

OCTOBER 2020



# 10-YEAR STRATEGIC PLAN

## PEARL RIVER COUNTY, MISSISSIPPI

# CONTENTS

Introduction .....	1
Pillars of Focus .....	2
Priority Strategies .....	2
Moving Forward.....	3
Planning Context.....	4
COVID-19 .....	4
Economic Analysis .....	4
Stakeholder Input .....	7
SWOT Analysis.....	8
Priority Investments & Strategies .....	10
Priority 1. Site Development .....	10
Priority 2. Target Industry Recruitment.....	12
Priority 3. Marketing & Image .....	15
Priority 4. Business Retention & Expansion .....	16
Priority 5. Regional Collaboration .....	18
Appendix: Engagement & Outreach .....	20



# INTRODUCTION

**Pearl River County (the County), Mississippi, has a wealth of assets for economic development.** The County sits at the center of the Gulf Coast super-region stretching from Baton Rouge and New Orleans to Northwest Florida, which contains more than 5 million residents. Pearl River County lies just north of the lower-lying coastal and Mississippi River delta zones. The County benefits from proximity to larger markets such as Greater New Orleans and Coastal Mississippi (including the John C. Stennis Space Center) to the south and Hattiesburg to the north. Aside from its geographic advantages, the County has several assets of its own. These include infrastructure (Interstate 59, Picayune Municipal Airport, freight rail), scenic and natural amenities (the Pearl River and Crosby Arboretum), Pearl River Community College, two medical districts (Highland Community Hospital in Picayune and Pearl River County Hospital in Poplarville), and two downtown districts with redevelopment opportunities (Picayune and Poplarville).

Despite these strengths, **Pearl River County's economic development potential remains largely untapped.** While the County's population has grown, it has struggled to attract jobs and investment. The County has fallen short in its efforts to attract and retain a skilled, educated workforce. It has failed to develop high-quality sites and business districts needed to recruit new companies and help existing businesses expand.

In response to these challenges and missed opportunities, County leaders committed in January 2020 to create a new full-time economic development program for the County, hiring Blaine LaFontaine as the County's economic development director. Just a handful of weeks after the new program hit the ground running, COVID-19 erupted into a global pandemic, and the US entered the worst economic recession in nearly a century, upending entire industries and affecting millions of workers and businesses. Despite the economic headwinds of 2020, substantial progress has been made on building a robust economic development program for Pearl River County. Major accomplishments and early "wins" include a new economic development website ([prcedd.com](http://prcedd.com)), new incentive policies for local tax abatements, and several active recruitment prospects evaluating business relocation and expansion opportunities in the County. However, the need for a long-term plan for the County's economic development was identified as a top priority from the outset. Without a strategic plan to serve as a tool for organizing Pearl River County's economic development activities, future growth potential would be limited.

To fill this planning gap, Pearl River County, Mississippi, engaged TIP Strategies (TIP), an Austin-based economic development consulting firm, to help prepare **the County's first-ever economic development strategic plan.** This plan presents a set of investments and strategies for guiding the County's growth over the next 10 years. Over the course of several months in 2020, the consulting team met with dozens of community and business leaders to gain qualitative insights into the challenges and opportunities impacting the County's future growth potential.

In addition to conducting valuable interviews with local leaders and regional partners, TIP performed a targeted analysis of relevant demographic, workforce, and economic trends that influence Pearl River County's competitiveness. The data analysis is delivered as a separate file—an interactive Tableau data visualization—with key findings summarized in the Economic Analysis section of this report. A review of the County's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats identified during the planning process (a SWOT analysis) is also presented. The firm's work was partly informed by a planning document prepared by TIP in 2019 for the Gulf Coast Business Council and Gulf Coast Community Foundation. The analysis covered the six-county Coastal Mississippi region, comprised of George, Hancock, Harrison, Jackson, Pearl River, and Stone Counties. The objective of the Coastal Mississippi Investment Opportunities Analysis was to provide a framework for driving prosperity in the region and to guide the award of settlement funds associated with the 2010 BP oil spill. The larger regional context, combined with local analysis of Pearl River County's competitive position, provide a solid foundation for the strategic plan to ensure recommendations are based on realities rather than wishful thinking.

**This plan provides a roadmap to guide Pearl River County's economic development program for the next 10 years.** If community leaders embrace the opportunities presented in this plan, the County can become a thriving destination for new jobs and investment, talent, and business growth.

## PILLARS OF FOCUS

Based on the data analysis, stakeholder input, and discussions with County officials, the following “pillars of focus” were established to guide the plan. The idea of these pillars is to provide a framework for evaluating potential projects and investments that improve the economic position of Pearl River County and create a common vision for the future.



### JOBS & INVESTMENT

Create well-paying jobs and drive resilient and sustainable investment in the County



### TALENT

Ensure the County has the skills and talent to support current and future employers



### QUALITY OF PLACE

Make investments that support and enhance the County’s quality of place

## PRIORITY STRATEGIES

In identifying strategies for Pearl River County, TIP focused on activities and investments that would complement the three pillars, take advantage of local strengths, and build on regional priorities. The following priorities emerged from the planning process. They represent the most promising opportunities for promoting economic growth and prosperity in the County.

1. **SITE DEVELOPMENT.** The County has several development options that could facilitate employment growth and enhance the tax base. These include existing industrial parks and revitalization of commercial areas, as well as new development opportunities. Building out the Interstate 59 (I-59) and West Union Road interchange and encouraging medical-related development in the areas adjacent to Highland Hospital (Picayune) and Pearl River County Hospital (Poplarville) are examples of new development opportunities. Moving these opportunities forward and creating shovel-ready sites will position the County to move quickly when the economy recovers. Within these efforts, consideration must be given to how trends that have accelerated during the pandemic—including the dramatic rise in e-commerce and remote work—will impact development patterns. Focusing on industries and activities that are likely to continue to require face-to-face operations should be emphasized.
2. **TARGET INDUSTRY RECRUITMENT.** The availability of developable land at an affordable price is a significant competitive advantage for Pearl River County. This advantage, coupled with the County’s assets like interstate highway access; proximity to numerous major metropolitan areas; and the presence of unique institutions, such as Stennis Space Center (SSC), were among the considerations in the selection of target sectors.
  - ▶ The **aerospace** target builds on the presence of SSC, as well as military assets in neighboring counties and the growing commercial market for unmanned aircraft.
  - ▶ Anchor institutions such as the US Navy, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and the University of Southern Mississippi Division of Marine Science, underpin the recommendation to target the emerging “**blue economy**” sector, which covers economic activities derived from oceans and coastal areas.

- ▶ Large tracts of available land with easy highway access make **distribution and logistics** a fit, particularly given the flood-prone nature of properties south of Interstate-10 (I-10).
- ▶ Supply chain disruptions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic have helped to accelerate the reshoring trend already underway, creating an opportunity for Pearl River County to capture **light manufacturing** facilities that are expanding or relocating in response to these pressures.
- ▶ Long-term demographic shifts coupled with ongoing industry trends, such as increased demand for testing and specialized services, will continue to make **healthcare** an attractive target for expansion.
- ▶ Finally, a proliferation of chemical plants along the Gulf Coast and proximity to the Mississippi Polymer Institutes present potential competitive advantages for the manufacture of **polymers**.

3. **MARKETING & IMAGE.** Defining an image for the County and raising awareness of its advantages will be an important foundation for making progress on the identified priorities. The first step in accomplishing either objective is a deep understanding of the County’s value proposition. What makes Pearl River County unique? How does this value proposition vary according to the audience, which includes local employers, site location professionals, current residents, visitors, and state and regional allies? Once these questions are answered, the task of marketing comes into play through the selection of channels, themes, and messages. Taking advantage of low-cost channels like social media, coordinating themes across multiple partners, and tailoring the message to the appropriate audience are the priority. Linking economic development marketing with complementary efforts, like tourism, can help amplify their effectiveness.
4. **BUSINESS RETENTION & EXPANSION.** The once-in-a-generation challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated economic impacts illustrate the critical role that existing businesses play in local economies. Formalizing a business retention and expansion (BRE) effort should be the backbone of any economic development strategy. In the current climate, it is essential. Activities under this umbrella are straightforward: creating and maintaining an inventory of existing businesses, putting in place a mechanism for listening to their needs on a regular basis, serving as a liaison and a resource for addressing those needs, and establishing a method for reporting outcomes.
5. **REGIONAL COLLABORATION.** Regional collaboration was one of five guiding principles identified in the Coastal Mississippi Investment Opportunities Analysis. In keeping with this principle, the 2019 analysis sought to “[a]lign regional community and business leaders to make investments, launch initiatives, and pursue projects that collectively benefit every Coastal Mississippi community.” This plan extends that theme to include collaboration across multiple disciplines and among geographies extending along I-59 from Hattiesburg to New Orleans. Connecting the County’s efforts with a broader region will help amplify them and help raise awareness of opportunities. Advancing the long-standing goal of creating Enterprise Park— a 1,100-acre development within SSC designed to promote commercial development partnerships tied to the facility—and improving broadband access are examples of opportunities and challenges that would benefit from a regional approach.

## MOVING FORWARD

Just as important as this document and the detailed recommendations it contains is the positive momentum that has emerged as a result of the strategic planning process. Pearl River County’s community and business leaders have opened their eyes to new opportunities, committed their time and resources, and rolled up their sleeves to take the critical first steps toward charting a new path for the county’s economic future. The way forward is now clear: an unwavering focus on economic development to build a more prosperous local economy in Pearl River County with greater opportunities for higher-wage employment, business growth, and investment.

# PLANNING CONTEXT

To provide a common foundation for the planning process, TIP reviewed background materials, conducted a targeted analysis of demographic and economic indicators, and facilitated several stakeholder roundtables. Highlights from these activities shaped the recommendations and are summarized here.

## COVID-19

One cannot talk about the planning “context” for this work without mentioning that it took place amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Economic activity has been upended across the globe. Unemployment rates have soared. Evictions and foreclosures loom for workers and families caught in the grip of these crises. However, as this document goes to print, the impacts of the outbreak and the associated economic upheaval are only beginning to show up in many of the major state and federal data sets.

In addition to their effects on economic indicators, the current crises also appear to be accelerating trends that will impact communities and the practice of economic development in ways that are both immediate and long-lasting. The situation has exacerbated social inequities and spurred calls for change. It has brought to light vulnerabilities in supply chains, including the supply of skilled workers, in multiple sectors. The fallout is likely to change the way we work, shop, and consume everything from entertainment to healthcare.

While these trends and countless more are not necessarily apparent in the data yet, the planning process sought to take them into account through qualitative research and anecdotal input from those on the ground in Pearl River County and across the country.

## ECONOMIC ANALYSIS

TIP analyzed published data in four areas: demographics, housing and households, workforce and industries, and commuting patterns. The results of this data analysis were presented to the Pearl River County economic development department in an interactive Tableau workbook that allows for deeper dives into the data. This section outlines key takeaways from the analysis.

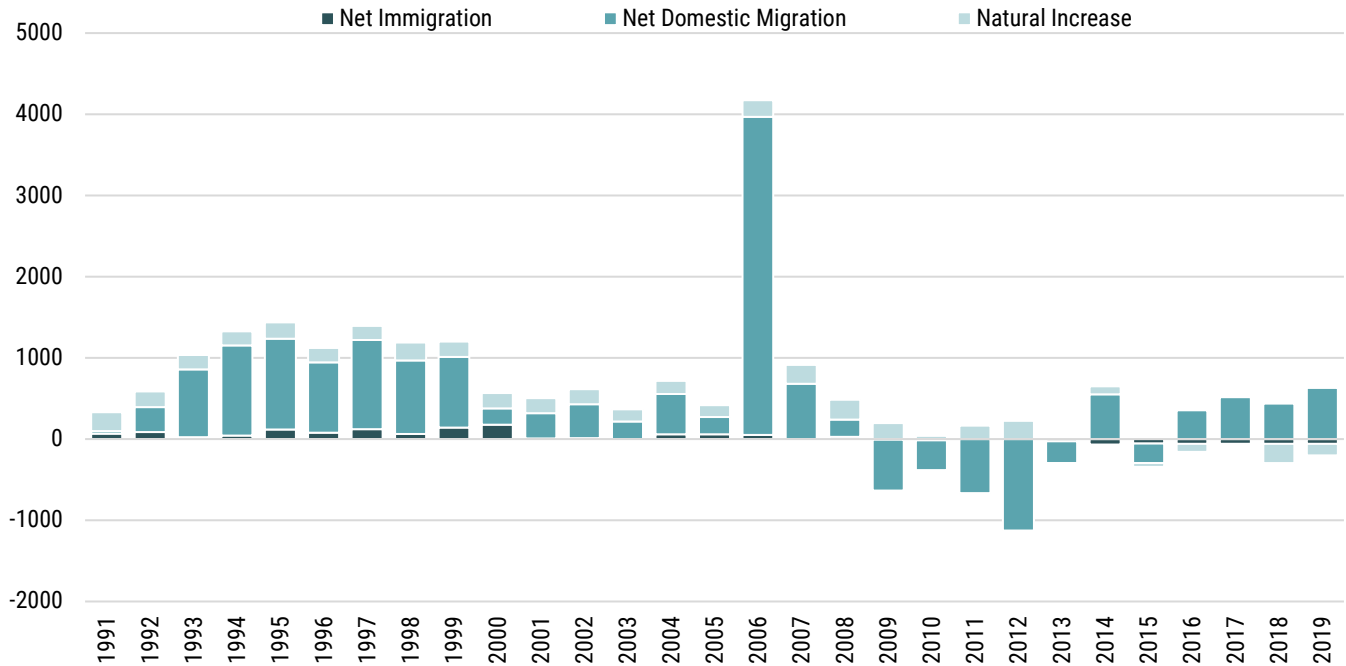
### DEFINED BY EVENTS

Pearl River County's population and employment were growing at a steady clip in the early 2000s. Then came Katrina. In the aftermath of the hurricane, the population surged, and the job base jumped accordingly. However, much of the bump proved to be short-lived. Eventually, the displaced population dissipated. The pre-Katrina momentum in population growth never completely returned. Pearl River County's employment growth in recent years has inched back to a pace of 100 to 200 net new jobs per year. (See Figure 1, next page.)

### MARRIED WITH CHILDREN

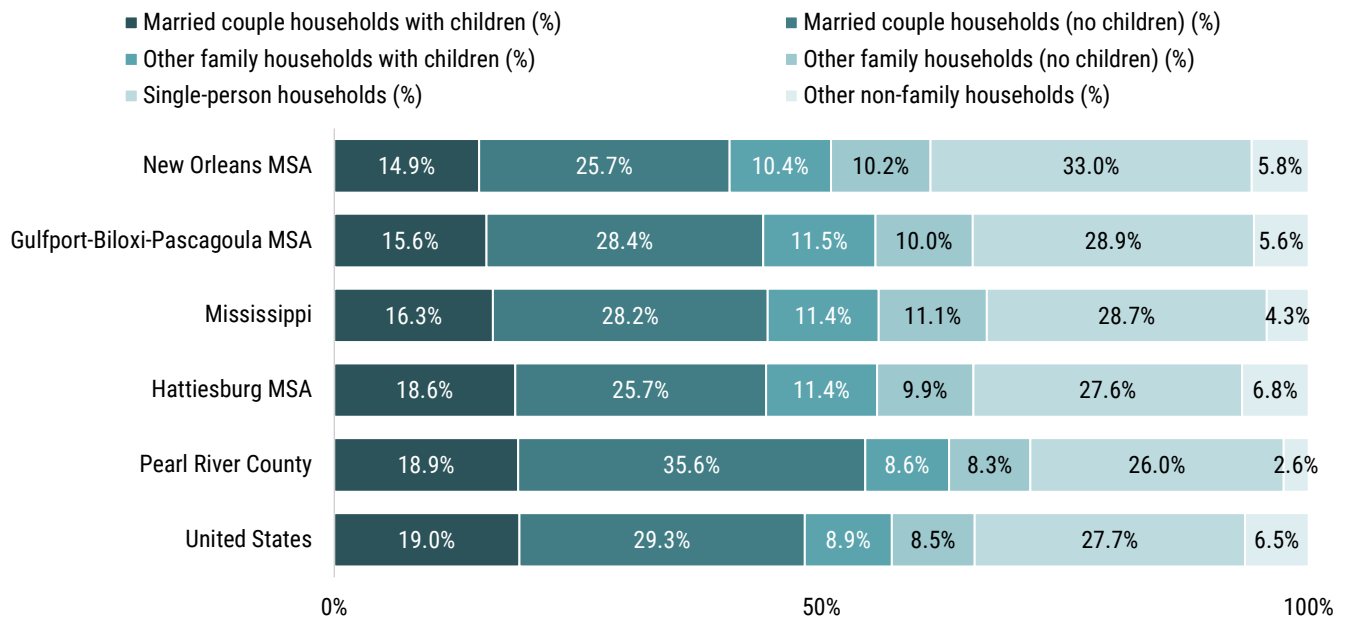
The demographic data for Pearl River County present a distinct portrait of the County. Residents are slightly older and less diverse than the nation as a whole. Pearl River County households tilt toward married couples, including those with children. Together, these two groups comprise nearly 55 percent of all households in the county, 6 percentage points higher than the US. Education levels are quite low by national standards, as is the County's labor force participation rate. Median income, however, exceeds the State of Mississippi overall, though this metric falls a bit below the surrounding metros of New Orleans, Gulfport, and Hattiesburg. (See Figure 2, next page.)

**FIGURE 1. COMPONENTS OF POPULATION CHANGE**  
PEARL RIVER COUNTY, MS



Source: US Census Bureau, Population Estimates Program; Moody's Analytics; TIP Strategies, Inc.  
Notes: Natural Increase is the difference between annual births and deaths. 2010 components are estimated based on a 12-month projection of the 2nd quarter (the period between the Census and the mid-year estimate) that is not seasonally adjusted. Total population change includes a residual (a change in population that cannot be attributed to any specific demographic component) which is not shown here. As a result, the sum of the components of change may not equal net population change.

**FIGURE 2. HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION**  
SHARE OF HOUSEHOLDS BY THEIR COMPOSITION

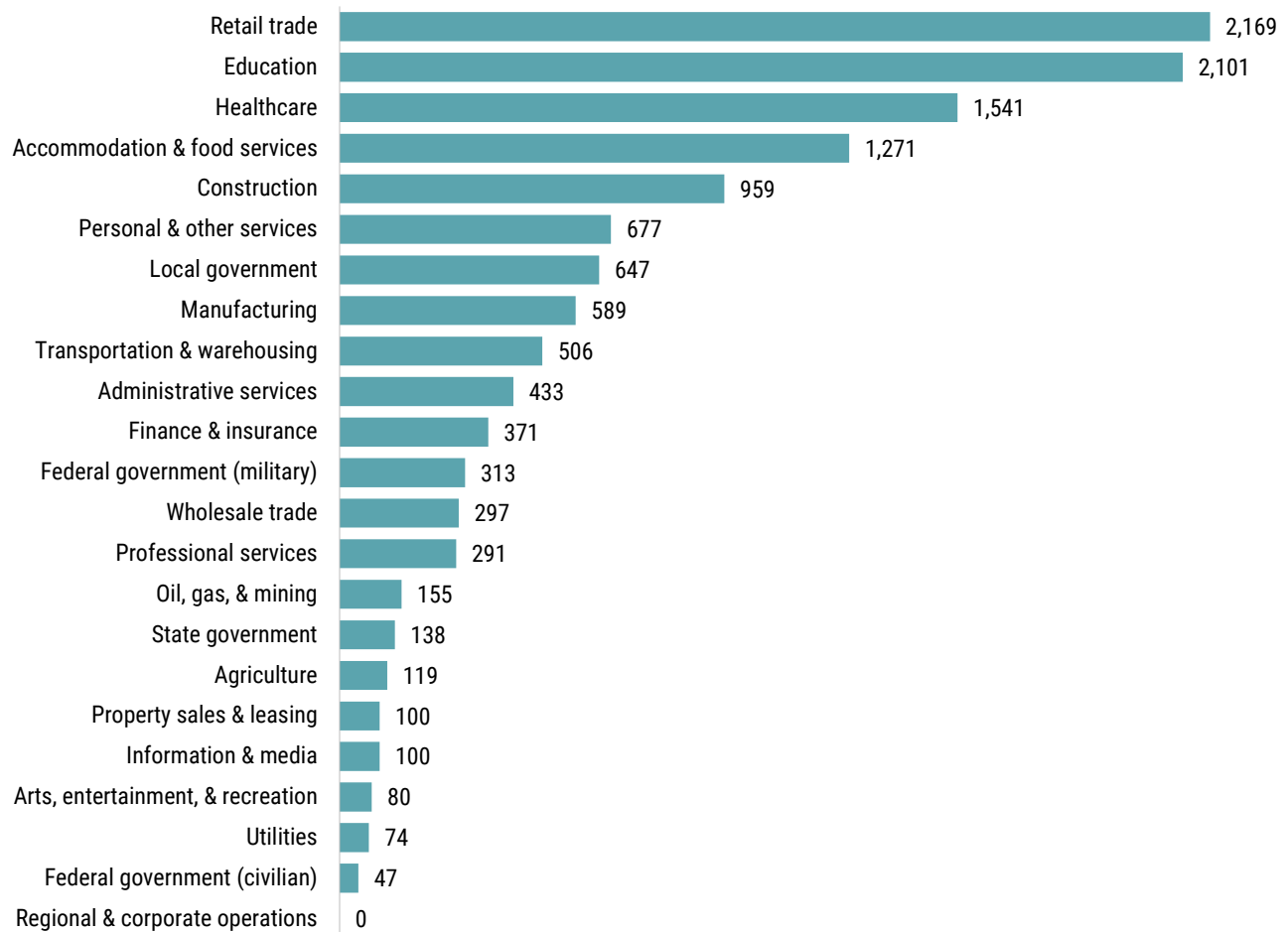


Source: American Community Survey, 2018 5-year sample; TIP Strategies, Inc.  
Notes: Family households are those where one or more people are related to the householder by marriage, birth, or adoption.

## SECTOR DYNAMICS

Retail trade, education, and healthcare form the base of the local economy. Nearly one in every four jobs in Pearl River County is in one of these three sectors. Similar to national patterns, the County's healthcare sector tacked on 368 net new jobs in the 5 years up to 2019. There are a couple of surprises in the sector growth patterns, too. On the upside, the transportation/distribution sector has shown solid growth in the County. The 5-year net gain of 225 jobs in this sector is second only to healthcare. On the downside, the education sector shed 140 jobs over the same period, the most of any of the County's industry sectors.

**FIGURE 3. 2019 EMPLOYMENT BY INDUSTRY SECTOR**  
PEARL RIVER COUNTY, MS



Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics; Emsi 2020.2 – QCEW Employees, Non-QCEW Employees, and Self-Employed; TIP Strategies, Inc.

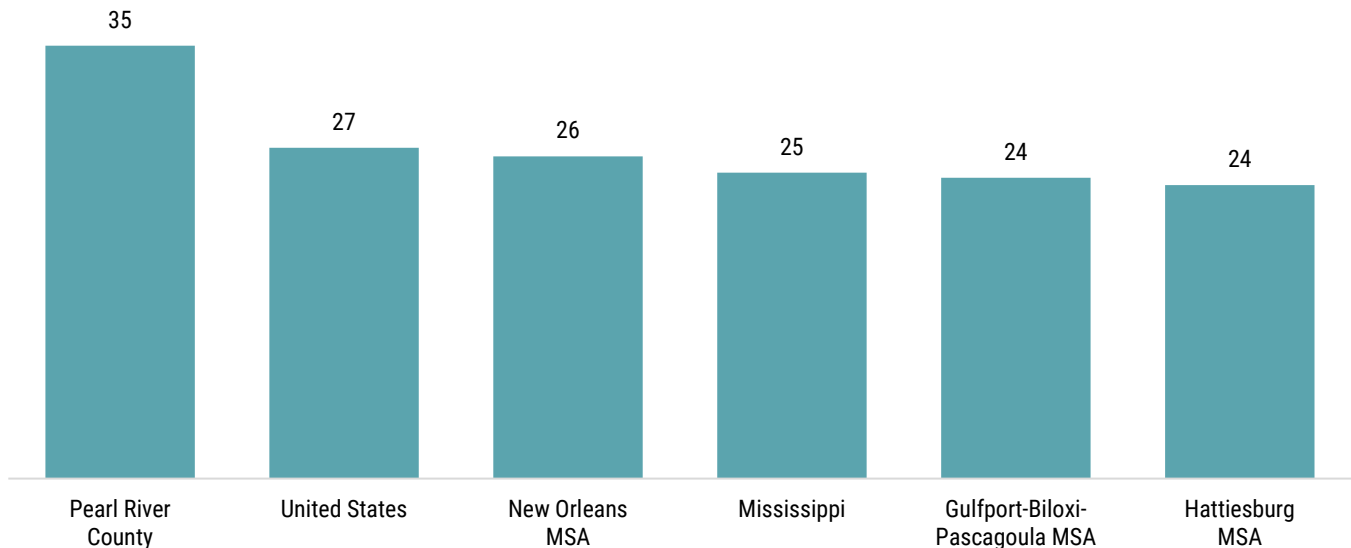


## THE LONG ROAD TO WORK

The average American spends 27 minutes getting from home to work. That's more commuting time than the average Mississippian spends getting to work, and it exceeds commuting times for residents of adjacent metros like New Orleans, Gulfport, and Hattiesburg. But if you live in Pearl River County, you're likely to have an even longer commute than the average American. On average, County residents spend 35 minutes getting to work. Our analysis shows that many of them are outbound commuters heading to jobs in the surrounding metros.

**FIGURE 4. COMMUTE TIME**

AVERAGE COMMUTING TIME IN MINUTES FOR WORKERS (16 YEARS AND OVER)



Source: American Community Survey, 2018 5-year sample; TIP Strategies, Inc.

## STAKEHOLDER INPUT

To supplement the quantitative analysis, TIP facilitated a series of roundtables with stakeholders. Due to social distancing policies and public health guidelines associated with COVID-19, these input sessions were held virtually over a series of Zoom meetings in July 2020. The sessions included elected officials and members of the economic development board, along with a mix of individuals representing major employers, local chambers of commerce, higher education, state and regional economic development allies, and others. Additional input was received in meetings with economic development board members and other key stakeholders in August 2020.

Takeaways from this outreach include:

- ▶ The relative lack of industrial parks is a limiting factor in the County's ability to grow the job base. Maximizing development options should be a core focus.
- ▶ Several assets could be better leveraged in local economic development efforts, including Stennis Space Center, Pearl River Community College, and the County's geographic location.
- ▶ The lack of high-speed internet access remains a huge competitive disadvantage for the County in the attraction of both businesses and residents.





- ▶ Improving residents' perception of the area and raising awareness of local assets should be a priority. Currently residents leave the area for work, shopping, and medical care when there are local options available.
- ▶ The development of new housing to address specific gaps (such as a lack of housing for Stennis Space Center workers and dormitories for Pearl River Community College students) and unmet housing demand within the larger region represent a significant opportunity to bring new investment and attract and retain talent.
- ▶ Many Pearl River County residents frequently leave the County in a "mass exodus" each weekend to eat, shop, and spend their wages at establishments in surrounding destinations such as Bay St. Louis, St. Tammany Parish, and other parts of Coastal Mississippi and Greater New Orleans. Restrictions on the sale of alcohol at local establishments are one key factor currently limiting the growth of restaurants, bars, nightlife, and related business activity in the County.
- ▶ External funding sources such as the RESTORE Act, the US Economic Development Administration, and other state/federal funding opportunities should be aggressively pursued by County leaders to accelerate investment in key site development and infrastructure needs.

## SWOT ANALYSIS

Building on the stakeholder engagement and economic analysis, TIP prepared an analysis of Pearl River County's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOTs). This analysis also leveraged findings from the firm's work on an investment opportunity analysis for the Coastal Mississippi region that encompasses George, Hancock, Harrison, Jackson, Pearl River, and Stone Counties, along with relevant insights from the consulting team's knowledge of national and global trends affecting economic development. Pearl River County's key assets/opportunities and challenges/threats are summarized in Figure 5 on the following page. SWOT analysis categories can be defined as the following.

- ▶ **STRENGTHS** – Advantages that can be built on to grow and strengthen the local economy.
- ▶ **WEAKNESSES** – Liabilities and obstacles to economic development that limit growth potential.
- ▶ **OPPORTUNITIES** – Assets and positive trends that hold significant potential for increased prosperity and the attraction of new businesses, investments, and people.
- ▶ **THREATS** – Unfavorable factors and trends that could negatively affect the local economy.

FIGURE 5. SWOT ANALYSIS

 <b>STRENGTHS</b>	 <b>WEAKNESSES</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lower-cost, higher-elevation land compared to Coastal MS and Greater New Orleans</li> <li>• Pearl River Community College</li> <li>• New local economic development program</li> <li>• Proximity to Stennis, New Orleans, Coastal MS, and Hattiesburg</li> <li>• Transportation infrastructure (I-59, rail, Picayune Municipal Airport)</li> <li>• Natural &amp; scenic assets (Pearl River, Crosby Arboretum, lakes)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relatively low wages, household incomes, and educational attainment levels</li> <li>• Small employment base provides few local career opportunities</li> <li>• Visual appeal &amp; community image lacking (development standards, code enforcement)</li> <li>• Lack of development-ready sites &amp; infrastructure to support business expansion &amp; recruitment</li> <li>• Lack of amenities for young adults &amp; families</li> </ul>
 <b>OPPORTUNITIES</b>	 <b>THREATS</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Business &amp; industrial park site development</li> <li>• Stennis-related development (aerospace, engineering, workforce housing)</li> <li>• Recruitment of manufacturing &amp; distribution businesses to serve Coastal region (LA, MS, AL)</li> <li>• Downtown revitalization (Picayune)</li> <li>• Expansion of local medical sector</li> <li>• Support &amp; leverage Pearl River Community College</li> <li>• Eco-tourism &amp; visitor attraction</li> <li>• RESTORE Act funding</li> <li>• New housing development throughout County</li> <li>• Broadband infrastructure investments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• National &amp; global recession</li> <li>• Negative perceptions of Mississippi (state rankings on economic, social, and health measures)</li> <li>• Difficult for local employers to find skilled workers</li> <li>• Dry county status (alcohol sales) limits potential for restaurants, bars, nightlife, entertainment, and talent attraction</li> </ul>

# PRIORITY INVESTMENTS & STRATEGIES

This section lays out the specific priorities that emerged from the planning process. They represent the consulting team’s perspective on the most promising investments and strategies Pearl River County leaders should undertake to enhance the County’s economic competitiveness. These recommendations are designed to align opportunities with desired outcomes while also addressing critical challenges that limit the County’s growth potential. The priorities are numbered to facilitate implementation; the order is not intended to suggest rank.

## PRIORITY 1. SITE DEVELOPMENT

*Ensure the availability of sites to drive investment and support job growth in the County.*

The availability of affordable and developable land remains a significant advantage for the County. Ensuring that this advantage is fully leveraged is the central objective of this priority. Strategies focus on developing new industrial sites and positioning existing facilities, as well as the revitalization of commercial areas and continuing to move forward with development opportunities that leverage regional assets and institutions.

Significant opportunities include the following sites:

- ▶ **COMMERCIAL & INDUSTRIAL SITES.** The County has several development locations that could be leveraged for job creation and economic growth.
  - ▶ *Exit 10 on I-59.* Arguably the County’s most significant development opportunity is the northeast and southwest corners of the I-59 and West Union Road highway interchange. Careful planning to maximize this prime location should be a priority, including consideration of the site’s potential to serve as a “catalyst” project (i.e., public or private investments of a sufficient magnitude and focus designed to spur the development and/or rehabilitation of surrounding areas).
  - ▶ *Picayune Business Park.* This existing park contains up to 30 acres of development-ready sites. It also contains existing buildings that are vacant or underutilized that could be repositioned to attract new companies into the County.
- ▶ **PICAYUNE MUNICIPAL AIRPORT.** Located two miles southeast of the City of Picayune with access to I-59, the airport offers access to New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast in under an hour. The airport features four FBOs (fixed-base operations) offering aircraft maintenance, flight instruction, aircraft cleaning, and parts sales. The airport hosts Chevron as its primary commercial tenant, with its helicopter operations servicing off-shore oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico. The airport’s central location with proximity to I-59 and Stennis Space Center, along with adjacent developable land, position it to attract additional business expansion projects.
- ▶ **MEDICAL DISTRICTS.** Hospitals are critical anchors for communities and regions. Pearl River County is fortunate to have not one but two facilities within its borders. In addition to being an important source of employment, hospitals are typically an “exporter” of services (since they typically draw in people from outside the immediate area) and are a key amenity for residents. Taking steps to retain these anchor institutions, by contributing to their economic health through targeted development efforts and other types of support, should be emphasized.
- ▶ **DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION.** As the County’s largest city, the revitalization of downtown Picayune sends an important signal about the overall health of the area. Picayune’s historic central business district features a well-defined core of two-story buildings, many of which need new investment to attract upper-floor residential uses and ground-floor commercial establishments. In addition to providing a key center of economic activity, Picayune helps draw tourists to the region to shop for antiques, enjoy local festivals, and visit one-of-a-kind



attractions, like the Crosby Arboretum. Poplarville’s downtown also presents opportunities, most notably in connection with Pearl River Community College’s residential dormitory needs. With a 700-person waiting list, student housing development could provide a catalyst for growth in the city center.

## STRATEGIES

- 1.1. Ensure appropriate industrial land is available and that the sites are aggressively promoted. (See also *Priority 3: Marketing & Image.*)
  - 1.1.1. Maintain information on available sites and ensure it is accessible and up to date via the Pearl River County Economic Development website.
  - 1.1.2. Ensure that existing business parks are shovel ready and positioned with appropriate sectors.
  - 1.1.3. Continue to participate in Mississippi Power’s Project Ready® Certified Sites program for major sites and keep information updated.
  - 1.1.4. Participate in local comprehensive planning initiatives to ensure that present and projected industrial and commercial development needs are adequately considered in the preparation of future land use plans.
- 1.2. Encourage the development of medical-related uses in the areas adjacent to Highland Hospital (Picayune) and Pearl River County Hospital (Poplarville). Building a cluster of uses that support hospital staff and patients will help create jobs and maintain access to medical care for County residents.
  - 1.2.1. Create/maintain medical districts or overlays to encourage clustering of related services such as medical offices and pharmacies, residential facilities (nursing homes and long-term care facilities), medical/dental clinics, labs, emergency services, medical vocational/business schools, and medical equipment/supply companies in the areas surrounding each facility.
    - ▶ The Highland Community Hospital in Picayune should be the primary focus of medical district development efforts in Pearl River County. The County, the City of Picayune, the hospital, and local landowners should work together to align long-range planning and future public and private sector investments to attract new development, jobs, and businesses into the area.
    - ▶ Similar efforts should be pursued in Poplarville to accelerate new investment and development adjacent to Pearl River County Hospital.
  - 1.2.2. Promote the development of related amenities, such as hotels and restaurants, to support hospital staff, patients, and their families.
  - 1.2.3. As part of medical district development efforts, work with local government officials, landowners, businesses, and the real estate community to identify and encourage development of complementary uses such as financial institutions, retail shops, and other non-medical professional services.
  - 1.2.4. Work with the hospitals and local workforce partners to support the hospitals in their efforts to recruit, retain, and develop staff.
- 1.3. Support downtown revitalization efforts in Picayune and Poplarville by helping local leaders put in place the tools and policies needed.
  - 1.3.1. Establish a targeted tax abatement policy, such as the policy currently being finalized for Picayune focused on the Downtown Historic Business District.
  - 1.3.2. Leverage programs, such as the National Main Street program, designed to support small business and retailers.

- ▶ Picayune has been a designated Mississippi Main Street Community since 1996. Poplarville planned to join in 2014 according to news reports but is not currently listed as a designated Main Street Community.
  - ▶ Supporting Main Street businesses with local and external resources is of critical importance in the current economic climate which has threatened the viability of locally owned small businesses across the country due to the combination of decreased consumer spending, limits on travel and public gatherings, and an acceleration of e-commerce.
- 1.3.3.** Encourage greater collaboration between Pearl River Community College and the City of Poplarville to connect Main Street revitalization efforts with the large, growing student population in the community.
- 1.3.4.** Link downtown revitalization strategies with tourism marketing. (See also *Priority 3: Marketing & Image.*) Connecting these two areas of focus can maximize the ability of retailers and small merchants to capitalize on visitors and events. Strategies include aligning hours of operations with festivals, athletic events, and seasonal offerings.

## PRIORITY 2. TARGET INDUSTRY RECRUITMENT

*Capitalize on regional assets and strengths that will encourage the growth of key sectors.*

The County is well-positioned to take a more aggressive role in the recruitment of companies in key sectors. In addition to its geographic advantages (relatively affordable land for development and easy access to major metropolitan areas along the coastal states) the County's economic development effort will benefit from new leadership that brings closer connections to state and regional allies. The following sectors represent the best opportunities for expansion based on a review of relevant assets and trends.

- ▶ **AEROSPACE.** Pearl River County is surrounded by numerous assets that support the aerospace sector, including the John C. Stennis Space Center (Hancock County); Keesler Air Force Base (Harrison County); and Camp Shelby (Hattiesburg area), a key training site for unmanned aircraft systems or drones. Given Stennis's position as NASA's largest rocket engine test facility, testing has dominated the region's activity in this sector. The increasingly competitive market for commercial space exploration and ongoing expansion of commercial applications for drones suggest an opportunity to build on and diversify the sector. The region's high-profile assets, the existing base of companies in the state, and the deep pool of aerospace and defense professionals position the area well for continued expansion.
- ▶ **BLUE ECONOMY.** The Blue Economy can be most simply described as "economic activities that create sustainable wealth from the world's oceans and coasts."<sup>1</sup> Coastal Mississippi's proximity to several bodies of water, including the Gulf of Mexico, the Mississippi River, and the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway, provides the region with a competitive advantage in this emerging sector. Buoyed by the presence of anchor institutions such as the US Navy, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and the University of Southern Mississippi Division of Marine Science, the region is well positioned to grow maritime-related industries and activities on the Coast. Shipbuilding and other defense-related developments have comprised the bulk of Coastal Mississippi's Blue Economy activities to date. However, increasing attention to the role of climate change, concern about the state of the world's oceans, and fears about drinking water safety have spurred the growth of tech companies focused on ocean exploration and water innovation.

<sup>1</sup> Center for the Blue Economy at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies <https://www.middlebury.edu/institute/academics/centers-initiatives/center-blue-economy>.

- ▶ **DISTRIBUTION.** Pearl River County's location along I-59 presents opportunities for distribution and warehousing. The County offers easy access to New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Hattiesburg, and Gulfport and is within a half day's drive of dozens of other metropolitan areas. In addition to its central location within the Gulf Coast, the County has the added advantage of being home to some of the most affordable, developable industrial land closest to the New Orleans and coastal Mississippi markets. By comparison, properties south of I-10 are more expensive and prone to flooding, both of which are barriers to developing the large sites required for distribution facilities. This sector also makes sense from a growth standpoint. The expansion of e-commerce nationally, which has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, continues to fuel demand for logistics and distribution activities.
- ▶ **POLYMERS.** Defined by the American Chemistry Council as "a useful chemical made of many repeating units," polymers play a central role in everyday life. Some polymers, like DNA and the silk spun by spiders, are naturally occurring. Manufactured polymers, starting with the invention of Bakelite in 1909, are used in applications from plastic bottles to playground equipment to medical devices. The proliferation of the chemical industry along the Gulf Coast makes polymers a logical target for the region. These facilities are often located on the outskirts of major population centers, like Pearl River County's location, to address air quality (non-attainment) challenges. The County offers another advantage for this sector: proximity to the Mississippi Polymer Institute (MPI). Located in Hattiesburg, MPI is a nonprofit "industrial outreach arm" associated with the University of Southern Mississippi. The organization provides technical services (such as physical and analytical testing, rapid prototyping, technical consulting, and workforce training and development) and educational outreach to companies, individuals, and organizations to support the growth of advanced materials in the state.
- ▶ **LIGHT MANUFACTURING.** The COVID-19 pandemic and associated economic upheaval has negatively impacted business supply chains across the world and focused attention on the potential vulnerabilities of this aspect of globalization. While the reshoring trend was already underway, global supply chain disruptions and human resource challenges resulting from the pandemic are likely to accelerate the movement. Geographic areas with strong transportation infrastructure and access to markets are well-positioned to capture expansions and relocations as corporations reevaluate their options. Light manufacturing—small-scale facilities focused on processing, assembly or disassembly, and fabricating—represents a major opportunity for Pearl River County.
- ▶ **HEALTHCARE.** The demand for healthcare services continues to be driven by the aging baby boomer generation and the rapid pace of technological and scientific advances. Increased reliance on testing, the evolution of personalized treatment options, and the growing acceptance of wellness products and alternative medicines are significant factors. As mentioned previously, Pearl River County is fortunate to have two hospitals within its borders. Supporting these essential anchor institutions and capitalizing on national trends make healthcare a strong target for Pearl River County.

## STRATEGIES

- 2.1. Establish a formal process for managing and responding to leads and prospects. Having an efficient and transparent approach to managing prospects is a critical element of an effective recruitment program.
  - 2.1.1. Implement a formal system for tracking and managing prospects. Options for creating a prospect management system range from customized solutions for economic development, to off-the-shelf customer relationship management (CRM) applications, to an Excel spreadsheet.
  - 2.1.2. Produce and maintain a standard package of information to respond to requests from commercial brokers, site selectors, and companies.

- 2.1.3. Review and tailor incentives policies to ensure they align with the requirements of target sectors and support the pillars of focus.
  - 2.1.4. Create a due diligence checklist for evaluating potential prospects. In addition to evaluating whether the business is on sound financial footing and can deliver on expectations (job creation, wage rates, and capital investment), the idea of due diligence should extend to understanding the fiscal, social, and environmental impacts of the proposed investment to the fullest extent possible.
  - 2.1.5. Prepare in advance for prospect visits. This advance preparation should include formalizing a community tour that presents the area favorably and highlights unique assets, identifying the delegation that will participate in the visit, and researching options for appealing to specific interests of the prospect's delegation (suggestions for dining and lodging, available outdoor recreation opportunities, possible events or cultural offerings to consider, and so on).
  - 2.1.6. Provide relocation assistance for prospects that have been evaluated and deemed to be of significant benefit to the County. These services could include assistance in navigating the local development process, negotiating incentives, and structuring training programs for new employees.
- 2.2. Build relationships with influencers and allies that can help generate high-quality leads. Forging strong relationships with these groups can also help the County stay abreast of regional developments and tap into expanded networks.
- 2.2.1. Update and maintain a database of developers, brokers, and site consultants.
  - 2.2.2. Attend a limited number of trade shows and industry conferences primarily to stay informed about industry trends and to develop industry network contacts. Focus resources on those that are most closely tailored to the target industries and that cater to executive-level participation.
  - 2.2.3. Maintain regular contact with developers and brokers with an emphasis on connecting the County with neighboring metropolitan areas. In addition to emails, newsletters, and general networking, consideration should be given to conducting a limited number of call trips/marketing missions (when public health guidelines permit).
  - 2.2.4. Connect regularly with state and regional allies that can help position the County and that are a source of lead generation. These allies include regional partners such as the Gulf Coast Business Council, state-level officials at the Mississippi Development Authority, the Southern Mississippi Planning and Development District, and the Mississippi Defense Initiative.
- 2.3. Stay current on trends and issues that are of concern to companies in the identified target sectors.
- 2.3.1. Maintain regular contact with local companies in target sectors as a means of understanding the needs and concerns of potential investors in the same sector. *(See also Priority 4: Business Retention & Expansion.)*
  - 2.3.2. Join trade associations that are closely related to the targets. Along with providing a significant source of information via their publications and events, trade associations frequently extend detailed intelligence to their members through surveys and in-depth market analyses.
  - 2.3.3. Identify industry-specific publications and data resources. Examples include both proprietary providers (such as Thompson-Reuters, Hoovers), public agencies (such as the International Trade Administration's industry intelligence resources <https://www.trade.gov/industries-0>), and corporate filings of publicly held firms in the sector (such as 10-K reports).
  - 2.3.4. Identify industry experts and build relationships. These experts could include individuals associated with regional organizations (SSC, the University of Southern Mississippi) as well as state and federal groups.



## PRIORITY 3. MARKETING & IMAGE

*Position the County with companies and talent in the Coastal Mississippi region and beyond.*

Raising awareness of the area, both within the region and externally, is an implicit goal of expanding Pearl River County's economic development efforts and is a necessary condition for securing new investment. A concerted effort that aims to influence the way the County is viewed by business executives, real estate developers, skilled workers, and other target audiences will be required to accomplish this goal. Identifying the area's value proposition is the starting point. With this value proposition in mind, the County can then tailor the channels, themes, and specific messaging to align with each audience.

However, to be completely successful, the County's marketing and image campaign must start by changing internal perceptions. Stakeholder input for this work suggests that residents' views of Pearl River County do not reflect the area's potential. A coordinated approach is needed to identify and tell more compelling stories about the County's many positive attributes. Changing these stories can have a transformational effect.

Linking internal and external efforts with other partners, including tourism, can extend the reach of economic development marketing campaigns. Along with attracting outside dollars to the region, successful tourism marketing efforts can have a positive effect on overall awareness and help change both internal and external perceptions of an area. Tourism also provides a mechanism for introducing people to the area who may later become residents, business owners, or investors. Connecting to regional and state tourism initiatives can further amplify these activities.

## STRATEGIES

- 3.1. Leverage the recently created Pearl River County Economic Development website.
  - 3.1.1. Devote resources to ensuring that information on the site is up-to-date and includes dynamic content (press releases, events).
  - 3.1.2. Promote the website aggressively. Specific tactics include incorporating the URL into County staff email signatures and County publications (as appropriate), linking to partner websites (and asking them to reciprocate), listing Pearl River County Economic Development and the website in relevant online directories, and promoting the site across all social media platforms. (See *also Strategy 3.2.*)
  - 3.1.3. Prepare materials aimed at decision makers in the target sectors outlined in Priority 2: Target Industry Recruitment. This could include developing a profile for each sector that includes relevant information on well-suited sites, labor market data (including leading occupations), testimonials from company executives, and key assets.
- 3.2. Establish a public relations and digital marketing campaign to highlight the County's economic development advantages and success stories for existing residents and potential investors/residents.
  - 3.2.1. Develop baseline digital marketing tools and engage in regular digital marketing activities, including:
    - ▶ Infographics created to visually highlight Pearl River County's key assets and the facts behind them.
    - ▶ Periodic LinkedIn Pulse articles that describe the County's competitive business advantages, using interviews with existing businesses to tell their story.
    - ▶ Weekly Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter posts linking back to the Pulse article.
    - ▶ Instagram posts of pictures of the assets and businesses that were interviewed, linking to the County's economic development website.
    - ▶ Short YouTube videos created to highlight each aspect of what makes Pearl River County a great community for businesses and residents.

- 3.2.2. Work with local partners and business organizations to ensure that information about the County being communicated through online and social media channels is positive, consistent, and accurate.
  - ▶ Closely monitor Pearl River County’s Wikipedia entry to ensure it depicts an accurate and positive image of the community as a location for business expansion and investment.
- 3.2.3. Identify contacts and build relationships with traditional print and online media outlets. Draft press releases on a regular basis to keep media contacts informed of important events and to communicate success stories.
- 3.3. Work with relevant tourism partners to design a visitor attraction strategy that links tourism to economic development.
  - 3.3.1. Identify significant attractions and events that could inform this strategy. This task should draw on existing inventories and assets, like Mississippi Tourism’s Visit Mississippi website.
  - 3.3.2. Work with tourism partners to make sure relevant assets are packaged in a way that appeals to specific audiences and helps link assets to one another.
    - ▶ Engage in conversations with Coastal Mississippi (the regional convention & visitors bureau and destination marketing organization for Hancock, Harrison, and Jackson Counties) about potential collaboration that would link Pearl River County’s visitor attractions to the larger region.
    - ▶ Examples include themed routes and trails (e.g., bird watching trails, wine tasting tours, BBQ “best of” lists), day or weekend trip itineraries (designed to draw residents from neighboring metropolitan areas), and road trips aimed at a certain demographics (such as retirees, RV enthusiasts, families, and outdoor adventurers).
  - 3.3.3. Partner with area hotels and restaurants to leverage area festivals and events as a means to entice visitors to stay in the region longer.
  - 3.3.4. Position the County with current and potential residents, visitors, and businesses that would value its outdoor recreation assets. Existing assets—most notably the Crosby Arboretum—would be the core of this strategy. However, a focus on marketing the County’s outdoor recreation assets could support further development in this space, including the following:
    - ▶ Completing the proposed Lower Pearl River Watershed Environmental Education Center at the Crosby Arboretum, a 64-acre native plant conservatory and trail system, could help attract visitors and provide them a reason to extend their stay.
    - ▶ The long-standing proposal to develop a master planned community in Millard, to include the creation of Lake Troy, would build on the County’s unique setting and enhance perceptions of its quality of place. Development of the lake could expand the County’s menu of outdoor recreation opportunities to promote, including fishing, boating, hunting, camping, hiking, and biking.
    - ▶ Stronger promotion and additional development of visitor attractions and events at Kings Arrow Ranch (location of the annual Gulf Wars event of the Society for Creative Anachronism) would further enhance the County’s status as an outdoor recreation destination.

#### **PRIORITY 4. BUSINESS RETENTION & EXPANSION**

*Support existing employers by identifying and helping to mitigate barriers and vulnerabilities.*

Although it is often overlooked in the rush to recruit new, headline-generating companies, support for existing businesses should be at the heart of any economic development strategy. Prioritizing existing employers makes sense on multiple fronts. Local businesses are already invested in their communities and often play an important role in supporting local causes. From a return on investment standpoint, the challenges facing existing establishments can sometimes be addressed with non-cash assistance or with a smaller outlay than the

recruitment of an outside firm. Perhaps most importantly, existing businesses serve as de facto ambassadors for the community as they transact with businesses locally and outside the region. By maintaining positive relationships, existing businesses become a recruitment advantage.

The importance of this “bird-in-the-hand” approach has been brought into sharp relief during the COVID-19 pandemic and related economic upheaval. Social distancing guidelines and stay-at-home orders have resulted in the closure, whether temporary or permanent, of countless businesses nationwide over the course of the pandemic. A solid business retention and expansion (BRE) effort—one that focuses on identifying and mitigating barriers, facilitating access to relevant information, and acting as a liaison with governmental agencies—becomes essential in the face of current challenges.

## STRATEGIES

- 4.1. Formalize the County’s business visitation program by documenting existing businesses and creating a mechanism for collecting information on a regular basis.
  - 4.1.1. Maintain an inventory of existing businesses and available properties. Publicly available business records, such as DBA filings, tax records, utility hookups, and ownership transfers, can be good sources of information. This inventory should be recorded and maintained in an electronic database or a customer relationship management (CRM) system.
  - 4.1.2. Administer an annual or bi-annual survey of employers. This survey will identify which companies may be at risk of leaving and which plan to expand. In addition, these surveys can uncover issues that might not otherwise come to the surface.
  - 4.1.3. Visit at least 20 businesses (one or two per month) per year. The purpose of the visits should be to gauge the ability and needs of local businesses to operate successfully and possibly expand in the community.
- 4.2. Establish tools and systems tailored to support and enhance business retention and expansion efforts.
  - 4.2.1. Ensure existing incentives policies support potential expansion opportunities and align with the needs of recruitment targets.
  - 4.2.2. Provide ongoing mechanisms for evaluation and reporting, such as the preparation of an annual report that highlights identified issues, tracks at-risk businesses according to major issues, and links issues to resources (i.e., with labor force, involve workforce boards).
  - 4.2.3. Feature success stories of local companies on the Pearl River County Economic Development website, through social media, and at regional events. (*See also Priority 3: Marketing & Image.*)
- 4.3. Team with local, regional, and state workforce development partners, including Pearl River Community College, to create a coordinated business retention effort.
  - 4.3.1. Cooperate with this partner network to align workforce development and training to support the needs of existing employers and key industries.
  - 4.3.2. Help workforce development partners raise awareness about local job opportunities, training options, and career pathways among employers and residents.
  - 4.3.3. Ensure the existence of a countywide “rapid response” strategy for dealing with potential layoffs or closures. If one does not exist, work with the workforce development network to create one.

## PRIORITY 5. REGIONAL COLLABORATION

*Build relationships and better connect the County with key players in Coastal Mississippi.*

The appointment of Pearl River County’s first economic development director signals a new commitment to building relationships and leveraging the County’s Gulf Coast location. Regional collaboration was one of five guiding principles identified in the opportunities analysis TIP prepared for a six-county Coastal Mississippi region, that included Pearl River County. The relationships that the new director, Blaine LaFontaine, brings to the role will greatly facilitate this strategy.

Regional leaders have long discussed the creation of a site that would facilitate partnerships between Stennis Space Center (SSC) and private companies that align with the facility’s mission and strategic goals. Known as Enterprise Park, the proposed site sits within the SSC campus, but outside of the secured perimeter. This “outside-the-gate” model can help reduce security and cost barriers to the co-location of commercial and federal operations. According to a June 2020 study of the issue (Stennis Space Center: Enterprise Park Special Study, prepared by Michael Baker International, Inc.), the primary industry targets for the park are aerospace, unmanned systems, shared services, and research and development (R&D). Supporting this long-term objective would yield benefits for the County and the broader region.

Broadband access is another essential economic development asset that is best addressed on a regional basis. Access to highspeed internet is no longer a luxury; it is considered a basic part of the infrastructure for conducting business. Stakeholders interviewed in connection with this work and with TIP’s larger Gulf Coast engagement pointed to the lack of broadband as a key constraint in the region’s development.

The concept of regional collaboration must also extend beyond the Coastal Mississippi region to include the metropolitan areas that anchor the I-59 corridor along which Pearl River County lies. Creating greater connections between the County and Hattiesburg to the north and Greater New Orleans to the south will be a key aspect in achieving the other priorities identified by this work.

In addition to a geographic take on regional collaboration, this strategy seeks to increase collaboration across multiple disciplines. A holistic approach to economic development—one that brings together workforce and education partners, community development professionals, social service organizations, in addition to the private sector—will be critical to the County’s success.

## STRATEGIES

- 5.1.** Strengthen and formalize partnerships between Pearl River County and SSC and Hancock County. Focus on Enterprise Park initially and look for future opportunities to coordinate activities and leverage combined resources.
  - 5.1.1.** Continue to support regional efforts to move forward with the development of Enterprise Park.
    - ▶ Project Ready North – 250-acre industrial park site
    - ▶ Project Ready South – 150-acre large industrial site (appears intended for large, single-user).
  - 5.1.2.** Engage in dialogue with SSC about how Pearl River County can pursue new housing developments to address shortages in the area’s housing supply for SSC employees and their families.
- 5.2.** Ensure Pearl River County is “at the table” in regional economic development efforts.
  - 5.2.1.** Participate in regional efforts focused on economic development, business advocacy, tourism, workforce training, and other issues that cross county lines.



- 5.2.2. Identify opportunities for greater engagement with regional organizations that focus on a larger geography that includes Pearl River County (such as the Southern Mississippi Planning and Development District) or could potentially include the County (such as the Gulf Coast Business Council, Coastal Mississippi, and Goodwill Industries of South Mississippi).
- 5.3. Support and leverage Pearl River Community College (PRCC) for local economic development and as an important part of the solution to Coastal Mississippi's workforce challenges.
  - 5.3.1. Find ways to provide more resources for PRCC to renovate existing facilities, create new facilities, and develop programs to better serve the needs of local and regional employers.
  - 5.3.2. Partner with PRCC to provide support for programs that are related to Pearl River County's target industries. (See also *Priority 2: Target Industry Recruitment.*)
  - 5.3.3. Work with area employers to support a wider range of internship opportunities, apprenticeships, and other work-based learning opportunities for PRCC students.
  - 5.3.4. Promote PRCC regularly through as many channels as possible, ensuring the County's economic development marketing efforts place special emphasis on PRCC's programs that align with the County's target industries.
- 5.4. Explore innovative strategies for addressing the need for more widespread broadband access throughout Pearl River County and the surrounding region.
  - 5.4.1. Support Coast Electric Power with its efforts to expand broadband internet infrastructure in the County and the region.
  - 5.4.2. Conduct a broadband internet planning survey (also known as a digital community needs assessment) to help understand where the gaps are in the County and help prioritize areas that need better internet connectivity with the greatest urgency.
  - 5.4.3. Engage in conversations with the Gulf Coast Business Council and other regional organizations seeking to address the area's broadband challenges with innovative solutions.

## APPENDIX: ENGAGEMENT & OUTREACH

As part of this work, TIP solicited input from a range of stakeholder organizations, including the following:

### COUNTY ORGANIZATIONS

- ▶ City of Picayune
- ▶ Picayune Chamber Board
- ▶ Pearl River County Economic District Board
- ▶ Pearl River County Board of Supervisors
- ▶ Pearl River County Community College
- ▶ Pearl River County Board of Realtors

### STATE AND REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

- ▶ Mississippi Development Authority
- ▶ Mississippi Power
- ▶ Mississippi Defense Initiative
- ▶ Coast Electric Power
- ▶ Southern Mississippi Planning & Development District

Outreach activities included virtual workshops during which participants were asked to share their views on opportunities and challenges using an interactive polling tool (Mentimeter). Findings from one such workshop, conducted in July 2020 in collaboration with the Greater Picayune Area Chamber of Commerce, are shown below:

### WHICH CHALLENGES FACING PEARL RIVER COUNTY'S FUTURE WORRY YOU THE MOST?

- ▶ Broadband, digital divide, land development, missed opportunities.
- ▶ Current lack of a true industrial park with access to high speed internet, rail, and interstate. Current park in Picayune is limited at best.
- ▶ Keeping our youth here in our community to help grow our local economy.
- ▶ Competition with other areas such as St. Tammany Parish.
- ▶ The loss of youth. Little is here to hold graduates in terms of jobs. For either college or high school grads.
- ▶ Buy local support Pearl River country.
- ▶ Available workforce.
- ▶ We need to change the mentality of our residents. Stay local to shop for things, eat, entertainment. Every one goes out of town. If we stayed in town and invest in our town we would be able to have more.

### WHICH OPPORTUNITIES TO ENHANCE PEARL RIVER COUNTY'S FUTURE PROSPERITY EXCITE YOU THE MOST?

- ▶ Leverage Stennis Space Center, Downtown Development, Warehousing & Distribution.
- ▶ Blaine Lafontaine in place.....The commitment from county and city to have him in place. He has and is creating new relationships/partnerships that will bring federal money and private money here.
- ▶ Industrial Park opportunities to bring industries into the community.
- ▶ Opportunity through the 2 area hospitals to draw in various medical industries.
- ▶ Our location is our biggest asset. We need a nice industrial park in the county.
- ▶ Working together as 1 community. Not 3.
- ▶ High and dry land availability. PRCC presence for available workforce.
- ▶ We have a great vocational program at a nationally recognized Community College to further jobs in that arena
- ▶ Improvement to our parks.