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Alabama Statewide Consolidated Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies: Planning for the Future

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Based on the model developed by the Alabama Association of Regional Councils (AARC), this brief was developed to provide state associations of regional development organizations (RDOs) with information about the value and importance of preparing statewide Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies (CEDs).

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Introduction

Collectively, Alabama's 12 Regional Councils work across the State of Alabama by planning and implementing strategies that create opportunities for development and prosperity. The Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) of each of the Regional Councils reflects the goals, objectives, and priorities specific to their region or constituency. The Alabama Consolidated CEDS was developed by the Planning Task Force of the Alabama Association of Regional Councils (AARC) to reflect the common vision, values, and goals contained in each regional CEDS and to serve as a comprehensive and representative statewide economic development strategy for the State of Alabama.

This report addresses the role that Regional Development Organizations (RDOs) – in this case, Regional Councils – played in the Alabama statewide CEDS process and explores lessons learned that can be applied to future RDO attempts at creating statewide CEDS.

Background: Regional Councils in Alabama

There are 12 Regional Councils in the state of Alabama, each charged with coordinating and strengthening the capabilities of the city and county governments within their jurisdictions. These public, non-profit agencies each serve between two and ten counties. Authorized by the State Legislature in 1935 and formed in the 1960s, the Regional Councils developed over time and their powers and duties continued to evolve until reaching their current structure in 1985. When referred to collectively, all 12 organizations are called "Regional Councils," but at the individual level they are referred to by a variety of names.

The Regional Councils in Alabama strive to improve the quality of life for their residents by obtaining funding for local government assistance, coordinating local governments' responses to regional issues, and providing a wide range of services to the region's governments and residents. Regional Councils have differing structures and program priorities, but each focus on areas of economic development and planning.¹

Regional Councils receive funding from their constituent governments. Ten of the 12 regional councils are also designated as Economic Development Districts (EDDs) and receive matching funding from the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) for planning purposes. In order to remain eligible for EDA funding, each Regional Council must develop a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) that includes the following:²

1. Summary of existing background conditions such as population, economic environment, geography, and transportation

REGIONAL PLANNING COUNCILS IN ALABAMA



Source: <http://alarc.org/the-councils>

1. Northwest Alabama Council of Local Governments
2. Top of Alabama Regional Council of Governments
3. North-Central Alabama Regional Council of Governments
4. West Alabama Regional Commission
5. Birmingham Regional Planning Commission
6. East Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission
7. Alabama-Tombigbee Regional Commission
8. Central Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission
9. Lee-Russell Council of Governments
10. South Central Alabama Development Commission (Headquarters in Montgomery)
11. Southeast Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission
12. South Alabama Regional Planning Commission

2. Identification of economic development problems and opportunities
3. Proposal of development objectives and an action plan

EDA requires that a CEDS be updated at least every five years.

Creation of a Statewide CEDS

The activities of the Regional Councils are coordinated at the state-wide level by the Alabama Association of Regional Councils (AARC). Representatives of the Regional Councils form task forces at the AARC to collaborate in leveraging resources, promoting commerce and trade, and accomplishing shared objectives.

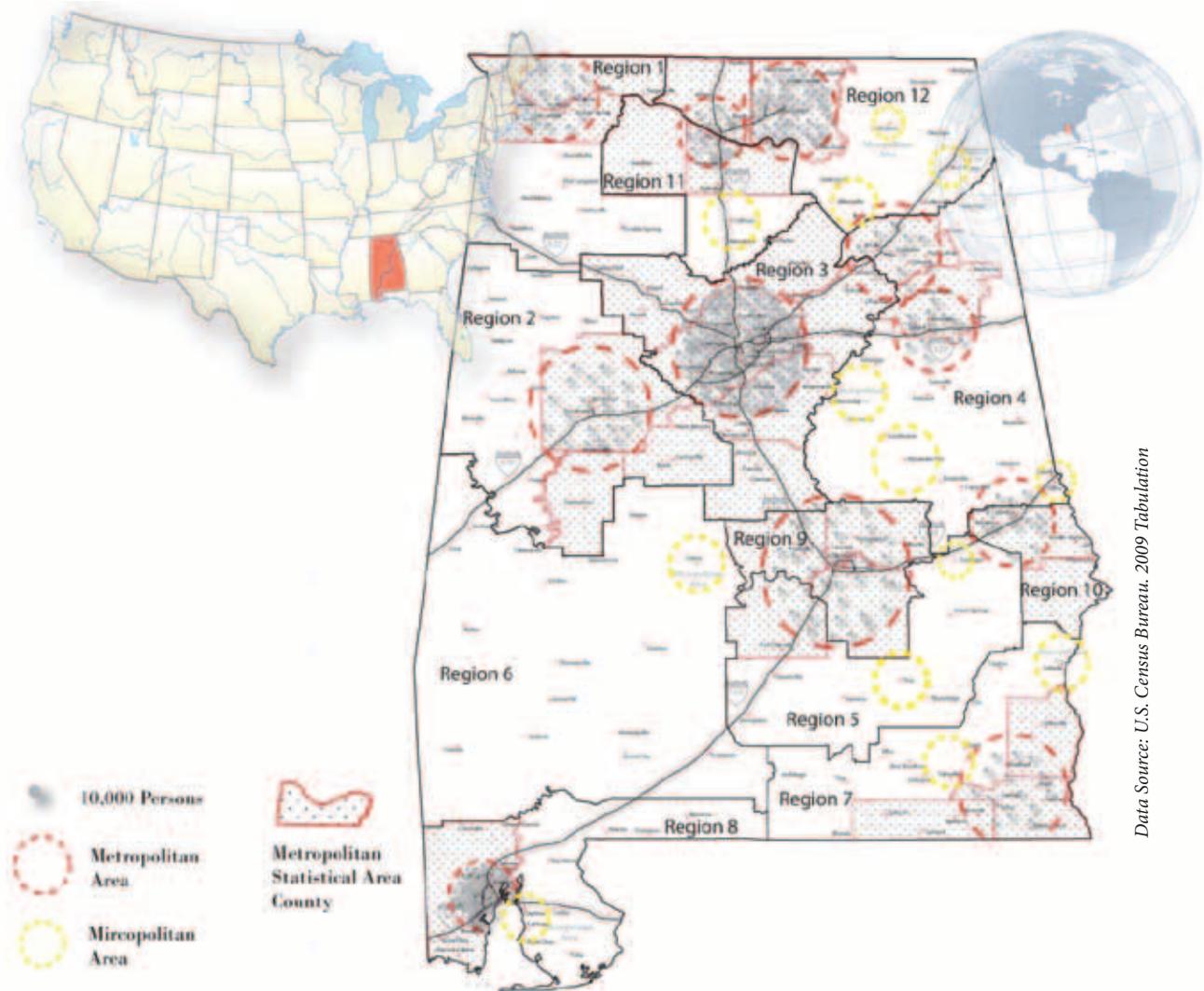
Through AARC task forces, the Regional Councils have often shared resources while preparing CEDS. Because there is a lot of

overlap between the CEDS for each Regional Council, working together has made the process more efficient, while also creating a better product. Building off of this momentum of cooperation among regional planning entities, the AARC and the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA) commissioned a brief Statewide Strategic Plan in 2001 and 2002.

The devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 led to increased support for state-wide planning efforts. In 2006 the AARC and the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA) agreed to further coordinate the efforts of the Regional Councils by developing a state-wide Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy. Released in the winter of the following year, The Alabama Consolidated Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy of 2007 summarized the economic development programs contained

METROPOLITAN AND MICROPOLITAN AREAS

Alabama Association of Regional Councils



Data Source: U.S. Census Bureau. 2009 Tabulation

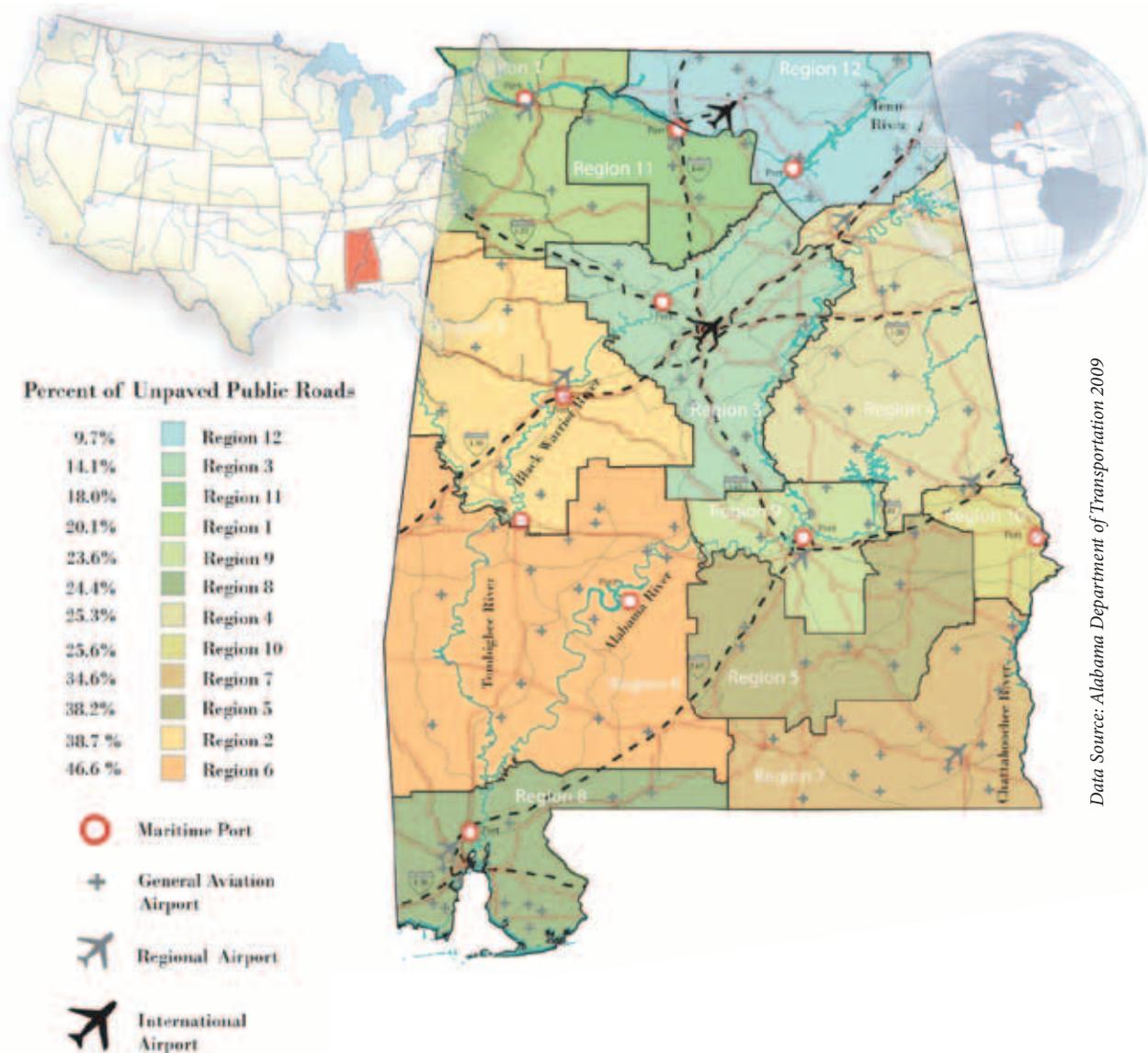
in the regional CEDS. The document was structured to reflect the organization of the regional CEDS, but with a more limited scope. As outlined on the Alabama CEDS website, “Although it was prepared under contract with a department of the State of Alabama, [the 2007 Consolidated CEDS] was still a compilation, and there were no decisions from or with a statewide perspective on any overall strategy or overriding policy.”³ The document’s main accomplishment was comparing the similarities and differences between the regional CEDS, and was used by the Regional Councils to refine their own CEDS and incorporate best practices of their peer organizations. It was clear there was more that could be gained from a state-wide CEDS and an update was undertaken starting in 2009.

Updating the Alabama CEDS

The Alabama Consolidated Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy of 2007 was about reviewing existing conditions. Its update, The Alabama Consolidated Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy of 2010 (completed in early 2011), was about creating a unified plan. Leadership from the Regional Councils believed that a second statewide CEDS could build off the information collected in the first plan and accomplish two primary objectives. First and foremost, the Regional Councils hoped an updated plan could help them better define their common objectives and understand the areas in which they should pool their resources—especially while developing regional CEDS. Second, it was an effort to create a coordinated document

TRANSPORTATION ACCESS

Alabama Association of Regional Councils



that could efficiently communicate their needs. By addressing the needs of the Regional Councils at a state level, they hoped to strengthen their collective case for maximizing political and financial support from government agencies and other potential funders, in order to enhance their capacity to serve communities.

The Consolidated CEDS Planning Process

The Consolidated CEDS and its 2011 update were planned and developed by the Planning Task Force of the AARC. The group consisted of one representative from each Regional Council, though those representatives often varied or changed over time. The Planning Task Force had met for years on a quarterly basis to discuss common issues and ways to collaborate. It took on the responsibility to develop the statewide CEDS, and created subcommittees of three or four people to develop various components of the plan, based on their own interests. Most of the research and writing was undertaken by staff from the Regional Councils, and overseen by the council's task force representative.

A challenge quickly emerged. The task force members lived in cities spread across the state of Alabama and already had full and conflicting schedules. Project management and communication presented difficulties. The task force began meeting on a monthly basis at the Central Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission office in Montgomery. In addition, the task force looked to alternative ways to communicate that did not require everyone to be present at the same time. Most communication happened over the phone and by email. In addition, the task force found survey instruments to be a useful tool. Instead of voicing opinions on concepts or decisions all at once, surveys were emailed to members, allowing each to respond at their own schedule. Such surveys were typically one or two-page documents allowing Task Force members to respond to questions in short-answer form. The use of this tool became such a success that the Task Force began using them to gather information from State agencies. These external surveys were used to collect data, identify the types of information outside agencies needed, and understand other organizations' roles in the economic development process.

The first version of the Consolidated CEDS required little outside research. The task force reviewed each Regional Council's local CEDS and other plans, and worked together to create a master document reflecting the needs of each region. The update required much more data collection and technical expertise, and the task force began to reach out to other organizations for assistance.

Plan Collaborators and Partners

The updated Consolidated CEDS called for an understanding of the economic context not only within the state of Alabama, but also the state's context within the United States and the globe. The

task force developed "benchmark" areas within which to collect data, including education, employment, infrastructure, and a wide range of other statistics and information. It became clear that a more efficient way of collecting this information would be to hire an outside organization or consultant to do so.

Delaney Associates, Inc. was hired to conduct a large portion of the data collection. Later, the Center for Business and Economic Research at the University of Alabama was selected to develop a companion document to the Consolidated CEDS detailing the current conditions within Alabama and its larger context.

Additional consultants were brought on to the team to create graphics, maps, and a website (<http://ceds.alabama.gov/>). Much careful planning went into the website, which has become a

The Planning Task Force developed a four point program for completing the Consolidated CEDS update:

1. *Benchmarking.* A system of relevant and meaningful economic benchmarks and performance measures to gauge the success of regional and State economic development efforts;
2. *Strategy Update.* An updated, statewide consolidation of the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies (CEDS) of the individual Regional Councils, including an added focus on sustainability and an itemization of their respective, high-priority economic development projects;
3. *Web-based CEDS Development.* A web-based format for communicating and monitoring Alabama's economic progress on a statewide and sub-state basis, providing accessibility of the economic performance benchmarks to a broad spectrum of users; and
4. *Advisory Committee:* An Advisory Committee consisting of the Regional Councils, the Alabama Development Office (ADO), the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA), the Alabama Rural Development Office (ARDO), the various Rural Planning Organizations, county-based economic development organizations, and other entities involved in economic development for the purpose of providing advice and feedback regarding the usefulness and relevance of the CEDS process.

Source: *The Alabama Consolidated CEDS*⁴

valuable asset. It was decided that instead of simply posting an electronic version of the Consolidated CEDS online, the plan should be displayed in an easily-accessible, easy-to-understand online format. The website does just that, and allows the user to access the Consolidated CEDS at his or her own pace without thumbing through an intimidating document or scrolling through multiple pages.

The AARC collaborated with the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA), who assumed the responsibility of structuring and printing a finalized hard copy version of the report.

A new governor, Robert Bentley, took office in January of 2011, at the same time the Planning Task Force was finishing the Consolidated CEDS.

The task force met with the Governor's Office's new Director of Economic and Community Affairs and the Director of the Economic Development Partnership of Alabama to explain the work they had done and share the information they had collected. Economic development had been an issue on Governor Bentley's platform as he ran for election, and the timing of the administration change created an opportunity to incorporate the findings of the Consolidated CEDS into state-level planning efforts.

Plan Findings and Conclusions

The *Alabama Consolidated Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy: A Prospectus for Sustainable Economic Prosperity* was released in June 2011. It was organized into seven sections:

- *The Planning Process for a Consolidated Strategy* – Describes the process for engaging State officials along with regional and community leaders in the economic development process;
- *The Economic Situation of the State and the Regions* – Presents statistical and other information to present an overall picture of the local and regional economy as well as the State economy, particularly in relation to the global economy and the greater Southeast region;
- *An Analysis of Economic Development Issues and Opportunities* – Analyzes local and regional problems and opportunities;
- *The Vision of the Regional Councils for Sustainable Economic Prosperity* – Presents a statewide perspective and program for dealing with the identified problems and opportunities, as well as looking forward to a broader vision of economic prosperity, environmental vitality and community wellness;
- *Promoting the Vision for Sustainable Economic Prosperity* – Summarizes the capabilities and interests of the Regional Councils and puts forth a strategy of action for addressing the expectations and project priorities;

- *Strategic Projects and Programs* – Describes the vital project priorities of the various Regional Councils from the standpoint of a statewide perspective; and
- *Measuring Sustainable Economic Prosperity* – Describes the methods of the various Regional Councils in measuring their performance in economic development and calls for efforts to develop a system of measuring overall sustainability.

Based on the prior review of the Regional Councils' CEDS, the document identified three common objectives:

- **Community wellness:** The Regional Councils of Alabama value communities that preserve their unique character and provide people access to quality housing, education, employment, and health services.
- **Environmental vitality:** The Regional Councils of Alabama value a diverse natural environment and the wise and efficient use of resources for social, cultural, and economic needs.
- **Economic prosperity:** The Regional Councils of Alabama value a globally responsive and viable economy that seeks quality development.

The Role of the University of Alabama

Early in the planning process, the Planning Task Force issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) for an outside consultant to create a report that (a) detailed Alabama's relation to the global economy and (b) touched on how Alabama's economic growth could be achieved in a sustainable fashion. The Center for Business and Economic Research at the University of Alabama responded to, and won, the RFP. The University compiled and synthesized a large range of economic and demographic data, which was organized in a report called "Alabama in the Global Economy: Working Toward a Sustainable Future," released in April 2011.

The Planning Task Force did not have the capacity to complete this research in-house, and hiring the Center for Business and Economic Research made for an efficient process and helped develop the best possible document. The report has become an important companion document- both because it helped formed and direct the consolidated CEDS and also because it works as a stand-alone text.

Says Cory Johnson, Senior Economic Development Planner at the West Alabama Regional Commission: "The report by the University of Alabama was probably the thing we were most pleased with. It did exactly what we hoped for and supported the process overall."

Statewide Regional Council Common Vision

“It is the vision of the Regional Councils of the State of Alabama that the State shall advance its prosperity by ensuring the optimal health and well being of its people, its environment, and its economy.”

Source: *The Alabama CEDS*

Outcomes

The Consolidated CEDS provides a guide for the Regional Councils to follow at their own discretion. It does not have legal standing, nor are the Regional Councils or any other body required to follow it. The process for implementing the goals outlined in the plan has been a topic of ongoing conversation among AARC task forces.

In the year since its release, the initiative’s primary objective has been realized: the Consolidated CEDS has helped improve the development of CEDS at the regional level. Many of the Regional Councils that are preparing regional CEDS for the 2012 year have drawn from the data collected for the Consolidated CEDS. Not only has this improved the speed and efficiency of their CEDS,

but Regional Council officials say it has helped provide direction for their CEDS and has created better overall strategies.

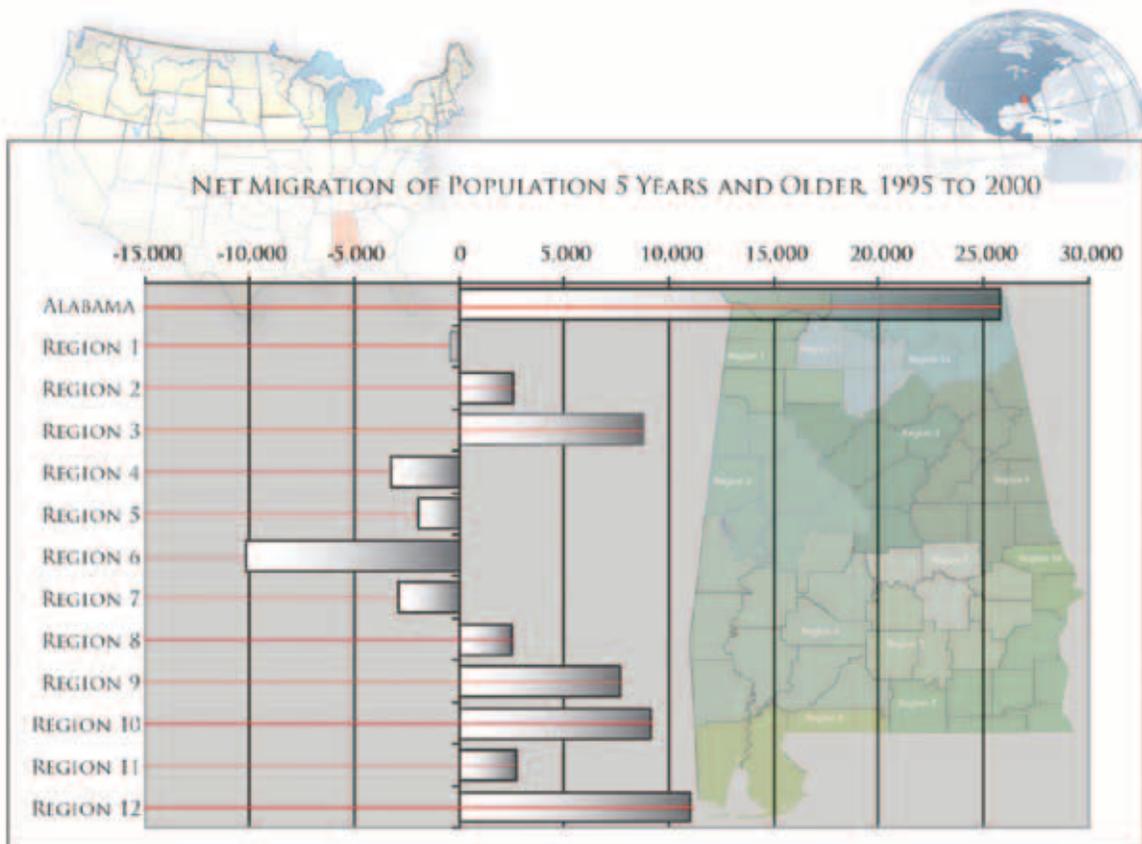
A secondary aspiration of the Consolidated CEDS was to better communicate the needs and objectives of the Alabama Regional Councils to State officials and Federal agencies that provide grants and other types of support. AARC and Regional Council representatives have met with the Alabama State Governor’s office on several occasions to communicate their findings, but most of those involved agree that more could be done to leverage the Consolidated CEDS. So far the Regional Councils have not received increased State or Federal support as a consequence of the Consolidated CEDS. In addition, there has not been indication that other regional or state agencies are using the Consolidated CES as a resource during their own planning and economic development efforts.

Next Steps

To date, the Consolidated CEDS has been a relatively inward-looking process: despite its broad potential and applicability to a variety of statewide economic development organizations, the Regional Councils and the AARC are the only organizations

NET MIGRATION OF POPULATION

Alabama Association of Regional Councils



currently utilizing the plan. At the local level the Regional Councils are finding ways to use the Consolidated CEDS to improve their own planning efforts. The AARC Planning Task Force continues to discuss ways to broaden the Consolidated CEDS's impact, and bring the perspective of the Regional Councils to the table during other statewide economic development planning processes.

For this to happen, the Consolidated CEDS should be marketed to the wide variety of government organizations that play a role in statewide economic development in Alabama, including the Governor's Office, the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs, the Economic Development Association of Alabama, the Economic Development Partnership of Alabama, the Alabama Department of Transportation, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the U.S. Economic Development Administration.

Lessons Learned

There are some valuable insights that can be taken from the AARC's process of developing a unified, state-wide Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy, ranging from organizational strategies to broader economic development concepts.

- It is difficult for regional representatives to meet in person. The Consolidated CEDS planning process was a success, in part, because of strong communication that occurred over phone and email, in addition to frequent meetings. Surveys were an important tool used to incorporate many people's input efficiently.
- Each regional representative saw the consolidated strategy as an opportunity for mutual gain, not a competition for resources. The equitable and cooperative nature of this process limited conflict. While minor disagreements did arise during the planning process, there were no clashes over the project's direction or findings.
- Printed copies of the Consolidated CEDS are popular, but it is easier and more economical to communicate plans and their findings online. The Consolidated CEDS's website is one of the process' best achievements. As opposed to mirroring the structure of the report itself, it is organized in a user-friendly fashion that allows the reader to access information easily and at his or her own pace.
- Some of the best outcomes and products, such as the Alabama in the Global Economy Report and the project website, were subcontracted out to third parties. The process of developing a Consolidated CEDS is extremely time-consuming and relies on individuals who already have full workloads. While being involved in the data collection process built project ownership, participants agree that, in hindsight, more of the work could have been subcontracted.

- Cooperation with the State is essential. The Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs developed and printed the finalized version of the report, something that would have been difficult for the Alabama Association or Regional Councils to produce in-house. However, the timing of a new Gubernatorial Administration entering office limited the Consolidated CEDS' impact on related State initiatives. The planning of a Consolidated CEDS should be coordinated with State activity and involve State officials from the onset. In this way, State economic development agencies can have better understanding of how they can build off the information available in a consolidated CEDS to assist other state-wide economic development plans.

By developing a Consolidated CEDS, the Regional Councils gained insight into their common goals, found areas for collaboration and improved efficiency, and incorporated a state-level perspective into their individual CEDS. The opportunity remains, however, to leverage the Regional Council's newfound collective voice into promoting increased understanding of what they do, and how their local economic development efforts affect the State of Alabama as a whole.

Says Jeff Pruitt, the Planning Director of the Top of Alabama Regional Council of Governments and a leader of the Consolidated CEDS development process: "I think we should ask: why haven't we been doing this all along? Why would you not do this? It is so easy to proceed within your own community or agency. We build silos and don't look outside. We need to make a point to tear those things down. There is value in doing this to achieve more coordination and cooperation in the process."

Concludes Cory Johnson, Senior Economic Development Planner at the West Alabama Regional Commission and Planning Task Force member: "This story is about the benefits of having a really solid grasp of what's going on in our state: where we stand and how Alabama fits into a global view. This was an extremely educational process for those involved in it, and we're doing everything we can to disseminate that information to others. The more they understand, the more they can make better decisions."

Endnotes:

1) Alabama CEDS Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy, <http://ceds.alabama.gov/> (accessed May 2012).

2) Alabama Association of Regional Councils Website, <http://alarc.org/> (accessed May 2012).

3) Alabama CEDS Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy, <http://ceds.alabama.gov/> (accessed May 2012).

4) Alabama Association of Regional Councils, *The Alabama Consolidated Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy: A Prospectus for Sustainable Economic Prosperity* (Montgomery, AL: 2011), 4.

The plan outlined strategies for each of the three objectives:

COMMUNITY WELLNESS	ENVIRONMENTAL VITALITY	ECONOMIC PROSPERITY
<p>GOAL 1: Direct resources toward established communities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Identify resources and provide needed plans and services for local governments. > Rehabilitate and maintain existing housing stocks. > Invest in housing initiatives, mixed use, and urban redevelopment. > Increase transportation options and access to bicycle, pedestrian and public transit. > Ensure quality and capacity of existing infrastructure systems. 	<p>GOAL 1: Promote sound management of natural capital</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Promote comprehensive statewide environmental planning efforts. > Encourage use of planning tools to protect and efficiently utilize natural resources. > Acquire, develop and maintain a variety of passive and active recreational facilities. 	<p>GOAL 1: Align efforts and assets of business, government, and educational institutions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Invest in entrepreneurship and innovation. > Increase retention and expansion of existing industry. > Increase access to venture capital and technology. > Facilitate development of existing and emerging economic clusters.
<p>GOAL 2: Increase the range of choices for housing, health care, and education.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Advance availability of affordable and quality housing for all ages, incomes and abilities. > Increase access and options for healthcare. > Promote regional approaches to improve community services. > Expand access to technology and facilities that increase educational opportunities. 	<p>GOAL 2: Designate and protect critical environmental areas.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Identify and inventory environmentally significant and critical ecosystems. > Support and promote stronger conservation efforts. > Generate natural resource plans to address watersheds, wetlands, critical habitats and migration corridors. 	<p>GOAL 2: Invest in regional development strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Promote tourism and cultural assets. > Maximize use of existing industrial and commercial sites. > Increase development of agri-business and related trades. > Coordinate and enhance use of inter-modal facilities – road, rail, water, air.
<p>GOAL 3: Maximize human capital by increasing competencies to meet global expectations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Promote expanded job training programs targeted to regional needs that support global competitiveness. > Coordinate local workforce efforts with state initiatives. > Involve business and industry in planning and implementation of vocational and training programs. 	<p>GOAL 3: Foster statewide participation in environmental stewardship.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Encourage state and federal agencies to develop a unified state message to promote environmental education. > Identify, protect, and preserve valuable historic resources. > Partner with public and private groups to increase access to environmental programs and services. 	<p>GOAL 3: Foster a statewide collaborative spirit of leadership.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Promote leadership programs at local, regional, and state level. > Encourage and support youth leadership programs. > Promote involvement of private sector in creating economic development strategies. > Improve intergovernmental cooperation and coordination • Encourage a wider cross-section of leaders to fill board and elected positions.

Source: The Alabama Consolidated CEDS



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