



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Each of the Middle Georgia region's 11 counties and 20 cities have resources, challenges and opportunities that cross their individual borders. In order for these communities to achieve individual success, they must not only identify their assets and weaknesses, but also must understand the concerns of their neighbors. Once communities recognize their common, diverse, and complimentary characteristics, leaders can utilize partnerships to foster and harness regional solutions. The purpose of the regional planning effort is to create a common tool that describes the state of the region and outlines a roadmap for a regional progress that includes all of Middle Georgia's communities. The ultimate goal of this process is a thriving Middle Georgia that flourishes in every category, from the economy to education and local infrastructure.

With this in mind, and in accordance with the Standards and Procedures of Regional Planning established by the Georgia Department of Community Affairs, the Middle Georgia Regional Commission is responsible for updating the Middle Georgia Regional Plan every five years. This plan serves as an assessment of the region today and a strategy for the region over the next 20 years. As with previous iterations of the regional plan, this document is comprised of three primary parts:

- **Stakeholder Involvement Program:** This portion of the plan outlines the process whereby Regional Commission staff will engage interested community partners in the development of the Regional Agenda.
- **Regional Assessment:** This is a comprehensive inventory and evaluation of existing resources, trends, and conditions found in the region. This section also highlights the major issues and opportunities on which the Regional Agenda will be based.
- **Regional Agenda:** A guide to the region's success that includes specific action items and barometers for region-wide success.

The Regional Assessment is comprised of four main sections, each helping to display the substance of the current condition of the region. These sections include the recognition of issues and opportunities found throughout the region, data analyzing regional characteristics, current development patterns, and the region's success in achieving Quality Community Objectives.

The collection of data pertaining to the region is a vital part of the assessment and is the basis for understanding the region's issues and opportunities. For example, we know that the population of Middle Georgia is growing, while also becoming more diverse and continuing to advance in age. This last point will be a specific challenge for Middle Georgia, as age-friendly government services will demand a greater allocation of local resources and a continued review of policies. It is also known that Middle Georgia faces persistently high unemployment and poverty rates, particularly when compared with the nation at-large. The regional economy is also challenged by its overreliance on Robins Air Force Base, as well as on the service sector in general. This connects to the regional challenges of poverty, as many employees are not skilled enough to perform more complex jobs that could provide a better quality of life. These challenges present opportunities to simultaneously invest in job training and economic diversification, so that skilled workers can be retained in the region, and so that companies that require a more skilled workforce will also be more likely to locate in Middle Georgia. Similarly, an opportunity is present to enhance the region's housing stock, so as to support the workforce with shelter that is both affordable and high quality.

The region also needs to consider its possible investments in the natural environment and how service provision can be made more efficient by working together, as well as by working within the context of the region's natural environment. Middle Georgia is uniquely situated with many natural resources, as well as

a large variety of cultural resources that developed early on as a result of the region's strategic location along the Fall Line. While the region has been fortunate enough to experience growth in past years, growth and the natural environment, both assets for the region, sometimes find themselves at odds with each other. An example of this is the sprawling growth and development that has been seen throughout parts of Middle Georgia, particularly outside of the traditional urban centers. This has led to the loss of valuable greenspace, difficulties in affordable service provision, and congestion within the transportation system, as growth outpaces the capacity of existing road infrastructure. However, coming out of this are the opportunities to not only invest in the region's transportation infrastructure, but also the chance to improve regional growth patterns by encouraging mixed-use infill development within portions of the region that have already seen development occur. Likewise, the region can examine economic development opportunities that take advantage of existing natural and cultural resources, while working to preserve them. Finally, as these challenges persist, the opportunity also exists for partnerships across jurisdictions that will increase the efficiency of services and help to conserve the region's assets.

As mentioned above, the region has several opportunities to modify and advance its existing land-use within the region. For this, it is important to note that there are a number of areas where additional growth and development is expected over the 20-year planning period. These particularly include some of the region's major transportation corridors like Interstate 75 and Highway 129. In addition to these areas, there are a number of additional locations throughout the region where special attention needs to be paid over the upcoming years to respond to environmental and quality of life concerns. These include, not only areas of rapid development, but also areas where natural or cultural resources could be impacted by existing development within an area. Likewise, there are a number of areas in the region that are in need of redevelopment, or are characterized by significant disinvestment. While redevelopment can mean many things it certainly will require special care and attention from local governments to ensure that improvement occurs. These areas are specifically differentiated from others due to the broad impacts from these areas that can be felt beyond county borders.

In order to measure the condition of the Middle Georgia region, the regional assessment outlines its success in the concepts of the Department of Community Affairs' Quality Community Objectives. These objectives consist of 15 categories designed to evaluate the region's ability to develop in a way that maximizes its potential and preserves its character and resources. Some of the measures include, growth preparedness, preservation of natural and cultural resources, and educational opportunities, among others. Across Middle Georgia, there are examples of communities achieving positive results in the categories. There is, however, much progress needed in order for the majority of Middle Georgia to be considered a thriving place that is prepared to grow.

The factors described here and in the following pages of the Regional Assessment were identified by staff from the Middle Georgia Regional Commission with the assistance of regional stakeholders at a meeting on September 3, 2015. Much of the contents of this assessment are in their preliminary form, and may be revised in the Regional Agenda. However, what this document does contain is the latest, most accurate data available about the current state of Middle Georgia as well as a general overview of important concepts for regional policymakers to be aware of when planning for the future of their communities. For this reason, the Middle Georgia Regional Commission encourages the distribution of this document for public consumption, as well as continued engagement of all interested parties in the regional planning process.