

Greater Dalton Community and Economic Development Strategic Plan

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What is it?

- A plan to improve the economic future of Greater Dalton
- Led by a 23 member steering committee
- The planning stage of the process is broken into four phases
 - Phase 1 – Interviews and Online Survey
 - Phase 2 – Community Assessment
 - Phase 3 – Community & Economic Development Strategy
 - Phase 4 – Implementation Plan
- The planning stage of the project will conclude in late May

Where are we in the process?

- We have completed Phases 1 & 2
- We conducted 20 face-to-face interviews with community leaders
- 2,220 citizens took the online survey
- We conducted a research-based comparison of Greater Dalton to 9 similar communities in the Southeast:
 - Morgan County, AL (Decatur)
 - Bartow County, GA (Cartersville)
 - Floyd County, GA (Rome)
 - Hall County, GA (Gainesville)
 - Lee County, MS (Tupelo)
 - Catawba County, NC (Hickory)
 - Davidson County, NC (Lexington)
 - Randolph County, NC (Asheboro)
 - Bradley County, TN (Cleveland)

What did we learn?

The Community Assessment document presents key findings from the interviews, surveys, and research in 5 sections.

1. Economic Performance (Rank - 7th): This section deals with our community's economic health and well-being, focusing on key indicators such as total private employment, employment growth in key economic sectors, and per capita income. Key findings include overdependence on one industry, heavy job losses during the Great Recession followed by strong job gains, relatively strong wages, and a loss of white collar jobs.

2. Workforce Dynamics (Rank - 10th): A community's workforce competitiveness is primarily determined by its ability to meet regional businesses' demand for qualified talent and its capacity to attract new residents and retain its existing population. Key findings in this area include low educational attainment, out-migration outpacing in-migration, and praise for Dalton State, GNTC, and the College & Career Academy.

3. Innovation and Entrepreneurship (Rank - 10th): The capacity to generate new ideas and new businesses is a core component of economic development. An "entrepreneurial ecosystem" can be quantified by examining self-employment, new startup growth, minority-owned business growth, and so forth. Key finding include a

diminishing entrepreneurial environment, lagging new business starts, and a lack of focus on the “entrepreneurial ecosystem”.

4. Business Climate (Rank - 1st): While factors such as talent and location are among the most important in business location and expansion decisions, a favorable “business climate” – infrastructure, utility availability and cost, etc. – also plays an important role in driving economic growth. Key findings include a very favorable tax and regulatory climate with access to good infrastructure and utilities.

5. Quality of Life (Rank - 7th): Quality of life and quality of place are crucial to retaining and attracting talented individuals. While it is difficult to quantify a community’s culture and “feel,” crime, walkability, and health outcomes can provide objective insight into a community’s desirability as a place to live. Downtown redevelopment, improved social offerings, quality housing, and aesthetics were major themes in this section.

Key takeaways from the Community Assessment phase of the project include:

- Greater Dalton faces a talent drain as college-educated professionals choose to earn a salary in Greater Dalton and live elsewhere
- “Quality of place” and housing, especially downtown, are needed to retain talent
- Greater Dalton has a poor self-image that is detrimental with residents and outsiders alike
- Renewed focus on entrepreneurial ecosystem offers a path to new business creation
- Low educational attainment rates undermine our economic competitiveness
- Child poverty threatens community success and individual outcomes
- Dalton State and innovative educational programs such as the College & Career Academy’s Advanced Manufacturing and Business Academy and GNTC are key assets

What’s next?

- Phases 3 & 4 will focus on developing the strategy and implementing the plan. The Community and Economic Development Strategy will bring together findings from the first two phases of the process to create a holistic five-year vision for the Greater Dalton. Strategic recommendations will be driven by research findings and feedback from local stakeholders. Examples of best practice programs, policies, and initiatives from communities around the country will be included when relevant and appropriate to help inform strategic recommendations and their subsequent implementation.
- The Implementation Plan will ensure that the strategy can become a reality by committing to how actions will be implemented. The Steering Committee will prioritize actions, develop a realistic timeline for implementation, identify of “lead” and “support” organizations to advance efforts, review capacity and funding, and develop performance metrics that the community can use to track progress.

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