

SUMTER COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

November 2012



SUMTER COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN
UNIVERSITY CENTER FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Funded by the Alabama Department for Economic and Community Affairs through a US Housing and Urban Development Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), the Sumter County Comprehensive Plan is a collaboration between the Sumter County Commission, the Alabama Tombigbee Regional Commission and the local civic leaders and citizens who participated in the planning process.

To support the comprehensive planning process, the Sumter County Chamber of Commerce, the University of West Alabama Center for Business and Economic Services and the University of Alabama Center for Economic Development, held public meetings in communities throughout Sumter County. Citizen leaders provided their ideas, suggestions and comments about issues and opportunities facing the county.

This comprehensive plan provides goals, strategies and recommendations for a wide range of opportunities and can be used as a guidebook to support community and economic development throughout Sumter County.

This plan should be treated as a living document, and as goals are completed, the plan should be updated to create new goals that reflect shared priorities for Sumter County.

County Commission:

Drucilla Russ-Jackson, District One
Marcus Campbell, District Two
Ben Walker, District Three
Tommie Armistead, District Four
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Lucinda Cockrell, County Administrator



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sumter County is at a crossroads. It is in a position to embrace opportunities due to its advantageous location on Interstate 20/59 between the two metropolitan areas of Meridian, MS and Tuscaloosa, AL, and the county's many assets: the Tombigbee River, the University of West Alabama, rail lines (both active and de-commissioned), and its historic and natural resource heritage.

In order to progress and achieve greater success, the county, its communities, organizations and citizens, must organize resources and work together. This comprehensive plan provides goals, strategies and recommendations for a wide range of issues, including infrastructure, economic development, education and workforce development, retail and commercial development, housing, tourism and community development. Every organization and every citizen can find a portion of this plan that applies to their individual goals and priorities.

The recommendations in this plan can guide the Sumter County Commission, the Sumter County Chamber of Commerce, the Sumter County School System and the various Towns and unincorporated communities, churches and non-profit organizations to establish a new direction for prosperity.

Infrastructure

The Sumter County Commission and Sumter County communities must make a commitment to continuously improve infrastructure to support business development and growth. Sumter County has successfully accessed funding to provide water and sewer services throughout the county. On-going collaboration can result in improvements in infrastructure to support business and industrial development, which results in job creation and an improved economy.

Economic Development

Sumter County needs to create a countywide economic development team in order to proactively develop business opportunities. Currently, the county has nine individual organizations involved in economic development. This situation creates confusion for potential investors located outside the county. One county level, five to seven member, authority can represent the county and the smaller communities and towns. The City of Livingston has an established entity that supports its three industrial parks; this organization compliments and does not compete with a county level organization.

Education/Workforce Development

Sumter County needs to utilize the leadership and resources of the University of West Alabama to organize the various county educational resources in order to create a seamless workforce development delivery system. UWA's experience and success in securing resources to provide training and support to area industries results in the county being a more competitive location for business and industry.

Healthcare

Sumter County needs to showcase and market its healthcare assets internally to insure that local residents and companies support these facilities as the provider of choice. Counties throughout the Black Belt are losing hospitals and healthcare facilities and services. Sumter County has the opposite occurring. Insuring the sustainability of these profit and non-profit entities will insure that Sumter County continues to attract companies and residents.

Housing

Sumter County should develop public and private partnerships to improve the housing stock within the county. Partners focused on improving the housing conditions for poorer citizens and a variety of housing for families moving into the county, result in a better quality for all.

Retail and Commercial Development/Tourism Development

The Sumter County Chamber of Commerce is well positioned to take responsibility of marketing the county for both retail recruitment and tourism. Working with the governments and existing businesses within the county, the Chamber has the knowledge and the contacts to represent Sumter's interests.

Community Development

Sumter County is made up of many small towns and communities. All communities should organize a formal Community Development Committee that focuses on an annual action plan, to keep each community moving forward. Several organizations within the region and state are available to assist individual Sumter County communities to build their capacity (Alabama Cooperative Extension, Black Belt Foundation, Habitat, Faith Based organizations, and the universities).

SUMTER COUNTY History and Background

Sumter County was formed by the Alabama legislature on December 18, 1832, from former Choctaw Indian lands located in west-central Alabama which were ceded to the United States in the Choctaw Treaty of 1830, also known as the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, and was named in honor of General Thomas Sumter of South Carolina, a Revolutionary War hero. In 1832, Livingston became the first and only county seat. The first courthouse was built of logs in 1833 and a second framed courthouse was built in 1839 on the same site and burned in 1901. In 1902, the third and present courthouse was built on the same site – a domed, brick structure that has undergone several renovations yet is still in use today.

The earliest settlers came to the county from the Carolinas, Georgia, Tennessee, and Virginia. Some of the first towns included Gaston, Gainesville, Paynesville, Bluffport, Warsaw, Tompkinsville, and Sumterville, of which half are now only county roads. Because of Sumter County's diverse and rich history, as the Choctaw Indians, French, British, and Spanish have all settled or inhabited parts of the county, it is home to approximately 128 historical markers, sites, homes, and churches.

Located in the Alabama Black Belt, Sumter County has a rich culture by which many important people, historical events, and natural attractions exist, such as one of the oldest covered bridges. It was the birthplace of people such as Ruby Pickens Tartt who helped to collect African American narratives and local musical traditions; Vera Hall Ward, a blues singer whom Tartt helped bring to fame; and home to Julia S. Tutwiler, a pioneer advocate of women's education, prison reform, and women's rights as well as the author of Alabama's state song.

Sumter County is governed by an elected six-member commission and includes the incorporated cities of Livingston and York and the incorporated towns of Cuba, Emelle, Gainesville, and Geiger. The towns that makeup Sumter County provide comfortable living to all that reside there. Every citizen can live easy under the safe and stable lifestyle Sumter County has to offer. The county is conveniently located approximately 20 miles from the Alabama/Mississippi border near larger metropolitan areas such as Meridian, Mississippi; Tuscaloosa, Alabama; Birmingham, Alabama; Memphis, Tennessee; and Atlanta, Georgia.

SUMTER COUNTY Current Conditions

Demographic Data

Sumter County's population has been decreasing gradually during the past ten years. Some of this decrease is due to labor age residents moving to urban areas where jobs are more abundant.

Population of Sumter County			
	2000	2010	Change
Total	14,772	13,763	-1,009

The labor force has remained stable, and the unemployment rate reflects the economic conditions that the region, the state and the nation has faced during the past two years.

Labor Force September 2012	
Total Labor Force	4,549
Number Employed	4,016
Number Unemployed	533
Percentage of Labor Force unemployed	11.7%
Mean Travel Time to Work (2010)	23.8 Minutes

Per Capita Income and Median Household Income have increased slightly from the previous few years; yet, the percentage of persons living below poverty indicates that Sumter County is one of the poorest (Black Belt) counties in the state of Alabama.

Income, 2010	
Per Capita Income	\$24,344
Median Household Income	\$25,586
Number of Households	5,629
Persons per Household	2.32
Persons Below Poverty	31.3%

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INFRASTRUCTURE

Sumter County has the entire basic infrastructure in place for existing business and industry and future industrial growth.

Water and Sewer: The Sumter County Sewer Authority, Inc. (SCSA) was created in March 2007 by the Sumter County Commission and charged with the responsibility for securing funds for the purpose of constructing a sewer system to serve at least 260 customers in the towns of Emelle, Gainesville, and Geiger, AL as well as residents located along highways 17, 39, and 116 connecting the three towns. The Authority procured a US Department of Agriculture grant of \$1,985,000 and a USDA 40-year low interest loan of \$930,000. It also obtained total grants of \$400,000 from other sources to upgrade the Wendy Hills lagoon located near Gainesville. The towns received two additional grants from ADECA totaling \$838,000 for the purpose of setting up low and moderate income families within the three towns. The construction phase was completed on May 12, 2012, and their charge now is to operate the system with revenues provided by the 293 customers the system will eventually serve. The Authority is governed by a board of seven officers, appointed by the Sumter County Commission, including a President/CEO, a Vice President, and a Secretary/Treasurer.

Airports: The closest airports with commercial air service are Key Field Airport in Meridian, Mississippi, which has four daily flights, two carriers and is approximately 32 miles away, and Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport in Birmingham, Alabama, which has 120 daily flights, seven major carriers and is about 114 miles away. The closest general service airport is the Demopolis Municipal Airport located on Highway 80 just outside of Demopolis, Alabama.

Roads and Bridges: Interstate 20/59 bisects the county with exits at Livingston, York, and Cuba. There are also three major U.S. highways and two state highways; however, the only four-lane highway is U.S. Highway 80. The only slated highway project is the completion of four-lanes of U.S. Highway 80 from the Campbell Road-Pine Street intersection to the Highway 11-Highway 80 intersection in Cuba. There are no current projects to replace any of the highway or county road bridges.

Waterways: The Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway acts as the county line on the east side of Sumter County. There is one major port at Epes and three access points at Epes, Belmont, and Panola. It is an excellent resource for industrial development and expansion and outdoor recreational opportunities.

Information Technology/Broadband: Sumter County is currently served by MediaCom for cable and internet services and DirectTV and Dish for satellite services.

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ECONOMIC/ INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT

Sumter County is known for its plentiful farm land and timber, and has plenty of available acreage for economic/industrial development. The current inventory of industrial property includes five industrial parks, with three of the parks within the city limits of Livingston. All of the industrial parks have the major utilities, including power, gas, water, and sewage, readily available. The parks are located on or near a major highway and within a few miles of Interstate 20/59. The Port Epes Industrial Park, located in Epes, also has mainline rail service and a barge slip off the Ten-Tom Waterway. All five of the parks have available acreage for development and three of them have vacant and available warehouses or commercial buildings.

The largest employers in the county by sector are education (services), manufacturing, and healthcare, and are listed in the table below.

Major Employers in Sumter County (Manufacturing and Non-Manufacturing)

Name	Product	Number of Employees
The University of West Alabama	Higher Education	340
Sumter County School System	Secondary Education	333
Mannington Wood Floors	Wood Flooring	150
Prystup Packaging Products, LLC	Folding Cartons	141
Sumter Health & Rehab	Assisted Living/Long Term Care	140
Chemical Waste Management	Toxic Waste Landfill	86
Big River Industries	Aggregate/Construction Materials	76
Hill Hospital	Healthcare	58
Rock-Tenn	Corrugated Boxes	50
Southwest Paper	Paper Products	42
<i>Source: Local economic development contacts</i>		

The education sector, the leading employer, has approximately 673 employees followed by the manufacturing sector with 545 employees, and healthcare with a total of 198 employees.

There are nine entities involved in Economic Development for the county, each with varying levels of responsibility and financial capability. For a county with a population of 13,763 and a labor force of 4,400, it is more rational to have one strong county level economic development authority and the

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existing Livingston entity that manages the three Livingston industrial parks. Smaller towns can still maintain an economic development committee, which would represent the town's interests, and would work with the county level board to support the projects looking to locate within the county.

The ideal authority has five to seven members with members representing the following sectors: financial, legal, business, political, and education. The authority should be structured to provide assistance to businesses expanding or locating within the county. The assistance would range from facilitation, advocacy with the State of Alabama, financial and other incentives, coordination with workforce and other resources, in order to make Sumter County competitive.

An Authority has a broader mandate and capabilities. It is authorized to acquire, own, lease and dispose of properties, and has the legal ability to issue bonds for the purpose of obtaining and constructing facilities.

Economic/Industrial Development Goals, Strategies and Recommendations

Goal: Create an environment that encourages economic development with an emphasis on maintaining and improving existing business, recruiting and development of new business and promoting entrepreneurial opportunities in Sumter County.

Strategies:

- 1) Create a county-level, 5 to 7 member, Economic Development Authority with members drawn from legal, financial, business, education and political sectors.
- 2) Adequately fund the Chamber of Commerce and assign responsibility to the Chamber for marketing industrial properties and facilities, recruitment of retail and commercial businesses and tourism promotion.
- 3) Assign point of contact and marketing responsibility of the industrial parks, available acreage, and available buildings to the Sumter County Chamber of Commerce and the City of Livingston.
- 4) Expand the City of Livingston Economic Development Plan.
- 5) Develop a county wide Business Retention and Recruitment Plan, which would include annual goals and targets and an annual progress evaluation.
- 6) Establish a pilot Small Business Incubator which could start out in the Chamber of Commerce building, providing reasonable lease rates.

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HEALTHCARE

Healthcare is strong and well-positioned in Sumter County, with numerous facilities offering a wide variety of services. These services range from dentistry to hospice services to mental health to assisted living and rehabilitation, to opticians; to physical therapy, orthopedics and athletic training with UWA, and other private physician clinics. Tuscaloosa VA Medical Center sends a mobile clinic to the Livingston Civic Center every Monday from 10 am to 3 pm. Any eligible Veteran living in a rural area can apply for their services and care. Sumter County is also home to the county hospital, Hill Hospital, which offers various in-patient and out-patient services including but not limited to emergency, home health, dietary, clinical laboratory, social, and speech services. The newest healthcare facility, Universal Medical Training Services, just opened its doors in July 2012, and offers such services to Sumter County as a partner in the Alabama Strategic Alliance for Health (SAH) in a five year agreement with the Center for Disease Control (CDC) to reduce the burden of obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. In 2010, the SAH built and sustained activities to promote education and awareness in Sumter County; the Sumter County Health and Wellness Education Center helps to coordinate the activities of healthy living and other activities with the SAH program. In addition, in 2010, there were five quarter mile walking trails established through a healthcare grant program in the county to promote a safe, accessible, and healthy lifestyle, and each site was designated as tobacco-free and advertising-free zones. The walking trails are located in Emelle, Epes, Gainesville, Livingston, and York.

With the support and initiatives of UWA, Sumter County is continually improving and expanding the healthcare services and programs it can provide to its citizens. UWA's Athletic Training Department houses the University of West Alabama Athletic Training and Sports Medicine Center which offers the public physicians from the Andrews Sports Medicine and Orthopedic Center three days per week. The services offered include evaluating high school and collegiate athletic injuries and evaluating orthopedic patients. UWA is also partnering with the City of Livingston and Anderson Regional Medical Center to provide a multi-use Anderson Family Medical Center in Livingston for Sumter County citizens and the surrounding area. Dr. James Robinson and his staff will be providing general family medical services including wellness exams, vaccines, physicals, CLIA-waived testing (strep, mono, flu, STD, urinalysis), pap smears, and occupational medicine, etc. He will also see sports medicine injuries. This state-of-the-art facility will be located on Washington Street next to the National Guard base and will be open Monday through Friday from 8 am to 5 pm; construction will begin on the new facility in January 2013.

Healthcare Goals, Strategies, and Recommendations

Goal: Sustainable comprehensive healthcare system, where for profit and non-profit entities can thrive.

Strategies:

- 1) Encourage collaboration and cross marketing between healthcare providers, in order to keep and attract healthcare services in Sumter County
- 2) Promote and market existing healthcare facilities and services to local businesses, residents and students, in order to increase in-county utilization of local healthcare companies and non-profits
- 3) Hold periodic Health Fairs in order to promote healthy lifestyles and familiarize the public with local resources

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EDUCATION/WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Sumter County, Alabama’s education and workforce development progress is at a crossroads. There are many existing and available assets, including brick and mortar facilities, a diverse and progressive university campus, and a growing postsecondary student population. There are equally many challenges, including a high dropout rate at the secondary level, a declining population countywide, and a distressed and rural economy.

The success of Sumter County vis-à-vis education and workforce development will hinge on the county’s willingness to collaborate and partner in order to maximize existing resources and leverage new ones. The University of West Alabama is poised to take a leadership role in workforce development, both in terms of outreach services provided to the county as well as direct academic and technical training opportunities offered in Livingston. However, for progress to be realized, enhanced cooperation must take place among all stakeholders.

Education in Sumter County:

Sumter County is fortunate to have a comprehensive educational system ranging from Kindergarten through post-secondary education, and the University of West Alabama.

Below is data furnished by the University of Alabama’s Center for Business and Economic Research; this data provides a snapshot of the current status of educational attainment in Sumter County:

Sumter County Educational Attainment in 2006-2010, Population 25 Years and Over

Total	8,731		
High school graduate or higher	6,512	Bachelor’s degree or higher	1,103
High school graduate or higher, rate	75.4%	Bachelor’s degree or higher, rate	12.8%
No schooling completed	141	High school graduate/equivalent	3,475
Nursery to 4th grade	76	Some college, less than 1 year	271
5th and 6th grade	165	Some college, 1+ years, no degree	1,183
7th and 8th grade	548	Associate degree	480
9th grade	228	Bachelor’s degree	643
10th grade	318	Master’s degree	347
11th grade	540	Professional school degree	34
12th grade, no diploma	106	Doctorate degree	79

Source: Center for Business and Economic Research, The University of Alabama and U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2006-2010.

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The Sumter County school system operates five facilities, four K-8 schools and one high school, as detailed below:

School	Grade Level	Enrollment	2012 AYP Status	% Free/Reduced Lunch	% Black	% White	% Other
Kinterbish Junior High	K-8	181	Yes	90%	95%	2%	3%
Livingston Junior High	K-8	598	Yes	94%	94%	3%	3%
North Sumter Junior High	K-8	120	Yes	90%	100%	0%	0%
York West End Junior High	K-8	352	No (pending appeal)	92%	97%	0%	3%
Sumter Central High	9-12	710	No	91%	98%	1%	1%

The Sumter County School System employs 278 persons of which 159 serve in instructional positions and 119 serve in instructional support positions. These employees support instructional programs at five school campuses serving approximately 1,963 students. The Sumter Central High School is a newly constructed, state-of-the-art facility that serves the graduates of all four junior high schools in the county.

According to the Alabama State Department of Education, the Sumter County School System's FY 2011 per pupil expenditure was \$8,734.69, as compared to the statewide average of \$10,371.35.

Below is a matrix containing graduation data in the Sumter County School System since 2000:

Graduation Rates in Sumter County School System		
	Number of Graduates	Percent of Students
2000	165	70.70%
2001	139	68.00%
2002	145	69.80%
2003	165	72.60%
2004	175	80.00%
2005	126	72.60%
2006	145	71.10%
2007	162	72.50%
2008	151	68.20%
2009	122	55.50%
2010	141	61.00%

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In addition to the public school system, Sumter County is also served by a private college preparatory school, Sumter Academy. This school is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools as well as the Alabama Independent School Association. The school serves K-12, and currently enrollment is 202 students, with 27 faculty/staff members. The school graduated 14 seniors in 2012. Sumter Academy's mission is to provide meaningful Instruction in academic studies, expert coaching and guidance in athletic venues, while demonstrating Christian, ethical, and moral conduct, which results in the best possible atmosphere for college preparatory, as well as vocation achievements. The school is located in York, Alabama.

Workforce Training in Sumter County:

The current state of workforce training in Sumter County can be categorized into two categories: secondary and postsecondary.

Secondary

The Sumter County School System operates the Bell-Brown Career Technical Center, which serves the students enrolled in 10th, 11th, and 12th grades. Students enroll in a variety of for-credit courses that include the following areas of study:

- Automotive Technology
- Cosmetology Technology
- Electronics Technology
- Construction Technology
- Healthcare, Science Technology
- Cooperative Education

Selection for the program is competitive, and a limited number of students are chosen to participate each semester. Transportation is provided from the high school to the center free of charge. The purpose of the center is to allow participants to gain entry-level jobs in their trade upon graduation, or to prepare them for admission to a postsecondary technical college program of study.

Postsecondary

The University of West Alabama is located in Livingston. This state university was chartered in 1835 as Livingston Female Academy and State Normal College, a church-related female academy, and admitted its first students in 1839. Today, the University serves 1838 on-campus undergraduate students, 452 on-campus graduate students, and 2968 online students (both graduate and undergraduate). The university offers a broad array of programs of study, and includes a growing international student population.

The University of West Alabama College of Business' Department of Computer Information Systems and Technology offers several technical training programs of study, including Industrial Maintenance and Industrial Technology, housed in the Guy Hunt Technical Education complex on campus.

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The Industrial Maintenance program offers to interested students a two year Associate of Applied Science Degree. The program is student-centered, career-oriented and designed to provide skills and knowledge necessary to meet the general maintenance demands of business, industry, and government agencies. This program is accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and School (SACS).

The Industrial Technology program's mission is to prepare students in the supervision and/or technical areas of industry, business, government, or service agencies. Successful completion of the curriculum will provide a background in liberal arts, natural sciences, mathematics, and business, with skills in the use of machines, tools, and computers, including but not limited to knowledge of industrial design, materials, and processes.

There exists a void in Sumter County, as well as in the surrounding northern Black Belt region counties, for flexible and affordable technical training opportunities. To that end, a major grant proposal to the U.S. Department of Labor was recently submitted, with The University of West Alabama as the lead applicant, and with Shelton State Community College and area business and industries as partners. This proposal, which is currently pending a funding decision, would provide for the establishment of a regional, broad based consortium to address the needs of hundreds of workers who have lost their jobs and hundreds more who are at risk of job loss in one of America's most impoverished areas—Alabama's Black Belt region. The consortium partners include The University of West Alabama, Shelton State Community College, and RockTenn, Inc. The target area served by this grant includes the counties of Greene, Hale, Marengo, Perry, Pickens, and Sumter.

The consortium is mobilized to address this immediate employment need with a comprehensive program of job training and re-training opportunities that will create new pathways to high paying, high quality, and family-sustaining skilled jobs. The challenges of target communities of this project have served as a catalyst for the design of data-driven, evidence based strategies that will effectively support the goals of the U.S. Department of Labor's Community College and Career Training Grants Program and implement short and long term interventions for impacted individuals and families.

The project addresses the four identified priorities of this application with an innovative nine-component project design. Specifically, the project: (1) establishes a unique partnership between The University of West Alabama and Shelton State Community College extending to the design, implementation, and operation of cutting-edge education and career training programs; (2) establishes a new Technical Training and Entrepreneurial Center in Livingston, Alabama where both post-secondary and higher education partners will work together to implement the training programs most in demand by industry—Welding, Machine Tool Technology, Industrial Electronics and Logistical Control, Electricity, and Drafting by providing a number of short and longer term education and career training options, certificates, and diplomas; (3) expands the existing Demopolis Higher Education Center where dual-enrollment high school students receive career education courses, programs, and training to facilitate the movement of these students into meaningful career programs after high school; (4) integrates new aspects of technology-based learning and community training across initiatives and strategies; (5) develops teacher training programs and modules that are replicable; (6) establishes and maintains strong community and industry partnerships to ensure that job training initiatives remain in sync with the needs of local business and industry; (7) utilizes data systems to provide ongoing feedback and evaluation of

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participant and program success; (8) creates technology-based replicable models and strategies for sharing and relating the activities of this project with evidence-based research; (9) creates new levels of integration between career and academic skills based training.

Education/Workforce Development Goals, Strategies, and Recommendations:

Goal: Create a seamless, comprehensive education and workforce delivery system

Strategies:

- 1) Foster a cooperative relationship between the Sumter County Board of Education, UWA, the Sumter County Commission, the economic development organizations, the City of Livingston and private employers in order to improve the Sumter County workforce development system.
- 2) Enlist businesses to provide input for curriculum development in the Career/Technical Education programs.
- 3) Inform students, parents, and the public about opportunities for skills development, job/career counseling, and job placement.
- 4) Hold career fairs on a regular basis, to provide a forum for information exchange and networking.

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HOUSING

Like many rural counties, Sumter County has seen a slight population decrease in recent years. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, Sumter County's population is about 13,700 with the housing unit population around 6,700. Sixty percent of these housing units are owner occupied. These housing units are single-family homes, multi-family units, or manufactured homes. About twenty-percent of these housing units are vacant. These numbers are not true representations of the current housing situation due to the tornado in April 2011. According to the National Weather Service Tornado Database for Alabama 2011, many homes were destroyed or severely damaged and have not been rebuilt or replaced at this time. The census data provided in the tables below provides a snapshot of Sumter County's housing in 2010. More than 100 homes were destroyed in Geiger alone.



Source: TuscaloosaNews

Consequently, this natural disaster shows the importance of affordable housing for residents of communities in Sumter County. Additionally, new residents will look for and expect to find housing that meets their family's needs.

**Housing Units
Sumter County, 2010**

	Number	Percentage
Housing Units	6,711	100
Owner Occupied Housing Units	3,920	58.4
Renter Occupied Housing Units	1,521	22.7
Vacant Housing Units	1,270	18.9

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Housing Units By Year Structure Was Built

	Number	Percentage
Total Housing Units	6,711	100
Housing, Median Year Built	1974	
Housing, Built 1999 or Later	306	4.6
Housing, Built 1990 to 1999	1,224	18.2
Housing, Built 1980 to 1989	999	14.9
Housing, Built 1970 to 1979	1,536	22.9
Housing, Built 1960 to 1969	1,206	17.9
Housing, Built 1950 to 1959	862	12.8
Housing, Built 1940 to 1949	183	2.8
Housing, Built 1939 or Earlier	395	5.9

Seventy-seven percent of the housing stock is over 20 years old, and over 1,400 of these homes were built prior to 1960. Almost forty-percent was built prior to 1970. Unless these housing units were kept in pristine condition, many are in need of structural, plumbing and electrical improvements. Keep in mind, this figure does include the many historical homes which have the opportunity to help generate cultural tourism dollars for the area.

Housing Units by Vacancy Type, Estimated 2010

	Number	Percent
Housing, Vacant Units	1,270	100
Housing, Vacant Units For Rent	204	16.1
Housing, Vacant Units For Sale	48	3.8
Housing, Vacant Units Seasonal	340	26.8
Housing, Vacant Units Vacant Other	637	50.2
Housing, Vacant, Not Occupied	41	3.1

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Census 2010 Housing Units by Units in Structure and Occupancy

	Housing Units	
	Number	Percentage
Total	6,711	
1, Detached	3,706	55.2
1, Attached	172	2.6
2	467	6.9
3 to 4	49	.7
5 to 9	136	2.1
10 to 19	183	2.7
20 to 49	124	1.9
50 or more	44	.6
Mobile Home	1,830	27.3
Other	0	0

Most of the homes (57.8%) in Sumter County are single-family units, followed by manufactured housing at 27.3%. The remainder of the housing units (14.9%) are multi-family units. Median rent is estimated to be \$242. One can correctly make the assumption that many of these manufactured or mobile homes are older and in need of repair or even replacement. Future housing inventory will include additional multi-family/student apartments currently under construction primarily in Livingston to serve the growing student population for the University of West Alabama. In order to address the aging mobile/manufactured housing units, several states have undertaken Mobile/Manufactured Housing Replacement Programs (MHRPs) to help improve the standard of living for its residents. Information from one of the programs can be found at the end of this discussion.

Sumter County Housing Assessment and Opportunities

Major Themes and Associated Issues Identified for Sumter County Housing Needs

1. There is not enough housing affordable to very low-income people.

The gap between incomes and housing costs is growing. People earning low wages or on fixed incomes have limited housing choices. This is due to the growing gap between the incomes of very low-income people and rising housing costs.

- Very low-income people in the county cannot afford adequate rental housing even though it is more affordable than in most other rural and urban markets. Prevailing rents are below the average for rural areas. Even so, most very low-income people (i.e., those with income below 50 percent of area median) cannot afford housing at prevailing rents.
- Overall, the housing stock is somewhat more balanced than in other rural areas, but is also old and unevenly distributed by location and groups served. Consequently, the housing stock is older. This increases the need for housing maintenance and repair, which many very low-income

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homeowners cannot afford. There has been little to no increase in multifamily housing stock during the past decade, so the average age of the rental stock is increasing.

- Low-income families lack access to housing assistance.
- Homeownership is relatively more affordable than in other rural areas. In addition, manufactured homes accounted for nearly half the area's single-family units during the past decade.

2. Special needs housing and support services are inadequate.

Transitional and long-term housing for people with special needs are inadequate. Changes in discharge policies are increasing the need for transitional and permanent housing for people with disabilities leaving hospitals and rehabilitation centers. A growing number of such people are at risk of becoming homeless due to lack of adequate transitional housing options. Quality, affordable, long-term assisted living options with access to support system programs and services are needed for disabled people and seniors.

3. There are barriers to accessing assistance.

Credit and financial management problems hinder homeownership. Many people in need of housing are not knowledgeable about credit requirements for home purchase or rental housing. They are unable to access housing because of problems with work history, debt, credit history and/or references. Credit and financial management counseling are needed to help people qualify for public program assistance and commercial loans.

4. There is a lack of local priority for housing.

There is insufficient local concern for housing needs. Sometimes local governments are reluctant to address housing needs and do not view housing as a priority. While affordable housing may not provide the desired profit margin for local developers, there are companies that build affordable housing located in Tuscaloosa, Montgomery, Huntsville, and Birmingham. Many of these companies build affordable housing in rural communities.

In addition to shortages of affordable housing in the area, older construction and poor housing conditions are a concern. Fewer new homes are built in rural areas compared to urban areas, resulting in increased costs and lower profitability for builders.

5. Seasonal housing provides key advantage for continued growth, including the seasonal housing, retiree, and tourist markets.

Sumter County is home to hunters, retirees, and eco-tourists part of the year. They are part of a growing segment of the new rural American markets. They tend to live in close-knit communities, own a single-family or a mobile home. They may choose to work part of the year in manufacturing, construction, or the retail sector. There is also an ongoing migration of new, young families and new retirees that may live here seasonally while enjoying all the outdoors have to offer in Sumter County.

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Housing Goals, Strategies, and Recommendations

Goal: Improve the housing inventory of Sumter County.

Partners for execution of strategies: Work with public and private entities to improve, enhance, and grow the housing inventory for current and future residents of Sumter County.

Strategy 1: Improve the quality of the housing inventory in Sumter County.

Recommendation: Determine what types of federal programs are available to repair/replace older manufactured homes in Sumter County. If a program fits the needs of Sumter County, engage in efforts to determine how/when this program can be implemented.

Strategy 2: Develop public/private partnerships to build affordable housing in Sumter County.

Recommendation: Create database of local and other developers who have experience in building affordable housing. Explore current and future funding opportunities for these developments. Determine where these housing options should be located and initiate the process for building additional affordable housing in Sumter County.

RETAIL AND COMMERCIAL

Sumter County Retail Leakages and Surpluses

Sumter County has the potential to provide numerous opportunities to serve its residents in furniture and home furnishings, apparel, motor vehicle and parts dealers, sporting goods, and building and garden supply retailers. These opportunities are present for local entrepreneurs, regional developers, and others who are interested in entering this market. Communicating the potential of Sumter County may be challenging, but the reward potential is high. Successful retailers will need to understand the local, seasonal, and regional market.

Presently, the Chamber of Commerce handles inquiries for site selection requests.

Introducing Sumter County to potential retailers will require enlightening them on all the county has to offer. The various communities each has their own personality and makeup of what would best benefit residents, travelers, sportsmen, and tourists. Small communities like Geiger and Panola would benefit greatly by a convenience/gasoline store possible anchored by a laundromat. This would serve those citizens who are driving more than twenty miles to meet those challenges.

Gainesville would benefit from retailers who serve the traveler/tourist traffic and their peak retail times might be Friday-Sunday or during a special event. There are several communities throughout the nation who are increasingly becoming known for “coming alive” on weekends. Greune, Texas is one such community. It boasts a dance hall, general store, ice cream shop, Mexican restaurant, and various artist shops mainly during weekends and holidays. But as many as 10,000 people may arrive in Greune on any given Saturday just to wander the streets and enjoy the small town feel. Springville, Alabama is capitalizing on its antique shops and proximity to Birmingham as a “weekend getaway.” Communities such as Panola, Cuba, Geiger, Epes, and Bellamy all have personalities that may attract visitors to come and stay for various lengths of time. It is up to Sumter County to have retailers, services, and activities in place when they arrive.

The wildlife and environmental opportunities in the county also lends itself to an increase in retail development to serve those who are interested in kayaking, canoeing, fishing, birding, and other seasonal activities.

Sumter definitely loses retail shopping opportunities to the surrounding counties and communities. Almost all communities suffer this dilemma, but it’s important to keep as many of those retail sales dollars at home rather than Tuscaloosa, AL and Meridian, MS.

The figure below provides a snapshot of the industry subsectors that are “leaking” from Sumter County to its neighboring counties. While this is not an uncommon occurrence for any community, Sumter County can use this information and capitalize on these opportunities to keep retail sales tax dollars at home and draw additional revenues from travelers, tourists, sportsmen, and others who are passing through the area.

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Opportunities exist in all subsectors except Gasoline Stores which reflects the high number of travelers who decide to fill their vehicle within Sumter County. Sumter County is underserved in all retail areas and especially in those industry subsectors that provide common needs such as clothing, furniture, sporting goods, electronics, and home and garden. The Retail Leakages and Surpluses are broken down by industry in the following table.

Sumter County Retail Leakages and Surpluses

Industry Group	Demand (Retail Potential)	Supply (Retail Sales)	Retail Gap	Number of Businesses
Motor Vehicle & Parts Dealers	\$13,974,048	\$166,031	\$13,808,017	
Automobile Dealers	\$12,273,826	\$0	\$12,273,826	4
Other Motor Vehicle Dealers	\$955,886	\$0	\$955,886	0
Auto Parts, Accessories & Tire Stores	\$744,336	\$166,031	\$578,305	0
Furniture & Home Furnishings Stores	\$118,899	\$0	\$118,899	4
Furniture Stores	\$99,667	\$0	\$99,667	0
Home Furnishings Stores	\$19,232	\$0	\$19,232	0
Electronics & Appliance Stores	\$232,073	\$0	\$232,073	0
Bldg Materials, Garden Equip & Supply Stores	\$2,843,951	\$358,804	\$2,485,147	0
Bldg Material & Supplies Dealers	\$2,172,847	\$279,514	\$1,893,333	7
Lawn & Garden Equip & Supply Stores	\$671,104	\$79,290	\$591,814	5
Food & Beverage Stores	\$12,172,343	\$9,110,242	\$3,062,101	2
Grocery Stores	\$11,983,840	\$8,904,864	\$3,078,976	18
Specialty Food Stores	\$46,297	\$39,102	\$7,195	14
Beer, Wine & Liquor Stores	\$142,206	\$166,276	-\$24,070	1
Health & Personal Care Stores	\$3,281,423	\$1,902,413	\$1,379,010	3
Gasoline Stations	\$16,008,441	\$19,220,037	-\$3,211,596	3
Clothing & Clothing Accessories Stores	\$1,683,718	\$216,949	\$1,466,769	16
Clothing Stores	\$1,631,355	\$216,949	\$1,414,406	3
Shoe Stores	\$25,502	\$0	\$25,502	3
Jewelry, Luggage & Leather Goods Stores	\$26,861	\$0	\$26,861	0
Sporting Goods, Hobby, Book & Music Stores	\$21,723	\$0	\$21,723	0
Sporting Goods/Hobby/Musical Instr Stores	\$17,201	\$0	\$17,201	0
Book, Periodical & Music Stores	\$4,522	\$0	\$4,522	0
General Merchandise Stores	\$10,146,308	\$3,684,110	\$6,462,198	0
Department Stores Excluding Leased Depts.	\$4,875,046	\$392,952	\$4,482,094	4
Other General Merchandise Stores	\$5,271,262	\$3,291,158	\$1,980,104	1
Miscellaneous Store Retailers	\$631,752	\$211,333	\$420,419	3
Florists	\$126,595	\$49,157	\$77,438	6
Office Supplies, Stationery & Gift Stores	\$9,433	\$0	\$9,433	2
Used Merchandise Stores	\$306,184	\$37,406	\$268,778	0
Other Miscellaneous Store Retailers	\$189,540	\$124,770	\$64,770	2
Nonstore Retailers	\$1,154,367	\$0	\$1,154,367	2
Electronic Shopping & Mail-Order Houses	\$951,333	\$0	\$951,333	0
Vending Machine Operators	\$106,206	\$0	\$106,206	0
Direct Selling Establishments	\$96,828	\$0	\$96,828	0
Food Services & Drinking Places	\$8,784,539	\$2,942,255	\$5,842,284	0
Full-Service Restaurants	\$3,005,502	\$1,046,704	\$1,958,798	19
Limited-Service Eating Places	\$5,135,080	\$1,696,480	\$3,438,600	11
Special Food Services	\$3,085	\$0	\$3,085	4
Drinking Places - Alcoholic Beverages	\$640,872	\$199,071	\$441,801	0

Source: esri.com

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Sumter County is currently losing approximately \$33.2 million in retail sales to other counties. This is an incredible opportunity to increase these retail options to its residents, travelers, and tourists to the area.

Retailers by Industry Group and Support

Retailer by Industry Group	Residents	Tourists	Pass-Through Visitors
Motor Vehicles & Parts Dealers	X		X
Furniture and Home Furnishings	X		
Electronics & Appliances	X		
Building Materials & Garden Equipment	X	X	
Food & Beverage	X	X	X
Health & Personal Care	X	X	
Gasoline	X	X	
Clothing & Clothing Accessories	X	X	X
Sporting Goods, Hobbies, Books, and Music	X	X	X
General Merchandise	X	X	X
Miscellaneous Store Retailers	X	X	X
Food Service & Drinking Places	X	X	X

By improving and expanding its retail base, Sumter County will strengthen and grow its tax base. Residents of Sumter County will support most retail expansion, but retailers who can satisfy the needs of visitors (hunters, anglers, outdoor enthusiasts, cultural visitors, and other tourists) will be especially valuable to the county's overall financial health.

Apparel and Accessories will be supported by Sumter County residents, surrounding communities, and tourists. Specialty shops that merchandise apparel used by hunters, anglers, and other outdoor enthusiasts will probably have seasonal peaks associated with different sporting seasons.

Industry/Service Group	Example	Supported By	Time
Lodging	Best Western	T,S	Year Round
Health Care	Urgent Medicine	R,T,S	Year Round with seasonal peaks
Food Places	Rally's, Long John Silvers	R, T, S, P	Year Round
Sporting Goods	Hibbett Sports	R, S	Year Round with seasonal peaks
Building and Garden	Ace Hardware, Tru Value	R, S	Year Round with seasonal peaks
Motor Vehicle & Parts	O'Reilly's, Auto Zone	R, S	Year Round
Electronics	Radio Shak	R, S	Year Round
Internet Providers	AT&T, Charter	R, S	Year Round
Apparel & Accessories	Payless	R, S, T	Year Round with seasonal peaks

T= Tourists S=Sportsmen R=Residents P=Pass Through

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Retail/Commercial Business Goals, Strategies, and Recommendations

Goal: Create an environment that encourages retail development with an emphasis on maintaining and improving existing retailing opportunities, the recruitment of new retailers, and the promotion of entrepreneurial opportunities.

Strategies:

- 1) Fully fund the Sumter County Chamber in order to have an organization that can take on the responsibility of recruiting and promoting the retail/commercial sector.
- 2) Facilitate the location and operation of retail and commercial businesses by consolidating new business licensing, linking to UWA's Small Business Development Center, and minimizing bureaucracy.
- 3) Provide a subsidized office location for business start-ups (Pilot Incubator).
- 4) Create a Business Retention/Expansion Plan with an Action Agenda and annual progress evaluation.

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TOURISM

Recently, Tourism in the Black Belt Region has become widely popular and has been promoted heavily through local festivals and homecomings, community plays, the Alabama Black Belt Heritage Area, “World’s Widest Yard Sale,” and the arts, just to name a few. Sumter County knows it needs to take advantage of this and work to accomplish one of its goals at the same time – Promoting Tourism. Four of Livingston’s restaurants did make it on the list of Alabama Restaurants on the Alabama Tripadvisor website. Livingston, Gainesville, and York have made it to the Alabama Tourism website under “Things To Do, Central Region,” however, more information and details could be added including pictures and attractions in the other Sumter County communities.

While Sumter County is an eco-and-cultural tourism destination for many, its share is a very small percentage of the total travel-related employment for the state according to the Travel Alabama Economic Impact Report of 2010. In 2010, Sumter County generated approximately \$64,000 in state lodging tax. This is up 19 percent from approximately \$52,000 in 2009. While this is positive news for Sumter County, there is even more room to grow. Sumter County has untapped potential for reaching many more people who have the means and the interests to invest in Sumter County.

Historical Places

Sumter County has a unique history and, because of that, has numerous historical sites, homes, and churches, especially in Gainesville (one of the most populated towns in 1840) and Livingston (the county seat). While in Gainesville, don’t forget to visit the antebellum homes, churches, and confederate cemetery. In Livingston, you will find the Alamuchee covered bridge, the UWA campus, Bored Well, Spence-Moon House, and the historical Courthouse. During a brief stop in Geiger, you will find the 1910 school house; it was the first public school in Alabama to provide free transportation. Next to the Tombigbee River in Epes, one can walk around the site of Fort Tombecbe, which was originally erected in 1736 by the French. There are approximately 134 historical sites and landmarks in Sumter County.

Arts

The “Arts” is gradually becoming more popular within the county. The Sumter County Fine Arts Council, UWA, and the Coleman Center for the Arts in York provide quality entertainment, arts education programs, and arts exhibitions to the West Alabama community. UWA hosts the annual Sucarnochee Folk life Festival each April, and both UWA and the SCFAC have hosted numerous plays, theatrical troupes, local performers, and orchestral performances. The Coleman Center houses a small art gallery and hosts educational arts programs for the local community.

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Outdoor Recreation

It is also rich in natural resources – land and water – that allows for a variety of outdoor recreational activities. With plenty of hunting land, lakes/ponds, and eight hunting and fishing lodges, it is obvious just how popular hunting and fishing is in Sumter County. Because of UWA, there are nine different athletic events to choose from.

There is an increasing demand for outdoor recreational activities in Alabama, and Sumter County has already gotten a head start on offering some activities. There are other opportunities it can take advantage of such as Rails-to-Trails: hiking, biking, canoeing and kayaking, and horseback riding

Tourism Development Goals, Strategies, and Recommendations

Goal: Make Sumter County a leading destination for Heritage Tourism and Outdoor Recreation
Strategies:

- 1) Develop public/private partnership to build tourism infrastructure in order to attract tourists (canoe inputs, camping and recreational vehicle campsites, equestrian trails and facilities, outdoor classrooms, wayfinding and directional signage).
- 2) Under the auspices of the Sumter County Chamber of Commerce, develop a marketing and branding strategy for the county.
- 3) Organize a countywide team of organizations, sites, service providers and businesses to develop the community that will support tourism development.
- 4) With support from UWA, develop an on-going hospitality training program that will enhance business and public interaction with visitors to Sumter County.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Sumter County has several small towns and unincorporated communities that have the potential to improve conditions for their residents and play a role in countywide improvement efforts. Some of these communities have organized committees, and in some cases, a formal non-profit body to guide and carry out development priorities.

Although these communities do not have a large or concentrated population base, there are plenty of projects they can carry out which will benefit local citizens and provide a platform for improving the overall quality of life.

During the strategic planning process, town hall meetings were held in several communities in order to collect input and ideas from the local residents.

Throughout the county, there were many similarities in the types of activities, services and amenities that the communities discussed. Among these were: **1) community buildings** to house after school programs, exercise classes, libraries, senior activities and workforce training programs; **2) food related projects** like community gardens, canning kitchens, farmers markets, and small produce stores; **3) projects with a cultural and heritage focus**, such as: museums, rehabilitated historic buildings, self-guided walking/driving tours; and **4) outdoor amenities to support local and tourist recreation**, such as parks, walking trails, equestrian stable and trails, and public access to camping and water activities.

To provide improved amenities and services throughout the county, additional revenue must be created. This can be achieved through increasing tourism and by each community developing a local plan of action for their contribution to the countywide effort.

Community Centers

Several of the communities already have community centers. Those with the building in place, need to identify their list of projects and develop consensus on which projects have the highest priority. By developing a project list and a team of local residents around each project, an action plan and budget can be devised. With an action plan and budget, a timeline can be devised and responsibilities for portions of the plans can be assigned to the local project team.

Community Centers will have two major focuses: 1) a facility plan, which guides the maintenance and development of the building and property, and 2) programming of activities, which orients the activities which take place within the building and on the property.

Overcoming the Food Desert

Sections of Sumter County are far removed from grocery stores, retail shops and gas stations. Although it will be difficult to recruit stores to provide many of these needs, rural sections of the county can become more self-reliant, particularly in the area of locally grown fruits and vegetables.

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Nearly all the communities have sufficient acreage to start a community garden. Community gardens rely on the experience of members of the community who grew up tending family plots and preserved food through canning, freezing and drying. These lost arts can be re-introduced with the help of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System, Master Gardeners and the common wisdom of those who have maintained the tradition.

With a small investment in tools, seeds, seedlings and other materials, each community can begin to become more self-sufficient in their fresh food needs. As each community begins this process, local farmer's markets can be held, rotating between the communities.

The idea of a community canning kitchen was mentioned in several communities. Because of the investment cost in equipment and necessary modifications to meet health codes, a common canning kitchen can be set up in one of the community centers as a shared investment, and made available to an entire area.

Preserving Sumter County's Heritage: Providing Destinations for Heritage Tourists

Sumter County is fortunate to have many historic buildings and places throughout the county. These historic places are an important tourist attraction and can help the county attract visitors to several communities.

Many of the buildings are in need of rehabilitation which translates to funding and expertise. A countywide list of endangered properties should be identified and circulated, so that a broader group of citizens become involved in the important work of historic preservation. It is important for elected officials to acknowledge the importance of historic places and buildings, and to advocate for these important sites in Sumter County. Whenever possible, funds should be identified that can be used to acquire these properties or to provide matching funds for grants acquired from foundations and preservation societies.

Programming Activities for Youth and Elders

Sumter County youth deserve educational and recreation opportunities that will help them improve their future. Many of these opportunities can take place in Sumter County with a little vision, some planning and fundraising, and the help of volunteers. All communities can have a modest library, a couple of computers, outdoor recreation amenities (such as areas for bicycling, ball courts and other sports) and programming to keep youth interested and active.

Tapping into the county Ministerial Council, as well as Alabama Cooperative Extension, University of West Alabama, University of Alabama and other institutions can provide guidance on resources.

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Identifying Volunteers

Most of the ideas discussed in the town hall meetings need volunteer action in order to organize activities and identify resources. There is an unending supply of talent and experience within Sumter County. These internal resources need to be inventoried and harnessed.

Each community needs to reassess where they have been and where they want to go. With an evaluation of what has already been accomplished, a group of committed volunteers and an action plan, each community can re-set its destiny.

Goals, Strategies, and Recommendations: Community Development

Goal: Develop a mechanism where each community can continually reassess its needs and develop actions to meet those needs.

Strategy: Set up a formal local Community Development Committee in each community, that focuses on a yearly action plan intent on accomplishing one to two major projects.

Recommendation: Each community can have a committee organized from local residents who have the ability and interest in improving the local conditions. This committee should draw additional volunteers from within the community to carry out projects. An understanding of each person's talents and experience is helpful in building these teams.

Goal: Keep each community moving forward, continuously improving the quality of life throughout the county.

Strategy: Develop a yearly local action plan for each community, in order to prioritize projects and activities.

Recommendation: Each community needs to learn how to prioritize needs, identify resources, develop consensus, develop an action plan, and hold themselves accountable. Once a community has learned this process and can manage it locally, they will hold their destiny in their own hands.

Goal: Build local resources in order to sustain progress and become more self-reliant.

Strategy:

- 1) Build a local volunteer base, identify people's talents
- 2) Grow the local leadership base through leadership development training and opportunities
- 3) Identify internal and external resources by growing the number and types of contacts known to the community
- 4) Access Sumter County resources for assistance, such as the Sumter County Chamber of Commerce, Alabama Cooperative Extension System, the University of West Alabama, and the county's elected officials