleveland-Bolivar County Chamber of Commerce’s economic development activities to assess effectiveness in aligning assets, talent and resources to be competitive for jobs and investment. VisionFirst considered the support and the demands placed on a young organization that fall within and outside its purview in determining what should be its primary focus over the next year.

Utilizing facts and trends drawn from the data as well as economic development best practices, a group of five primary strategies were identified for implementation. Within each strategy is a series of tactics that provide a crawl, walk, run approach to implementation. Understanding both the newness of the organization and the small staff size, the tactics are segmented by:

- **Implement**: The Chamber to undertake, coordinate and implement.
- **Facilitate**: The Chamber to work in conjunction with partners to develop and implement.
- **Advocate**: The Chamber to advocate to city, county, state leaders to undertake and/or implement.

For the purpose of the plan, the timeframes are defined as:

- **Short-Term**: Three Months to One Year
- **Mid-Term**: One Year to Three Years
- **Long-Term**: Three Years to Five Years
1. BUILD A CULTURE OF ENGAGEMENT & COMMUNICATIONS

Build collaboration through organizational structure and meaningful community dialogue

Successful economic development strategy is holistic and must have inclusive engagement. Gone are the days where a single-focused strategy on business recruitment consistently produces results and changes the trajectory of a community’s economic prosperity. Business recruitment is a component of economic opportunity but not the only piece. Cleveland and Bolivar County have an opportunity to reset the community’s economic development strategy and it begins with building inclusion and engagement in the process.

TACTIC // Expand engagement of community leaders beyond the Chamber of Commerce structure. (Implement, Short-Term)

Building a culture of engagement will require the Chamber to move beyond its traditional committee structure for members. The most effective way to accomplish this is to create task forces or councils that are focused on key issues relevant to the success of this plan. For example, education was identified as a critical issue to competitiveness by several stakeholders. A task force could be created and populated with both members and subject matter experts critical to focus on ways to improve the county’s workforce pipeline. The taskforce would do its work and then make recommendations to Chamber board for action. NOTE: This tactic is included again in strategic recommendation #2 to build additional capacity for the Chamber to implement this plan.

This tactic expands the engagement of the Chamber to include additional thought leadership leading to improved solutions.

TACTIC // Launch the new Chamber of Commerce strategic plan at a public event that includes not just members and investors, but other key stakeholders from around the county. (Implement, Short-Term)

A public rollout with key stakeholders and organizations will help create a sense of excitement around the new economic development direction for the community. As part of the event, the Chamber should facilitate group discussions around key community topics such as education/talent, entrepreneurship, community development and roles of nonprofits. These group discussions could be the basis for formulating task forces to continue addressing the issues.

To continue building an inclusive environment, it is important to provide forums for dialogue with the community. There are many ways to accomplish this; however, the Chamber should set guiding wisdom for the conversations that provide for a safe and open space for real conversation. Consider the Longest Table (best practice below) as a model for creating meaningful dialogue.

BEST PRACTICE: TALLAHASSEE’S LONGEST TABLE EVENTS

For the past three years, Tallahassee and Leon County residents have come together to share a meal and engage in heartfelt conversations aimed at breaking down community divides and building
relationships through *The Longest Table*. Organized by the office of the mayor, Leon County government and a handful of community organizations, the project aims to use the dinner table as a medium for generating meaningful conversation among people of diverse ethnic, religious and political backgrounds. Each event includes both “guiding wisdom” for the conversation as well as set questions.

### TACTIC // Facilitate the internal development of a customer needs matrix to optimize community efforts. *(Implement, Short-Term)*

This is a hands-on exercise with the staff and possibly some of the various board leaders to address operating in silos. Stakeholders often noted that there should be greater cooperation in the efforts of economic development, chamber, tourism and downtown program execution. The Chamber is fortunate to have multiple organizations within its purview that facilitate the creation of a holistic economy. The goal of the exercise is to improve collaboration of the entities housed at the Chamber as well as the many others that can contribute to economic development success. Through this collaboration, the Chamber can help optimize the value of their strategic partners to achieving mutual goals leading to a better economic well-being.

Parameters for developing the matrix:

- The staff, not board members, of the multiple organizations should conduct this exercise. It requires identification of all customers for all involved entities followed by pinpointing needs and expectations.
- Core customers are identified as the ones that are critical to the organization; without them, there is no need to exist. An example of a core customer for tourism would be an out of town visitor.
- Indirect customers, or stakeholders, are not a reason for an organization to exist but still can be critical to its success. An example of a stakeholder would be for the Chamber would be the media.
- Based on the group of customers, the four organizations should collaborate on providing programs, products and services focused on support.
Below is a start to a customer matrix for the four entities:

### CUSTOMER GROUPS (EXAMPLE)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Needs</th>
<th>Expectations</th>
<th>Programs, Products, Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Competitive Projects</strong></td>
<td>Site and building information</td>
<td>Accurate, timely and understandable</td>
<td>Completed sites and buildings data base</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Entrepreneurs</strong></td>
<td>Capital and mentorships</td>
<td>Supportive culture to business formation</td>
<td>Virtual incubator team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Small Businesses</strong></td>
<td>Grow business</td>
<td>Assistance in building local customer base</td>
<td>Chamber workshops and networking events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Visitors</strong></td>
<td>Place to visit and things to do</td>
<td>Accurate and up to date</td>
<td>Website listing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>New Residents</strong></td>
<td>Current housing options</td>
<td>Knowledge of area as it relates to different types of houses, schools...etc.</td>
<td>Online resources for new residents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Citizens/Retirement Community</strong></td>
<td>Economic prosperity</td>
<td>New businesses and job opportunities</td>
<td>Dashboard of economic measures</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### WHICH ENTITIES SUPPORT THE CUSTOMER GROUP (EXAMPLE)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Competitive Projects</th>
<th>Small Business</th>
<th>Visitors</th>
<th>New Residents</th>
<th>Citizens</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chamber</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Development</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Street</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourism</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. REFINE THE CHAMBER’S PURPOSE

Create an effective economic development organization with clear purpose.

The Cleveland-Bolivar County Chamber of Commerce has long represented the heart of the community serving in numerous capacities – from traditional chamber business functions to economic development, from tourism to main street activities. While challenging to undertake all of these functions with a limited staff, each of these elements have the ability to work together to create a thriving holistic economy.

The good news is that leaders and stakeholders are excited about the Chamber’s desire to build a refreshed effort and want to be engaged – both the development of a strategic plan and new leadership will build off that enthusiasm. However, it is critical the organizations’ leadership foster that engagement and invest the time needed to refine the operations to effectively implement this plan and move forward.

TACTIC // Define and communicate the definition of economic development success and purpose for the Chamber. (Implement, Short-Term)

Success starts with a vision, followed by setting a strategy to achieve it – having a vision, first. The lack of a unified shared vision was based on the feedback heard during the stakeholder interviews.

VisionFirst Advisors recommends setting a higher vision or North Star. This will enable all entities contributing to the economic development ecosystem to understand their role, collaborate and focus efforts leading to achieving that vision. During the interviews, stakeholders defined vision, mission and success. Below are key takeaways from that feedback.

What constitutes economic development success?

- New jobs
- Success in target industries
- Jobs value varies based on parts of county
- Tourism
- Increased tax base
- Increase in household income
- Per capita income growth
- Poverty rate
- New companies
- Higher wages and greater payroll
- Increase in retail and services
- Small business growth
- Population growth
- Diversity of the economy
- Business start-ups
- Educational attainment

VisionFirst’s Four W’s

One of the keys to defining the mission of an organization is understand its purpose. VisionFirst uses four questions, referred to as the “Four W’s”: who you are, what you do, why you do and for whom? Below represents stakeholder feedback.
WHO: What was once an easy question to answer has become increasingly difficult with the challenge of chambers to move beyond the perception of exclusive membership driven organizations to those of being more inclusive of community input.

WHAT: Cleveland and Bolivar County are fortunate to have many assets that can be used strategically to create economic wealth for the region. The biggest challenge is how to align and coordinate the use of these assets to contribute to the overall growth of the local economy. Action words such as direct, advance and forward describe the overall action of what the Chamber must do to implement a strategy for economic development.

WHY: There are many metrics that will define success, but the overall arching theme will be to raise the bar on economic viability of Cleveland and Bolivar County. VisionFirst recommends keeping metrics simple (as noted at the end of this document), and stating the sole reason the Chamber is involved is to create overall economic prosperity.

FOR WHOM: While the Chamber serves its member investors and public partners, the vision has to be higher. VisionFirst recommends the benefit of the efforts should raise viability and prosperity not just for Cleveland and Bolivar County, but for the region as a whole.

Based on interviews, an understanding of the organization and answering the four Ws VisionFirst suggests building off the following draft statements:

EXAMPLE

VISION: Bring economic prosperity to every citizen of the region.

MISSION: The Cleveland-Bolivar Chamber of Commerce and its stakeholders direct a pathway to overall economic prosperity for the region.

TACTIC // Instill practices for the Chamber to be a high performing economic development organization. (Implement, Short-Term)

For economic development to be successful in Bolivar County, it is imperative the Chamber strive to be a high-performance organization operating efficiently, professionally and focusing on meeting the needs of its clients (customers).
Characteristics of a high-performing economic development organization include:

- Operates at the speed of business.
- Solicits private sector involvement for incorporating business practices.
- Utilizes intellectual capital of business to develop policy and strategy.
- Instills a laser-like focus on mission and purpose.
- Develops a culture for professional development of others within the community.
- Creates a collaboration of public and private sector to achieve economic success.
- Focuses on programs and strategies that demonstrate measurable success.
- Understands the value proposition of investments and demonstrates the value of a project for public support.
- Commits to fiscal responsibility and management of programs and initiatives.
- Practices transparency with operations.
- Builds support and trust through proactive communications.

The Chamber should utilize this list in order to ensure its activities mirror the type of organization it is striving to become.

**TACTIC // Reorganize the structure of Chamber board meetings to be mission focused. (Implement, Mid-Term)**

To ensure effective and efficient use of board meetings, the Chamber should restructure the organization of its board meetings. The executive committee meetings should thoroughly review, provide highlights and summarize items on a consent agenda for the larger board meeting including financials and minutes.

The agenda should be structured to allow the board and executive committee time to review a dashboard of measures and discuss strategic objectives and ongoing activities, all while utilizing a consent agenda. If the Chamber is able to better harness the intellectual capital of the board and committees, engagement will increase. Include monitoring progress regularly to assess if tactics and activities are being implemented, achieving milestones and share results to the broader community.

**TACTIC // Build capacity through a focused committee or council structure. (Implement, Mid-Term)**

The greatest challenge today for the financial stability of a chamber of commerce is to pivot from focusing on investing members to one of the greater good of the community. In addition to the existing member-driven committee structure, it is important to create opportunities to incorporate a broader diversity of thought in the economic development strategy for the county – even if that means including non-members.

The Chamber should create two to three task forces to focus on specific initiatives that can offer support to the economic development ecosystem in the community. Examples of task forces that would add immediate value include workforce, existing business, creative economy and/or infrastructure. The membership of these councils should include both Chamber members and non-members and reflect the makeup of the community. Their work can be incorporated into the
Chamber board of directors’ meetings adding to the strategic direction of the meetings. It is important to note, these should not be ongoing committees. The task forces are just that – focused on a specific task, once the task is completed the group should be disbanded as to not create additional work for staff.

**TACTIC // Identify and develop a rapid response or Delta Team (Implement, Mid-Term)**

Given limited resources of the Chamber, it is critical to develop a spirit of trust and collaboration to accomplish the objectives of this plan. The creation of a team, similar to a special strike force or what VisionFirst likes to call a Delta Team, is needed to provide the necessary targeted support when decisions are being made regarding jobs or capital investment. This same team can also be an advocate on issues important to the community in both Jackson and Washington DC.

- Identify team members with skills and intellectual capital to address infrastructure, workforce, public services and business climate.
- Provide training to the team members to understand importance of confidentiality and roles in the process.
- Utilize the group to analyze projects considered, won or lost to adjust and improve process.
- Understand that a title does not necessarily make you a member on the Delta Team.
- Utilize skills and abilities of team members to better position odds of community winning competitive projects and improving overall community competitiveness.
3. DRIVE BUSINESS RECRUITMENT, RETENTION & EXPANSION

Implement a proactive business recruitment, retention and expansion program

An aggressive business recruitment strategy paired with an effective existing industry outreach program has long been a staple for successful economic development organizations. The blueprint has been simple with both efforts working in tandem to provide a diverse local economy and strong business climate.

Traditional recruitment strategies in a market filled with uncertainty will not elicit the desired results; nor will standard outreach to existing industry. The current pandemic has changed the playing field of economic development and so should the approach of the Cleveland-Bolivar Chamber.

New business recruitment can have a myriad of positive outcomes as it pertains to the local economy. From diversification of opportunity with new business in a variety of industries to an improved skill set in the local labor force, new business recruitment must be a priority for the Chamber moving forward. What has changed as the nation recovers from the current pandemic is the approach and marketing tactics used for lead generation.

The volatility in the current marketplace has impacted traditional lead generation methods, which were already an inexact science. Instead of that prospective outreach, it is far more effective, at least in the interim, to focus on existing industry to identify new opportunities for growth. A strong business climate with engaged employers will create qualified opportunities that stand a greater chance of success. But meaningful engagement is the key.

Strengthen Existing Industry Relationships

With a strong existing industry base including corporate citizens such as Baxter, Quality Steel and Bunge Corporation, the Chamber has an opportunity to not only cultivate its local industry for growth but also create additional opportunities. However, to accomplish this, the level of engagement with existing industry leadership must increase. Throughout the discovery process one common theme that emerged, was a feeling of detachment by local employers with the economic development staff. While they felt like they had positive relationships with the Chamber, there was limited opportunity to offer feedback. The lack of a proactive existing industry program may have been contributing factors to the shutdown of Faurecia and the demise of the former HR roundtable. This offers a significant opportunity for the new leadership to develop a process that seeks to improve that engagement and place a focus on the health of existing industry.

Engaging local employers to understand both their challenges and successes is the goal of any existing industry outreach effort. The partnership that is developed from those employers when they feel a connection with the economic development staff is mutually beneficial and leads to a relationship with the trust to tackle difficult issues together. Formalized outreach designed to elicit candid feedback concerning the hurdles to a company’s success along with a dedicated commitment to be responsive to those needs will provide long lasting benefits to the Chamber’s efforts.

TACTIC // Institute a Business Retention and Expansion program. (Implement, Short-Term)
While there has been significant outreach to local businesses, it has been in a less formal manor that did not provide local employers a consistent schedule. Local business leaders need contact throughout the year to ensure the Chamber has ample opportunities to ascertain both positive and negative feedback concerning the current realities of doing business in the county. Understanding challenges on the front end will allow the staff to work together to avoid bigger challenges in the future.

Over and above the direct outreach to existing industry, the Chamber should provide forums for business leaders to come together and share best practices – even across industry sectors. This provides added value not only to the local businesses but offers the Chamber staff insight to their shared feedback. However, engagement should not just take place at the C-Suite level. Human resource managers are critical frontline workers in assessing the community’s challenges and assets even beyond workforce. The Chamber should provide them with opportunities to access others in their field to overcome challenges and share best practices.

Above all, there will be no impact unless the data and feedback that is collected is utilized. There must be follow up or employers will remain detached. Chamber staff will need a system to catalogue all information collected and designate check points to allow for timely outreach and engagement on any issue generated.

Ultimately, increased existing industry outreach, at its core, will invariably lead to three main benefits:

1. **Business Intelligence.** The Chamber will become aware of issues and obstacles early in its relationship with the company allowing time to address any challenges. The same can be said of opportunities for growth.

2. **Community Evaluation.** Valuable information related to business climate and labor supply will be provided. For example, a company’s struggles can help provide a roadmap for Bolivar County to remain competitive in the market.

3. **Location Marketing.** The Chamber will establish positive relationships with local company officials and will create community business ambassadors to a host of potential prospects augmenting limited staff.

At the end of a successful business retention and expansion (BR&E) strategy is an improved business climate for the existing industry. Their challenges become the community’s challenges; but so, do their opportunities. Not every company they are competing with in the market has that kind of support structure in the local community. Having local leadership engaged will ultimately help the company be more competitive in its own industry.

**The Chamber must make existing industry engagement a primary focus as the organization begins plan implementation.** As the Chamber develops its BR&E efforts the following activities should be included:

- **Conduct Bi-Annual Outreach Meetings:** Institute bi-annual outreach meetings designed to understand the current competitive advantages/disadvantages for operating a business in Bolivar county. Create a survey list of questions designed to provide useful feedback and business intelligence, not just on the company but the select industry as well.
• **Host Business Roundtables:** Facilitate business roundtables for C-suite/plant manager/human resource directors designed to offer information exchange, relationship building and best practices for operating a business in Bolivar County. Utilize the exchange to determine hot button issues that can be assigned to select committees ensuring steps will be taken to overcome the identified hurdles.

• **Advocate for Existing Industry:** Follow up. This is the simplest of recommendations but can potentially have the largest effect on your outreach efforts. Business leaders will only devote their time to engaging with you if they know there is a potential for action. Without that trust they will become less likely to engage meaning you may never get the chance to help them overcome hurdle which could have potentially become a new opportunity for growth and expansion.

• **Utilize Existing Resources:** Both Entergy Mississippi and Cooperative Energy offer support and funding resources to support local existing business efforts. Both should be trusted partners in the efforts providing not only funding support but added experience and technical assistance to the program. Collaboration with these partners provides added value to the support of existing industry in the county.

**TACTIC // Implement a systematic business recruitment effort.** (*Implement, Mid-Term*)

One of the biggest mistakes a community can make in their new business recruitment efforts is to take a very general approach to attracting new business. The pandemic is clouding the economic development roadmap. Uncertainty is causing many companies to scale back their approach to expending capital. That means potentially less opportunities in an already highly competitive environment. If a community is not laser focused on their approach to recruitment, they risk wasting significant funds on unrealistic pursuits.

There are three major steps that must be initiated in order to ensure business recruitment is successful in Bolivar County.

1. Understand current assets and how they translate in a desired market.
2. Be realistic about what can be accomplished.
3. Proactively advocate for the region and tell Bolivar County’s story.

None of these steps will move the needle without a concerted effort to implement the other two. Throughout this plan, it has been discussed how competitive the economic development environment truly is and the resources that are being allocated toward the attraction of new business from competitors. While Bolivar County has unique opportunities to grow its economy, it will not be successful without this type of comprehensive approach.

**UNDERSTANDING THE CURRENT ASSETS**

From the existing talent pipeline to available sites and buildings, it is critical the Chamber adapt its targets to those most suited to the region’s assets. Throughout this process and the subsequent discovery, the Chamber’s industrial targets were unclear. While economic development organizations should never limit their potential opportunities in any given industry, it is crucial to spend the already limited resources of the Chamber on those sectors that have the best chance of
offering a return. The state of Mississippi lists 10 targeted industries that their programs and outreach center around:

1. Advanced Manufacturing  
2. Aerospace  
3. Agribusiness  
4. Automotive  
5. Energy  
6. Health Care  
7. Shipbuilding  
8. Tourism & Film  
9. Distribution & Warehousing  
10. Information Technology

While this is a broad list it also considers every part of the state and the vastly different assets of each region. The Chamber must think more regionally to determine its targets.

Many of the state’s targets have relevance in Bolivar County. The manufacturing, agribusiness, automotive and energy sectors already have a strong presence in the region and with the state’s programs centered around their attraction these are industries show significant promise. In addition, the Rosedale-Bolivar County Port and sites along the Mississippi River are assets that provides opportunity in other sectors as well, such as fabricated metals, distribution and food processing.

**TACTIC // Define and refine the current targeted industries for Bolivar County.** *(Implement, Mid-Term)*

The Chamber should work both internally and with externally partners to develop a targeted industry plan for the Chamber. It is important that the Chamber adapt current programmatic solutions to align with the recruitment of these sectors and review policies and procedures designed to promote the region within the select industry.

Based on the LQ analysis and knowledge of the region, listed below are a few targeted industries worthy of exploring and developing a value proposition to locate there:

- **Agriculture Related Businesses (4.75 LQ):** The challenge remains the same as it has for years is how to add further value to the agriculture economy that exists today. Certainly, the programs at Delta State University provide value to businesses in this sector that rely on automation through GIS, and other technology platforms. In addition, the proximity of Mississippi State’s Delta Research and Extension Center in Stoneville provides excellent support for businesses needing research support as well as access to one of the nation’s leading programs in unmanned aerial systems for farming.

- **Pharmaceutical (28.95 LQ):** The LQ in this industry sector is an outlier in Bolivar County due to presence of Baxter. While pharmaceutical as a target might be difficult, it is worth exploring opportunities to expand additional product lines at Baxter that might be re-shored or added due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Automotive / Automotive Related (LQ 1.38):** In addition to automotive suppliers, this sector includes boat manufacturing. Location to markets makes boat manufacturing a logical target. In addition, with Mississippi and surrounding states heavily involved in automotive manufacturing, there are opportunities to target this sector as well.
• **Machine Manufacturing (1.28 LQ 45-minute drive):** Fabricated metals and machine manufacturing are great targets dependent on rail and water transportation. Sites at or near the Port of Rosedale provide competitive advantages in this sector.

• **River Opportunities:** In addition, VisionFirst Advisors also recognizes the competitive advantage of having river access. In addition to machine manufacturing, Port of Rosedale, provides additional opportunities for business recruitment, especially with the reconstruction of rail service. Sectors would include steel manufacturing, energy related businesses and value-added food processing for commodity grain products produced in the Mississippi Delta.

• **Outdoor/Lifestyle Brands:** This sector serves both as an opportunity for business formation as recruitment. Given the amount of recreation and outdoor activities in the region, the Chamber should target companies that manufacture equipment for hunting, fishing and use in the outdoors. These would include boats, camouflage, ammunition, guns, bows, ATVs and more. In addition, this is a target through that can also be developed to increase tourism opportunities though hunting lodges and experiences.

**BE REALISTIC**

The effectiveness of any economic development organization should not be judged on its ability to compete against unrealistic expectations. Albert Einstein said “Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.” This is far too often the case in economic development. Stakeholders often compare communities with vastly different population sizes, logistical infrastructure and assets and wonder why one succeeds while the other does not. For comparison, one would never compare a landlocked community as it pertains to shipbuilding with a coastal community. This should be the case for every industry.

There are inherent advantages that relate to every potential opportunity. Bolivar County is not located on a major interstate nor does it have a large population or workforce. This immediately puts the region at a disadvantage when considering large distribution facilities requiring that kind of access or large automotive plants needing thousands of employees. Rather than focusing on what could be unrealistic, the county and its citizens must embrace what is possible.

With a strong entrepreneurial spirit and skilled manufacturing workforce there is abundant opportunity to grow and expand business in the region. Paired with the Port of Rosedale, has the potential to be Bolivar’s strongest asset, allowing for global connectivity and you find there are unique assets that set Bolivar County apart from competitors. The community as a whole must understand the potential and not judge the county’s efforts based on unrealistic expectations.

**TACTIC // Conduct education and outreach as it pertains to regional potential.** *(Implement; Mid-Term)*

After the targeted industries are defined, conduct workshops and outreach to local stakeholders and interested citizens to develop an awareness of targets and potential. Provide partners with facts and messaging giving them the ability to spread positivity as it relates to the Chamber’s current mission and efforts. Utilize the tactics outlined later in this document to better communicate to both internal and external stakeholders.
TELL BOLIVAR COUNTY’S STORY

Unfortunately, defining the community’s product and its story is just the first step. That story must be told to decision makers. For those that have been to Bolivar County and experienced it first-hand it is easy to see why so many have chosen to call it home. Unfortunately, without that personal knowledge it will be rarely considered as a new location. While the Mississippi Delta, and Cleveland in particular, have some name and brand recognition it is rarely related to business location. The Chamber must make proactive communication a focus moving forward.

From a new business recruitment perspective, these positive assets and attributes need to be in front of decision makers. Companies or site selection consultants within the newly defined targeted industries need to better understand Bolivar County as a viable destination for their next location. To do that, you must tell them the community’s story. While many communities spend a small fortune in this type of outreach it can be done reasonably if the approach is laser focused.

There are many general outreach opportunities to distribute the Bolivar County story from MDA’s recruiting trips to conferences such as CoreNet, IAMC and Site Selector’s Guild. But to attend everything is a significant expense and uncertain in the current pandemic climate. This is where the broader stakeholder team should work together.

Partner with MDA, Entergy, Cooperative Energy and Delta Council on their outreach efforts. Utilize local assets such as Delta State to help tell that story. DSU has a brand that extends well beyond the Delta. Make sure their leadership is part of Chamber’s extended team. Provide them with the Chamber’s narrative so they are telling that story to a much broader audience. Do the same with existing industries. View them as part of the extended team and the results will be substantial.

This type of outreach is discussed in more detail in the competitiveness section, but from a new business recruitment standpoint, if the positive message of Bolivar County is not getting through to those that make decisions or have the ability to influence them, the Chamber will never realize its full potential to impact transformative change in the region.

**TACTIC // Develop a proactive marketing and outreach plan to tell the Bolivar County story.**

*Implement, Mid-Term*

Develop a focused message as it pertains to Bolivar County and its benefits to specific industries. Utilize statewide, regional and local partners to distribute the message and work to cultivate meaningful relationships with decision makers. Develop a plan of action that prioritizes select partner events to attend and audit. Consider membership in select industry organizations that align with current target markets. Prioritize individual outreach to select decision makers that are focused on the Chamber’s targeted industries.

While there are multiple websites with information on the area, they all provide a mixed message to several audiences. An effort needs to be made to develop a common vision and refine the websites that provide critical information to their targets, but also share a common message about visiting or doing business there.
4. FOSTER ENTREPRENEURSHIP & BUSINESS FORMATION

Small businesses serve as the heartbeat of many small rural communities. Entrepreneurship can provide pathways to foster wealth, create jobs and provide needed services and goods to residents. In utilizing data from the U.S. Census Bureau (Figure 7) nearly all of the establishments in Bolivar County employ less than 50 people, underscoring the need to provide resources and attention to this critical part of the economy. As both a business membership and economic development organization, the Chamber plays a pivotal role in ensuring their growth and success in the marketplace.

**FIGURE 7: BOLIVAR COUNTY BUSINESS PATTERNS/ESTABLISHMENT SIZE (2018)**

*County Business Patterns by the U.S. Census Bureau is an annual series that provides subnational economic data by industry. This series includes the number of establishments; 2018 is the latest available data and was released in June 2020.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size of Establishment</th>
<th>Number of Establishments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All establishments</td>
<td>706</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishments with less than 5 employees</td>
<td>370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishments with 5 to 9 employees</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishments with 10 to 19 employees</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishments with 20 to 49 employees</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishments with 50 to 99 employees</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishments with 100 to 249 employees</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishments with 250 to 499 employees</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to a pre-COVID report, nonmetropolitan counties have higher rates of self-employed business proprietors than their metropolitan counterparts. With Bolivar County’s current population of nearly 35,600 the five-year success rate of these businesses 68.5 percent as compared to metro areas which have a success rate of 66.5% (Figure 8).

**FIGURE 8: ENTREPRENEURSHIP PER 1000 RESIDENTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area type</th>
<th>Proprietor employment per 1000 residents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural (pop. less than 2,500, not adjacent to metro area)</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural (pop. less than 2,500, adjacent to metro area)</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural (pop. 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to metro area)</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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2 U.S. Census Bureau County Business Patterns (2018)

3 The Conversation: Six charts that illustrate the divide between rural and urban America
Utilizing this data and the community’s assets, the Chamber should implement a series of initiatives that support entrepreneurship and small business growth.

**TACTIC // Engage small business owners with meaningful workshops, data and events.** *(Implement, Mid-Term)*

There are numerous membership organizations that seek small business owners to join. Each has a different membership fee and offers a range of networking opportunities, workshops and resources. In order for the Chamber to engage with local small businesses, it must go above and beyond to provide personalized service and meaningful Delta specific programming.

Offering coaching and programming to small businesses often leads to a higher rate of success and longevity. Programming could include topics such as:

- Market Research
- Marketing, Graphics & Copy Writing
- Financial Management
- Technology
- Product Design
- Financing
- Sales and Promotion
- Employee Management

Taking into consideration the pressures of running a small business during the current pandemic coupled with changes in the learning environment, programming should begin utilizing online platforms and partners. This training can be developed in-house or curated from existing resources. Utilizing DSU professors and students would provide an ideal partnership and leverage the community’s expansive intellectual capital.

**TACTIC // Advocate on behalf of small businesses to local and county officials and departments.** *(Advocate, Mid-Term)*

During discussions with small businesses many noted that the activities seemed more reactive relating to small businesses rather than proactive. Staff and board members should advocate on behalf of small businesses to ease burdensome regulation and serve as a voice for small business to county and city officials and department staff.

**TACTIC // Facilitate the expansion of Delta State University’s externship programs.** *(Facilitate, Long-Term)*

With declining population numbers and a desire to increase growth for both small and large businesses, it is imperative to invest in up and coming talent. The nearly 4,000 Delta State students represent an unmatched opportunity to engage students in local businesses through an expansion of existing internship and externship programs.
Beyond just offering on-the-job training, the Chamber should engage the students by offering professional development programs that both expand their skills and provide a more in-depth perspective of what Bolivar County has to offer.

In interviews, stakeholders noted the young talent in the area hold the belief that local opportunities are too few and far between. Creating internship opportunities will help aspiring young professionals take notice of the communities growing businesses of all sizes and consider starting their careers in Bolivar County.

In the long-term, the Chamber should look to expand internship and externship opportunities to high school youth. Research notes many young people miss out on the chance to work during their teen years, especially low-income youth. This can result in academic disengagement, lack of career awareness and planning, and poor preparedness for available careers. By offering shadowing opportunities, the Chamber can inspire next generation talent through opportunities and engagement in their own community.

**TACTIC // Leverage music history and creative assets for business and job growth. (Facilitate, Long-Term)**

Located in the Delta and within the Americana Music Triangle, everyone in Bolivar County knows about the community’s rich creative assets. But what about the rest of the South or the country? When those outside the area think of the Delta, they tend to think of poverty and issues of race. Bolivar County has the opportunity to reframe those opinions. Stakeholders noted, “Once we get people from out of town here, they fall in love with it – our history, our arts, our community.”

Leaders passionately embrace the community’s creative culture. Small towns around the country are leveraging their own creativity to create jobs, revitalize neighborhoods and spur investment. Bolivar County has more assets to support an economic strategy around the creative economy, specifically music, than any location of similar size.

Often community leaders will say, “If only we had...” Bolivar is fortunate to have an unparalleled asset in the Delta Music Institute (DMI) to use as a centerpiece to its efforts. DMI has four recording studios, a mobile music lab and Fighting Okra Records along with The GRAMMY Museum.

All the assets are there, but it appears they are mostly operating as independent silos with little or no collaboration of skills, resources, expected outcome and more – all critical to an ecosystem of doing more than just operating programs but truly advancing a culture of business formation.

The recent appointment by the City of Cleveland of singer/songwriter Tricia Walker as music ambassador is a great step forward in utilizing experience to nurture the growth of this sector; however, it will take leadership, support and collaboration by many other stakeholders to move this forward.

Given the assets and the possibilities, the Chamber should create a council, or task force to specifically facilitate conversations about how to improve collaboration to create jobs and increase investment and business formation success.

Specific focus should include:
• Build a pathway to economic success from K-12 to community college to university that is inclusive of traditional programs and noncredit programs.
• Establish high school programs that utilize these assets.
• Foster residency programs to stay in Cleveland and have access to all of the assets.
• Create an incubator focused on the music industry.

**Best Practice: Mercer Music**

Macon, Georgia is a great example of utilizing a historic music landmark and its local university to optimize an asset for job creation. The former 20,000 square foot studio of Capricorn Records, where the Allman Brothers, Marshall Tucker, Charlie Daniels and others recorded, has been renovated to become Mercer Music at Capricorn. The facility provides four basic functions: incubator space for startup companies, sound studios for recording, a museum and interpretive center, and offices for co-working and meeting space. The first digital tenant of the office space was announced in February 2020, and will create 50 software development jobs.

**Best Practice: Project Music**

Project Music by the Nashville Entrepreneur Center was developed in partnership with the Country Music Association to bring music, technology and business leaders together to accelerate the development of industry-changing startups. Through the initiative entrepreneurs gain access to the Entrepreneur Center’s extensive network of music connections and are able to leverage industry connections to foster innovation, nurture growth, and drive the future of the music industry. It is a year-long, accelerator-level program featuring monthly programming and ongoing support.
TACTIC // Leverage Mississippi River for outdoor recreational companies. (Implement, Long-Term)

Bolivar County and the Mississippi Delta offer a variety of recreational and outdoor activities for the avid sportsman. This passion often generates ideas that lead to business concepts for new products or even services. Many of the great brands associated with hunting and outdoor sports were grown in the State of Mississippi such as Blue Delta Rice, DeltaAG, Delta Fowl, Delta Lures, LLC, Mossy Oak, Primos and Tara Wildlife. There are also several companies, such as Cathead Vodka and Blue Delta jeans that have used the brands associated with the Mississippi Delta to strengthen its marketing efforts.

Bolivar County has an opportunity to optimize its location and promote Delta State University’s Outdoor Recreation Education Program to capture part of the $8 billion annual consumer spending in Mississippi in the outdoor recreation sector. A taskforce could be set up to learn more about the current market and develop strategies to grow the sector through visitors and new businesses.

### Best Practice: BOTE, LLC

Corey and Magda Cooper both have a passion for water sports. Magda grew up swimming becoming a three-time collegiate National Champion at Auburn University. Corey enjoyed being on the water, fishing, swimming, skiing, hunting...etc. Less than a year after college they moved to Destin Florida to be on the water and found great careers, Magda as a financial planner and Corey as a mechanical engineer. Life on the beach included time on paddle boards which they found existing products unstable and all about the same in design and functionality. Corey felt like he could make a better product. One that could be adaptable to his preferences of holding a cooler and easily used by people of all ages. So, in 2008, they left their successful careers, cashed in their savings and launched a boat company, BOTE board. Today BOTE sells a variety of products through four retail stores and five authorized dealers and serves as an example of developing a business from the lifestyle and assets of the region.

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4 Outdoor Industry Association
5. IMPROVE COMMUNITY COMPETITIVENESS

In a highly competitive economic landscape, even considering the pandemic, communities are evaluated beyond just available sites and incentives. With conversations surrounding increased onshoring opportunities, communities must reimagine how they improve their local competitiveness – from workforce to marketing, from communications to quality of place initiatives.

TACTIC // Advocate for improvements in workforce development through K-12 education. (Advocate, Long-Term)

For years, economic development projects were won when a community had an available site with the necessary utilities, strong logistical access and assets combined with a competitive incentive package. Today, a key driver is the workforce. Will the company be able to recruit, employ and retain talent? Hiring, onboarding and retaining employees is about mitigating corporate risk and expense. If a community is unable to demonstrate an available and trained workforce, it will be left behind.

Bolivar County is fortunate to have multiple higher education institutions however, the K-12 public school systems were mentioned often in stakeholder interviews and was noted as an issue of top concern in the community survey. The perceptions around the public schools along with state data cannot go unaddressed. However, the Chamber cannot be responsible for improving the public-school system, but it can advocate for and facilitate programs that have the potential to make significant change.

A key statistic in the success of a child’s long-term educational attainment is third grade reading scores. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, students who are not reading proficiently by the end of third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school, and African-American and Hispanic students are six times more likely to drop out. While Mississippi is leading the nation in gains for readings with strong plans and programs in place centered around early literacy, there is more work to do. And communities play a role in the state’s success.

FIGURE 9: THIRD GRADE READING ASSESSMENT FOR PROMOTION & DISTRICT GRADES (18-19)⁵

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi Overall</td>
<td>74.5%</td>
<td>85.6%</td>
<td>41.8%</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleveland School District</td>
<td>63.7%</td>
<td>79.2%</td>
<td>29.2%</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Bolivar Consolidated School District</td>
<td>45.7%</td>
<td>66.3%</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Bolivar Consolidated School District</td>
<td>61.9%</td>
<td>80.0%</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunflower County Consolidate School District</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>69.2%</td>
<td>79.0%</td>
<td>24.3%</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vicksburg-Warren County School District</td>
<td>78.3%</td>
<td>93.8%</td>
<td>34.4%</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One way the Chamber can assist in improving third grading reading scores is by facilitating corporate and community reading volunteers with the school systems.

⁵ Mississippi Department of Education
Several states and communities have implemented reading coaches that volunteer time once a week to read with a child from pre-kindergarten through third grade. In Philadelphia, Committed volunteers, who can be as young as 14 years old, spend a minimum of one hour, once a week reading one-on-one with a youngster, helping them to gain confidence in their reading abilities and discover the love of reading. In addition, the program also provides 25 free books to each student. Research notes, children with 25 books in their home are more likely to complete two more years of school on average than kids with no books at home. Additional programs for the Chamber to consider include: Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library, The Campaign for 3rd Grade Reading and Read with Malcolm.

**Best Practice: SMART Reading Oregon**

The SMART Standard delivery model is our original and most common way to implement the program. In this model, teachers select student participants they feel would benefit most from the program. Students are selected for a variety of reasons including, but not limited to: children who would benefit from one-on-one reading time, children who would benefit from opportunities to increase enjoyment of reading, children who would benefit from selecting their own books to take and keep, and children who are not being served in other programs. Every week for seven months, volunteers read aloud with participating students to help them gain confidence and reading skills. Students read twice a week for 30 minutes, building relationships with two adult volunteers. Students also choose two books per month to keep and read with their families.

Another option could include the Chamber advocating for the formation of a Parent Academy. Numerous counties around the country form parent academies to provide parents, families and the community with the necessary tools and skills to support students academically, socially, and emotionally, while building a cornerstone to a healthier and safe community. Since COVID, many schools are continuing their efforts virtually providing resources and tips to help parents and caregivers adjust to online learning. In the coming year, the Chamber could provide guest online readers to engage students.

**Beyond third grade reading scores is advocating for programs that will raise the local graduation rate to state and national standards through mentorship programs.**

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6 Office of Children & Families, City of Philadelphia  
7 SMART Reading
FIGURE 10: HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION & DROP OUT RATES ALONG WITH ABSENTEEISM (18-19)⁸

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School District (2018-2019)</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Graduation Rate</th>
<th>Dropout Rate</th>
<th>Chronic Absenteeism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi Overall</td>
<td></td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleveland School District</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>85.9%</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
<td>21.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Bolivar Consolidated School District</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>80.0%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>15.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Bolivar Consolidated School District</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>76.4%</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>12.31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunflower County Consolidate School District</td>
<td>311</td>
<td>74.3%</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
<td>15.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vicksburg-Warren County School District</td>
<td>701</td>
<td>72.2%</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
<td>21.81%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

High school graduation rates are an important indicator of a community’s talent pipeline. The nation’s current graduation rate is 88% and the state is 84%. For Bolivar and Cleveland school districts, the goal should be to meet or exceed the national rate. With a strong membership database, the Chamber should facilitate with the school district a high-school mentorship program.

Research has noted that mentor programs help reduce absenteeism. Students who meet regularly with their mentors are 52% less likely than their peers to skip a day of school and 37% less likely to skip a class.⁹ In addition, positive mentoring relationships can support youth career development. A mentor program can allow young people to explore various career options, develop their skills, and stay engaged academically as they prepare for a career without the more rigorous standards of internship or apprenticeship programs.

According to the nonprofit, Mentor, “Mentoring can be a critical component of successfully supporting youth career engagement and workforce development in three important ways: improving youth’s employability by building the necessary skills and work experiences that allow youth to succeed in a job and advance in a career path; facilitating continued academic engagement and achievement; and supporting youth in the development of noncognitive skills necessary for successful employment.”

Beyond supporting students, mentor programs support business. Mentoring is the number one form of skills-based volunteering, according to a recent report by A Billion + Change, a Points of Light Foundation initiative. The companies in one study cited the numerous benefits of mentoring from a business perspective:

- Mentoring helps foster employee engagement, retention, and recruiting efforts.
- Mentoring enables companies to cultivate and develop the future workforce.
- Mentoring supports vibrant communities, which includes viable customers.

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⁸ Mississippi Department of Education
⁹ Public/Private Ventures Study of Big Brothers Big Sisters
Utilizing existing best practices and national models, the Chamber should consider developing a high school mentorship program that not only will help foster improved graduation rates but also add value to the talent pipeline within the community.

**Best Practice: Fort Scott Kansas Area Chamber of Commerce Mentor Program**

Chamber mentors serve as a source of knowledge to enhance the student’s opportunity for personal development, workforce exploration and to prepare them to be career or advanced education ready upon graduation. The goal of the program is to help the students find a path to success as well as develop a funnel of employees for local employers by exposing students to local career opportunities available both now and after college. The program offers a monthly group activity, speaker or tour, as well as one-on-one meetings with the student-mentor matches to talk about personal goals, a list of suggested topics or other issues the student would like to discuss.

**TACTIC // Building on existing industry retention and expansion efforts, the Chamber should host an annual workforce summit to hear from existing employers.** *(Implement, Mid-Term)*

The Chamber should also invite workforce and education officials to not only participate in the conversation but also to listen along with economic development staff to identify future partnerships and efforts. The summit would have three top goals:

1. Provide a clear overview of the county’s current economy and projected workforce trends to facilitate a candid conversation regarding the county’s workforce and talent opportunities and challenges.
2. Gain insight from business, education and workforce leaders through a facilitated conversation; share a summary of insights and ideas from the meeting with participants.
3. Use information to inform future initiatives as appropriate.

**TACTIC // Improve internal communications efforts** *(Implement, Short-Term)*

With new leadership and a new strategic plan, the Chamber will need to harness the realm of influence and the intellectual capital of local stakeholders to effectively communicate the benefits of the organization and the county’s assets for success.

Understanding the importance of a solid communications presence in positioning the county, the Chamber should work with economic development communications experts to hone messaging for collateral and the continued development of the website. While the website contains the baseline of information about the county, there is room for additional positioning and updated data for more specific audience perspectives.

Clear, well-constructed messages help people break through information overload and choose among many different sources of information. The goal of the of the communications messaging is

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10 Fort Scott Area Chamber of Commerce
to shape opinion and motivate behavior. It is based on principles of effective communication and persuasion:

• Opinion is often shaped by a relatively small number of opinion leaders – those who are knowledgeable, influential and articulate.
• A message is more believable if the source is credible. The Chamber and its surrogates must deliver its messages honestly, clearly and from a position of expertise.
• Messages are most persuasive when they are simple, consistent and aligned with the audiences’ needs, concerns and interests – as well as repeated over time using multiple means of delivery.

Using these principles, the Chamber should continue to build foundational materials and customize the messages to specific internal audiences (board members, local officials, business leaders, investors, taxpayers, media) and external audiences (executives/business decision-makers, site selectors, location advisors, corporate real estate/tax professionals, existing industry).

• Create and communicate an annual communications plan based on the goals, strategies and tactics outlined.
• Communicate the Chamber’s success and initiatives as they happen to board, investors and public.
• Develop value proposition messaging for targeting new investors and increase giving of current members.
• Coordinate with existing industry, business leadership, elected officials, utilities, workforce and educational institutions to promote the area’s competitiveness utilizing testimonials and fact sheets.
• Create internal messaging regarding the organization’s purpose. Use the messaging to educate and create awareness about the value of the Chamber’s efforts on behalf of the county.
• Provide speaking points to board of directors, extended sales team and others as appropriate regarding the importance of competitive economic development.

TACTIC // Enhance external marketing efforts (Implement, Mid-Term)

The Chamber should take the lead in being the voice for Bolivar County and implement a formal marketing program with focused outreach to target industries for business recruitment; to existing to encourage business expansion; promote the area for business formation; and develop a cohesive approach for tourism and the creative economy.

Reassessing and pinpointing attributes on location opportunities best suited for today’s economy will increase the community’s competitiveness. A distinct part of a plan should include improving the marketing of the county’s available sites and buildings, including sales and promotional tools focused on the benefits of targeted industries. It is important to note that while sites and buildings are listed on the Mississippi Development Authority (MDA) and utility site databases, tools such as utility, flood and topography maps along with site flyers and drone footage would greatly increase marketing efforts through these databases.
Part of any marketing strategy includes developing the county’s elevator pitch. **Defining Bolivar County’s competitive advantage expresses to the customer what sets a community apart from the competition.** During the stakeholder interview process, when asked what the area’s competitive advantages are, typical answers included: *we have great people, the quality of life here is good, we are centrally located*... Although the answer might be accurate, taking those answers to another level will help the community develop its unique factors. Examples include specialized programs offered at Delta State University, customized training offered through the Mississippi Delta Community College or assets in an existing building, such as the insulated metal panels in the former Tyson Foods location.

**Similar to developing the community’s pitch, it is important for Bolivar County to embrace and develop a regional approach to marketing its economic development and tourism assets.** Bolivar County should take an in-depth look at the commuting patterns (Fig 6) to determine the inflow and outflow of workers and what measures could be taken to retain more talent. Also, it is important to understand what the community embraces and what the Chamber should sell as assets in neighboring communities when developing the marketing messages.

Using these principals, the Chamber should facilitate objectives such as business formation strategies, supporting creative economy and tourism objectives that lead to a cohesive marketing effort by:

* • Conducting outreach to business decision makers and influencers (site selectors/location advisors).
* • Upgrading existing marketing and communication tools internally and through partner websites (MDA, Entergy and Cooperative Energy site and building databases).
* • Leveraging partner marketing programs and tools to co-promote the region whenever possible.

**TACTIC // Develop Economic Development Metrics for Success (Implement, Short-Term)**

Often, economic development organizations are judged by the number of project wins or announcements made during a year. However, those in economic development understand there is much more being done behind the scenes that is critical to the organization’s ability to recruit successfully. The challenge is to balance measures that point to the effectiveness of the organization with those other metrics that provide context to the current economic health of the community.

**Many factors will be essential to the success of the organization. The following factors will also determine the long-term value to the county and should be shared with internal and external stakeholders:**

**PROGRAM METRICS**

* • **Awareness:** Consider conducting a survey or outreach on how familiar constituents are with what the organization does and what is the central mission. The first-year survey will establish a baseline. From that, set realistic goals to increase the baseline awareness with annual surveys. Additional awareness can be measured by an increase in key audiences, event attendance, promotional email open rates, etc.
• **Advocacy**: The Chamber should serve as an advocate for business-friendly policies at the local level. This should be measured by utilizing numbers related to outreach to local elected officials as well as their staff. Total consultations and meetings would be the measured number.

• **Business Development Impressions**: This is considered as unique opportunities for leads. The organization should not be judged solely on jobs and investment, but rather how many opportunities are being generated. This should not be limited to just specific leads generated by the Chamber. The Mississippi Development Authority as well as utility partners bring opportunities and leads to the county based on the ability of staff to develop relationships and their comfort with professionalism and ability to deliver by the Chamber. Metrics could include RFPs, site visits, active projects, etc.

• **Fundraising**: With new leadership there will be a desire to increase the level of funding from private investors. Consider metrics that measure not only the number of investors, but also the amount contributed as well as retention of current investors.

• **Original Lead Generation**: As there are no guarantees given the many external factors that play a role in the number, it is important not set expectations too high. VisionFirst recommends this metric as a stretch goal that is aspirational in nature and not one that staff will be penalized for not meeting. In addition, tracking the origin of all leads will also provide a tool for understanding where to adjust efforts of ongoing work.

• **Marketing Effectiveness**: With new leadership and a new strategic plan, the Chamber will likely expand its marketing and communications efforts. It is essential to set baseline measures to accurately demonstrate the effectiveness of these changes. Consider how many unique and new visits to the site, time spent on the site, downloads, bounce rates and search engine optimization referrals. If specific digital campaigns are launched, measure those separately.

It will be important to develop percentage metrics to go along with the measures that are realistic. The goal is to measure these elements along with the creation of jobs and investment to paint a clearer picture of how well the organization is representing Bolivar County.

**OVERALL ECONOMIC HEALTH METRICS**

- Workforce
- Total Employment
- Unemployed
- Participation Rate of Workforce
- New business startups
- Manufacturing Expansions (jobs, payroll and private capital investment)
- Manufacturing New Businesses (jobs, payroll and private capital investment)
Moving Forward »

Over the years, VisionFirst Advisors has been able to quantify the importance of optimizing the value of community assets, whether natural like the Mississippi River or man-made like The GRAMMY museum, to create economic wealth. Successful communities find ways to utilize each of their assets as part of a holistic economic development strategy.

All too often, we hear, “If only we had a four-year university, if only we had a river port, if only we had a major tourist attraction.” Cleveland and Bolivar County have an abundance of assets that when aligned with strategy can provide a pathway to prosperity.

To do so, it will take a reset of the Chamber’s organization and a collaborative approach to implementation of the plan. Leadership matters. That is why it is important to find the right leadership and skill set to advance this new strategic initiative.

People are excited about changing the economic trajectory of the region and building a new future. Success of this plan will be greatly increased by embracing a spirit of engagement during implementation and communicating progress. There is no doubt that Cleveland and Bolivar County can become a center of commerce for not only the region, but the entire state of Mississippi.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” Margaret Mead