



# GREATER VIDALIA® WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY 2021

*Let's Get to Work Greater Vidalia®!*



**Toombs County**  
development authority



Carl Vinson  
Institute of Government  
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

# Letter from Strategy Leader

Dear Greater Vidalia® Community Stakeholders,

I'm excited to share the Greater Vidalia® Workforce Development Strategy with you for review. Workforce development is a top issue for the future success of our community and region and is something that impacts every aspect of our community, including workers, families, employers, prospective businesses, and educational institutions. Over the past year, your Toombs County Development Authority has taken positive steps to better understand our community's workforce needs and develop a tangible plan. This work was led by a steering committee composed of a wide variety of community members. The committee used data, stakeholder input, and a review of best practices to develop a plan that we can implement and that will quickly make an impact. I would also like to acknowledge our community sponsors who helped make this work possible: Chicken of the Sea, DOT Foods, Georgia Power, Meadows Health, Southern Nuclear, Trane, and the Toombs County Development Authority

Greater Vidalia® is a future-focused rural community. We have been blessed with a strong existing industry base, recent economic development success, and numerous workforce development and education assets. I truly believe we are well positioned for more success in the coming years on several fronts. This plan will help us leverage our strong foundation and assets and prepare ourselves for more positive economic growth and success. We cannot successfully implement this workforce development strategy without your help. It will take all community stakeholders getting involved and staying involved for us to create the most community benefit. I invite you to join us as a partner in this Greater Vidalia® Workforce Development Strategy effort.

Let's Get to Work Greater Vidalia®!



**Michele Johnson**  
Executive Director  
Toombs County Development Authority

# Table of Contents

- 1 Project Overview
- 2 The Case for Workforce Development--Economic, Education, and Demographic Data
- 3 Great Vidalia® Workforce Strategy Values, Vision and Priorities
- 4 Priority 1: Greater Vidalia® Employment Fair
- 5 Priority 2: Integrate This Girl Can into After School Programming
- 6 Priority 3: Launch the Connect Greater Vidalia® Teacher Externship Program
- 7 Priority 4: Fully Implement YouScience in the Greater Vidalia® Region
- 8 Workforce Strategy Scorecard
- 9 Conclusion and Next Steps

Thank you to the project sponsors: Chicken of the Sea, DOT Foods, Georgia Power, Meadows Health, Southern Nuclear, Trane, and the Toombs County Development Authority

Project facilitation, documentation, data analysis, and stakeholder engagement provided by Greg Wilson, Rebecca McIver, Kira Crowe, and Jan Coyne of the University of Georgia's Carl Vinson Institute of Government. Editing by Karen DeVivo. Project management provided by Michele Johnson and Ann Owens of the Toombs County Development Authority.

# Project Overview

The Toombs County Development Authority and Greater Vidalia® Chamber of Commerce partnered with the Carl Vinson Institute of Government to develop a community wide workforce development plan. This process involved a number of stakeholders from across the community through a variety of input activities. Throughout the spring of 2021, the Institute of Government conducted stakeholder interviews, three community visits, and a number of listening sessions.

## Community Visits

Three community visits in March, April, and May 2021 to visit employers, engage with educational partners, and participate in steering committee meetings

## Stakeholder Interviews

Over 20 individuals from business, education, government, and community organizations

## Listening Sessions

Additional stakeholder feedback was gathered through listening sessions with students (STC and SECCA), a young professionals gathering, and additional employer listening sessions (small business and agriculture)

In addition to collecting all of this feedback, the Institute of Government facilitated three steering committee meetings. These meetings were designed to (1) kick off the project, orient the group to the process, and share data and feedback; (2) conduct a needs assessment and environmental scan; and (3) determine a Greater Vidalia® vision, analyze results, and develop the plan. This work would not have been possible without the work and commitment of a diverse steering committee. Members of the steering committee are listed below:

- Melissa Bruce
- Wendell Dixon
- Dr. Barry Dotson
- Dr. Steven Echols
- Debbie Evans
- Greg Hudgins
- Clint E. Hutcheson
- Michael Johnson
- Michele Johnson
- Andy Kimbell
- Willis D. NeSmith, Jr.
- James Nixon
- Ann Owens
- Henry Price
- Stacy Randall
- Greg Riekhof
- Doug P. Roper, III
- David Sikes
- Shelly Smith
- Tim Smith
- Alan Thigpen
- Tim Truxel
- Barry Waller
- Sara Waters
- Dr. Garrett Wilcox
- Paige Williamson

# THE CASE FOR WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

## Economic, Education, and Demographic Data

Workforce development has been and will continue to be a key part of long-term community success and growth. Area Development Magazine, an economic development site selection publication, has consistently ranked talent availability and labor cost as two of the top factors for economic development site selection locations. But, workforce development efforts do not just benefit new companies, they can have a positive impact on all aspects of the community. Investment in workforce development can help existing employers retain their employees and consider expansion opportunities. It helps the local schools and colleges by providing students with new experiences and connections to work. It can also provide opportunities to help adults in the community who are looking to connect with the labor market or advance their careers.

So why is workforce development important for the Greater Vidalia® area? There are several reasons, including its status as a regional hub, its robust educational pipeline, its strong industrial base, and its progressive community.



### Regional hub

First and foremost, Vidalia and Toombs County serve as a hub for many surrounding rural communities. According to the US Census Bureau, over 50% of Toombs County workers, or about 6,000 people, commute in from other counties each day. A number of employer stakeholders shared that they have employees commuting from over 20 counties. It is not uncommon for people to drive an hour or more in this part of the state for a good job. The success and health of the workforce and economy in Toombs County impacts the larger region.



### Strong Industrial Base

Many international and local companies call Toombs County home. Between 2011 and 2020, nearly 1,000 new jobs were created in the county, which is about an 8% growth rate. This rate is higher than in most surrounding counties. The outlook for Toombs County in the next 10 years will vary by occupation and industry, but data and employer feedback suggest that overall the area will continue to see positive growth.



### Progressive Community

Toombs County has long had a focus on the future and continuous improvement. The workforce development strategy and the Vibrant Communities initiative are new examples of this mindset. Workforce development and building a more vibrant community go hand-in-hand with attracting and retaining talent in the community. Many parts of Georgia outside of Metro Atlanta, larger hub communities, and the coast are expected to see population decline in the next 20 years. However, initiatives like these can slow or reverse these trends if communities find ways to encourage youth to stay in the area after graduation and attract new talent to the region. While this workforce strategy will tackle only part of this issue, the combination of the Vibrant Communities work and other community conversations and efforts will ultimately set Greater Vidalia® up for more long-term success.



### Robust Educational Pipeline

Toombs County is fortunate to have several high-quality educational institutions in the community including two school districts, Toombs County and Vidalia City, and Southeastern Technical College (STC). These organizations collaborate with two neighboring school districts to operate the Southeastern Early College and Career Academy (SECCA). The two school systems, SECCA, and STC offer many robust educational programs that can prepare students to go into many regional high-demand careers. Continuing to invest in these programs and partnerships will only continue to strengthen the region's workforce pipeline.



# Greater Vidalia® Workforce Development Strategy

## VISION, VALUES, AND PRIORITIES

The steering committee was charged with identifying values to guide the workforce development strategic planning process. With those values in mind, as well as the data and community feedback that was shared, the group established a vision for the future of workforce development in the Greater Vidalia® region. From this the steering committee members developed several short-term (1–2 years) priority areas that they determined would move the community forward on workforce development and ultimately work to bring the vision to fruition.

### VISION

*The Greater Vidalia® area will be a leader in workforce development, enabling regional businesses and industries to thrive and the community to be a sweet place to live, work, and play.*

### VALUES

- Collaborative
- Positive
- Trust
- Strategic but realistic and sustainable
- Open-minded
- Honest
- Measurable
- Acknowledge all work and talent for the greater good of the community

**Priority 1**  
Hold a  
Greater Vidalia®  
Employment Fair

**Priority 2**  
Integrate This  
Girl Can into  
Afterschool  
Programming

**Priority 3**  
Launch the  
Connect Greater  
Vidalia® Teacher  
Externship

**Priority 4**  
Fully Implement  
YouScience in the  
Greater Vidalia®  
Region





PRIORITY 1

# Greater Vidalia® Employment Fair

**Title:** Employment Fair

**Goal:** Plan and execute a large-scale community employment fair within 45 days to help individuals set to lose expanded unemployment insurance benefits and fill vacant positions with employers in the Greater Vidalia® region.

**Lead:** Barry Dotson, STC

**Partners:** All local business and industry partners, WorkSource Heart of Georgia/Job Training Unlimited, Greater Vidalia® Chamber, Georgia Department of Labor, education partners, civic clubs, faith-based organizations

**Timeline:** Mid-June

**Funding:** STC to host, so no cost for space

**Obstacles:** Marketing; job seeker attendance

## STEPS

1. Devise creative, outside-of-the-box ideas for recruitment.
2. Check the community calendar and set a date for the fair.
3. Prepare registration forms.
4. Start promoting the event.
5. Host the event.







## PRIORITY 2

# Integrate This Girl Can into Afterschool Programming

**Title:** This Girl Can Afterschool Programming

**Goal:** Expose young students to STEM and nontraditional careers through the This Girl Can program, a targeted afterschool program that can help build interest and confidence to pursue these career opportunities in the future.

**Lead:** Paige Williamson, Family Connections

**Partners:** SECCA, Vidalia City Schools, Toombs County Schools, STC, Georgia Power, Southern Nuclear, Altamaha EMC, other local STEM employers.

**Timeline:** Pilot during 2021–2022 school year

**Funding:** One year of funding from Vidalia City Schools and Toombs County Schools

**Obstacles:** Instructor recruitment; student interest; funding year 2 and beyond

### STEPS

1. Plan the curriculum.
2. Recruit students and instructors (July 2021).
3. Conduct a parent orientation session (August 2021)
4. Hold ongoing afterschool programming and events throughout the 2021–2022 school year.
5. Ask for feedback on the pilot experience.
6. Seek funding for year two and beyond.







PRIORITY 3

# Launch the Connect Greater<sup>®</sup> Vidalia Teacher Externship Program

**Title:** Connect Greater Vidalia<sup>®</sup> Teacher Externship Program

**Goal:** Provide an opportunity to connect educators and local employers. Teacher externships allow teachers to experience local industries hands-on and local companies to highlight what they do and what skills they are seeking in their employees. Such a partnership can increase awareness and communication between these two key groups of workforce stakeholders.

**Lead:** Barry Dotson, STC

**Partners:** Greater Vidalia<sup>®</sup> Chamber, Vidalia City Schools, Toombs County Schools, Montgomery County Schools, SECCA, Robert Toombs Christian Academy, Vidalia Heritage Academy, Southeastern Technical College, Local Companies

**Timeline:** Summer 2022

**Funding:** Vidalia City Schools, Toombs County Schools, Montgomery County Schools, local companies, Southeastern Technical College (in-kind), Brewton Parker College

**Obstacles:** Funding; industry commitment; finding a time for all partners

## STEPS

1. Hold an initial stakeholder planning meeting in summer/early fall 2021.
2. Connect with other communities that have similar programs (e.g., Connect Newton).
3. Recruit companies to host teacher externs.
4. Establish a summer 2022 program date.
5. Create, promote, and collect teacher applications.
6. The summer externship is held at the host company.
7. Garner feedback on the experience from both teachers and employers.
8. Ensure teachers take lessons back to the classroom.





## PRIORITY 4

# Fully Implement YouScience in the Greater Vidalia® Region

**Title:** YouScience Snapshot Implementation in Middle Schools

**Goal:** YouScience is an online tool that helps students identify their aptitudes and interests. This goal seeks to fully implement the various YouScience tools in 6th grade, 8th grade, and high school and then work to provide counseling and career coaching to students after completion.

**Lead:** Shelly Smith, SECCA

**Partners:** Middle and high school staff; Leadership Toombs; civic organizations; faith community; parents; Coastal Plains Charter High School

**Timeline:** 2021–2022 School Year

**Funding:** Assessment is funded by the Georgia Department of Education; additional local/state funds may be needed for outreach and events

**Obstacles:** Time commitment; need for counselor/mentors to interpret results; student motivation to take assessment; parents

### STEPS

1. Get the word out about the YouScience Snapshot in middle schools.
2. Develop a phase-in schedule.
3. Administer the assessment in middle schools during the spring semester of 2022.
4. Include partners in interpreting student results.
5. Hold events to encourage additional learning and connections with pathways/ industries.



# Workforce Strategy Scorecard

To help foster accountability and document the impact of strategy implementation, the following scorecard measures were developed. The measures were selected to closely align with the four priority areas identified in the strategy.

Measure	What It Captures?	What It Demonstrates?
<b>Toombs County unemployment rate</b>	The number of Toombs County residents actively looking for work divided by the total civilian labor force	The number of individuals actively looking for work; may provide insights into the available labor force pool
<b>Toombs County prime age labor force participation rate</b>	The Toombs County civilian labor force ages 25–54 divided by the total civilian noninstitutional population ages 25–54	Helps capture what percentage of the potential workers are engaged in work
<b># of job seekers participating in employment fair</b>	The number of job seekers that participate in various employment fairs	The pool of potential workers seeking either employment or career advance opportunities
<b># of employers participating in employment fair</b>	The number of employers that participate (i.e., host a booth) in various employment fairs	The potential level of hiring challenges from employers (i.e., greater participation may indicate more hiring difficulties)
<b># of students participating in career-focused afterschool programming</b>	The number of students participating in career-focused workshops hosted by the Family Connections afterschool program	Student interest in learning about in-demand career opportunities available in the regional economy
<b># of teachers participating in teacher externship</b>	The number of teachers completing the teacher externship program	Interest in gaining a greater understanding of employment opportunities and the regional economy
<b># of employers participating in teacher externship</b>	The number of employers hosting teacher externship program participants	Employer interest in helping to influence education and workforce development practices

# Conclusion and Next Steps

To ensure the success of the Greater Vidalia® Workforce Development Strategy and ultimately strengthen the local workforce, the partnership, investment, and action must continue. The successful implementation of this strategy will have noticeable impacts on the region's existing workforce and will also work to build a stronger future talent pipeline. This Greater Vidalia® Workforce Development Strategy was a team effort involving a number of stakeholders, supporters, and advisors.

Implementation of the Great Vidalia® Workforce Development Strategy is already well under way. It will be important to keep up the momentum, adapt to the changing labor market, and stay committed over the long term. The strategies developed during this process were envisioned to be relatively short term, able to be completed in one to two years, to focus energy on solving the largest current needs and build a stronger partnership for future work. Upon completion of the initial priority areas, the Toombs County Development Authority is committed to working with community stakeholders to re-evaluate workforce needs and map out additional strategies to implement.