

# River Valley Regional Plan 2012-2032



## Regional Assessment

# Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	2
• History of the River Valley Regional Commission	
• Purpose of the Regional Assessment	
<b>Quality Community Objectives</b> .....	3
• Quality Community Objectives.....	4
○ Traditional Neighborhoods	
○ Infill Development	
○ Sense of Place	
○ Transportation Alternatives	
○ Heritage Preservation	
○ Open Space Preservation	
○ Environmental Protection	
○ Economic Development	
○ Housing Choices	
○ Regionalism	
<b>Regional Issues and Opportunities</b> .....	11
<b>Data Elements and Analysis</b> .....	17
• Population.....	18
• Economic Development .....	21
• Housing.....	29
• Community Facilities.....	36
• Intergovernmental.....	47
• Transportation.....	50
• Land Use.....	56
<b>Analysis of Existing &amp; Future Regional Development Patterns</b> .....	58
• Existing Land Use.....	60
• Areas Requiring Special Attention.....	64
• Projected Development.....	69
<b>Regional Maps</b>	
<b>Transportation Map</b> .....	55
<b>Existing Land Use Map</b> .....	59
<b>Areas Requiring Special Attention Map</b> .....	63
<b>Areas RSA Natural Resources Map</b> .....	66
<b>Projected Development Map</b> .....	68
<b>Regionally Important Resources Map</b> .....	71

# Executive Summary

**The River Valley Regional Commission** has provided planning assistance for the sixteen counties and thirty-five cities in its region, which has included comprehensive plans, redevelopment plans, pre-disaster mitigation plans, and solid waste management plans as well as comprehensive economic development strategies.

**To aid in the future growth of the River Valley region,** the RVRC staff has prepared the Community Assessment, which addresses the statistics and demographics of the region, as well as the issues the communities will face and opportunities for growth and economic development over the next twenty years. The River Valley Regional Commission's Community Assessment is designed to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the region as a whole, to better develop strategies to guide the region in the upcoming years.

## **The Purpose of the Regional Assessment**

is to provide critical information that will help to identify the existing and future needs of the region. This process will aid local governments in developing policies and strategies that will drive growth within the region for the next twenty years.

As the first part of the River Valley Regional Plan, the Community Assessment will include the following information and topics:

- A list of potential issues and opportunities that the River Valley region may want to address.
- An analysis of existing development patterns within rural, developing, and developed areas of the region, including a projected development map to be considered in the creation of the region's vision statement.
- An evaluation of local government's current policies, activities, and development patterns within the region for consistency with the Georgia Department of Community Affairs Quality Community Objectives.
- An analysis of the River Valley region's socio-economic data and information.

# Quality Community Objectives

**The First Step of the Community Assessment** is to validate and evaluate the River Valley region's current policies, activities and development patterns for consistency with the Quality Community Objectives.

The quality community objectives will aid local communities in creating development standards and practices that encourage sustainability for our communities. Encompassing a range of objectives from open space preservation to economic development, the quality community objectives are principles to help guide communities in developing best practices that will ensure that their communities are healthy places to live, work, and play. This type of development will be extremely compatible with the existing development patterns of the small communities throughout the River Valley region, which are often characterized by a traditional downtown surrounded by residential neighborhoods, and will only serve to strengthen them for the future.



# **Quality Community Objectives**

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## **Traditional Neighborhoods**

Traditional neighborhoods typically follow development patterns common to the time period prior to World War II, which offers residents a variety of housing options. These neighborhoods are often located within easy walking distance of a community's downtown, town center, or other commercial areas, providing easy access to commercial and recreational activities. The resulting community is one that is pedestrian friendly and allows residents to easily work and live within a compact environment.

### **Assessment**

One major issue that needs to be addressed region-wide is the lack of consistent zoning codes and enforcement throughout the region. While most of the communities do have ordinances, some still do not. In addition, many of the existing codes are not comprehensive, or are in need of updating. Some communities have expressed interest in updating these codes to allow for more flexible and non-traditional development, such as form-based codes to allow for loft living and other more compact development types. Many cities in the region have sidewalks and vegetation and in portions of the communities in which errands could be made on foot. The increased use of tree planting ordinances and campaigns would aid in shading sidewalks to make commuting on foot more comfortable in the summer months. Children sometimes utilize these sidewalks to go to and from school. However, in many communities throughout the region, schools are located in remote areas that make it difficult, if not, impossible and dangerous, for children to either bike or walk to school.

## **Infill Development**

Infill development is an effective revitalization strategy for communities to maximize underutilized buildings, vacant lots, and brownfield/greyfield sites within the community. This strategy takes advantage of existing infrastructure and community facilities such as streets, sewer, and other utilities, as those facilities do not need to be provided for infill development projects.

### **Assessment**

Infill development is a difficult quality community objective for many communities to achieve. The extremely rural nature of many of the counties and cities results in few areas that are compact enough to truly benefit from this type of redevelopment. However, the majority of communities do have provisions for small lot development, which will encourage infill housing and commercial development in appropriate locations. The greatest opportunity for infill development in the River Valley region will be in the infill and redevelopment of brownfield and greyfield sites. Currently, several of the region's communities actively work to redevelop these types of properties. The RVRC aims to work with communities in the future to encourage redevelopment of properties that might otherwise continue to remain vacant and underutilized.

### **Sense of Place**

A community's sense of place is created by a combination of natural setting, architecture, history, and culture of the area that make it unique. Local governments can work to ensure that the character and sense of place of their community are preserved through a variety of different channels, such as the creation of historic districts, the development of design guidelines, and open space preservation ordinances to conserve the rural character environmental features of the area.

#### **Assessment**

While some communities have taken steps to protect historic and culturally important areas within the communities through historic districts, preservation ordinances, etc., many have not. Most communities do not have ordinances to regulate the aesthetics of highly visible areas within the community, nor do they utilize design guidelines to illustrate the desired new development within the community. However, each community does have a sign ordinance in place. While none of the communities have plans to protect designated farmland, many of the communities are so rural that they have not had the development pressure of making such plans an immediate concern. However, as growth in particular areas of the region continues, the RVRC will encourage the relevant communities to develop the plans necessary to protect their designated farmland.

### **Transportation Alternatives**

Transportation alternatives refer to a variety of means of traveling within a community, as opposed to solely using automobiles. These alternatives include walking, cycling, using buses, trains or trolleys, or flying. It is important for communities to have a comprehensive transportation system that includes as many different means of getting from one destination to another as possible.

#### **Assessment**

All of the communities throughout the region provide some type of public transportation. However, with the exception of the Columbus/Muscogee County area, these systems are extremely rural, and run on limited schedules and lines. The RVRC is coordinating with several counties in the region to develop the Pataula County Transit System to expand the alternative transportation offered in the region. Bicycling as an alternative means of transportation has gained more traction in the region, with several communities specifically planning for bicycle routes. However, the infrastructure required to encourage pedestrian activity throughout the region is fairly lacking. Many communities do not have a network of sidewalks extensive enough to connect necessary amenities. In addition, none of the local governments in the region have passed sidewalk ordinances requiring developers to provide user-friendly sidewalks.

### **Heritage Preservation**

Many different elements contribute to a community's heritage, including its historic and culturally significant structures and sites, which contribute to the community's identity and character. As this all relates to sense of place and regional identity, preservation of these sites and structures is important to maintaining the unique character of a community. These sites and structures can often provide a strong base for future

growth and economic development, and are therefore essential to the continued health and sustainability of a community.

#### Assessment

While the River Valley region is very rich in historic character, local governments throughout the region have taken few steps to specifically protect historic resources. Few local governments have designated historic districts within their communities, and only one has an active historic preservation commission. While many communities expressed interest in new development complementing existing historic structures, only three of the communities in the region have passed ordinances making this a requirement. The RVRC will continue to coordinate efforts with local communities to protect their historic resources.

#### **Open Space Preservation**

Open space, broadly defined as any natural areas that provide important community space, habitat for plants and animals, recreational opportunities, agricultural lands, places of natural beauty and critical environmental areas, are important to communities for a number of different reasons. Open space enhances local economies and improves the quality of life for local residents by preserving critical environmental areas and guiding new growth into existing communities.

#### Assessment

While there are no local governments in the region that utilize a formal greenspace plan, the extremely rural character of the River Valley region often precludes the need for such a plan. Many communities face little to no pressure from development that might threaten prime agricultural land, forests or other natural amenities. However, the RVRC will continue to work with local communities to establish greenspace and other conservation plans prior to the appearance of developments that might threaten these resources.

#### **Environmental Protection**

There are many environmentally sensitive areas within a community that need protection, including various bodies of water, wetlands, floodplains, steep slopes, and groundwater recharge areas. Protecting these resources not only ensures the environmental health of a community for future generations, but can promote a community's sense of place, and therefore economic prospects.

#### Assessment

Throughout the region, local governments have consistently worked to not only inventory and assess their natural resources, but have also taken the necessary measures to protect them. For example, many communities have passed Part V Environmental Ordinances, which include provisions for protection of water supply watersheds, groundwater recharge areas, wetlands protection, river corridor protection, and use other land use regulatory measure aimed at protecting natural resources. However, all local governments within the region should consider adopting Part V ordinances. In addition, tree ordinances will help to not only protect the mature trees in their communities, but also require replanting of trees removed as a result of new development.

## Economic Development

### Growth Preparedness

In order to be adequately prepared for both population and economic growth, a community must ensure that the necessary social, physical and regulatory infrastructure is in place. For many communities, this includes several important factors, such as an appropriately trained local workforce, public infrastructure to include water and sewer lines, and the encouragement of infill and redevelopment in areas in which infrastructure already exists. This strategy has the benefit of seeing redevelopment in underutilized parts of the community, but also reducing the burden of the local government in maintaining more infrastructure.

### Assessment

Most local governments throughout the region have population projections for their communities forecast twenty years into the future. For many, these projections are also used by school boards and other local decision making bodies to ensure consistency in the community. However, there are several communities in which the projects used by these boards are different, which can lead to discrepancies within the local government. The RVRC will coordinate with local governments to try to ensure that projections are consistent and accurate.

Many of the local governments in the region lack a Capital Improvements Program that will help to support current and future growth. This is an area which needs to be addressed as many local governments have identified areas they would like to see developed in the future. Without a plan to help guide development towards these more desirable areas, local governments will be left without tools to be an active participant in the growth of their community.

### Appropriate Business

Appropriate businesses are vital to ensuring that a community draws the most benefit from the businesses within the community. Types of businesses should be tailored to the local work force to provide local jobs to residents. In addition, a variety of businesses that require workers with different levels of skill and education will stabilize the economy.

### Assessment

While the economic development organizations for the local governments in the region consistently take into consideration the community's strengths and weaknesses when developing business strategies, often the job base is not diversified enough to ensure that if a major employer closed, the community would not seriously suffer. Other measures, such as considering existing businesses when recruiting other businesses, and other appropriate business development strategies are employed; many communities must still increase the diversity of their job base. The RVRC will continue to work with economic and downtown development authorities to help attract businesses from a broad range of sectors to broaden the business base in communities throughout the River Valley region.

### Employment Options

Employment options correlate very closely with appropriate businesses. Local governments, development authorities, and statewide economic developers should not only be aware of the strengths and skills of their local residents (employee pool), but also strive to expand the employment options of the residents in their community, so as to attract new residents with additional skills and strengths. Communities with few employment options are generally less diverse, as those with higher skill sets must commute outside of the community to find work.

#### Assessment

Within the River Valley region, local governments and economic development authorities encourage entrepreneurial businesses and support them through programs in order to provide guidance and assistance. While communities throughout the region often have jobs available, locally, for unskilled labor, many of these communities lack an adequate number of both skilled and managerial/professional jobs to meet the demands of the citizens living in the community. As a result, many residents are forced to commute to local job centers. This is an opportunity for many communities in the region to capitalize on the skills of the residents living within the community to expand and diversify the local job base. The extension of broadband services within the region would positively impact economic development by allowing residents the option to work from home, versus commuting to regional job centers.

### Educational Opportunities

As technology increases, many job markets will require more up to date training and education; therefore, it is important for local governments to coordinate with educational providers in the area to ensure that community residents have ample access to a diverse range of training and continuing education opportunities.

#### Assessment

Within the region, most communities have the capacity to offer work force training options, which can provide skills necessary to obtain local jobs. This is an important step towards filling local jobs with local residents, rather than having to hire employees from outside of the community. While all of the communities in the region have reasonable access to higher educational opportunities, few of these communities have job opportunities available to college graduates, so that they could return to the region to live and work, if so desired. This is an issue for the region, as many of the residents who leave for educational purposes cannot return to region due to the lack of available jobs. The development of broadband capabilities will also increase the capacity for satellite learning and online education within the region.

### Housing Choices

An important goal of local governments should be to provide a wide variety of housing options to meet the needs of different economic and social groups living within the community, and, therefore, to accommodate a wide range of income levels and housing preferences. For example, by including single-family homes, apartment/condo buildings, lofts above commercial space, and “mother-in-law” or garage apartments, a

government can ensure that citizens are able to find a home that meets their budget requirements and also suits their preferences and needs.

#### Assessment

Within the region, housing prices are generally affordable; however, several of the communities reported the need for additional housing options that were more affordable. Often, this could be achieved by diversifying the housing base to include options other than single-family detached units. In many of the communities, non-traditional housing types, such as accessory units like “mother-in-law” suites, are allowed under the current zoning code. However, other options, such as lofts above commercial space and small scale multi-family units, are not allowed. The RVRC will work with local governments to update zoning codes to allow for more flexible housing options for local residents. In addition, local governments should consider increasing programs that focus on households with residents with special needs. This could be accomplished through partnering with other organizations, such as aging organizations, to increase awareness and coordinate efforts and available resources. The pattern of streets and neighborhoods for new housing in the region is another issue to consider. Only about half of the local governments in the region encourage developers to continue the street pattern or design of existing neighborhoods within their communities. This is an issue that can lead to disjointed development patterns, discontinuity in sidewalks that discourage alternative transportation, and loss of greenspace within the community. Economic concerns also require local governments to consider regional solutions, if those prove to be more cost effective.

### **Regionalism**

#### Regional Cooperation and Solutions

Regional cooperation is a vital component to effectively execute and implement a number of strategies that are beneficial to the region as a whole. Governments are often able to achieve common goals that can increase the efficiency of each community, as well as the entire region. For example, without cooperation between jurisdictions, protection of regionally important natural resources is virtually impossible.

#### Assessment

Within the newly merged River Valley region, communities that were once part of separate regional commissions are working together on projects that will have broad regional impact. The in-land port in Cordele, for example, required cooperation between a number of counties and jurisdictions to bring the project to fruition. During the upcoming years, this intergovernmental cooperation and visioning for the good of the entire region is expected to increase.

#### Regional Identity

Regional identity is very similar to sense of place, but at a broader scale. Regional identity distinguishes a particular region from the state from others through the local and regional culture, architecture, economy, agriculture, and the natural environment. By coordinating efforts with neighboring jurisdictions, local governments can work to strengthen this sense of regional identity, and, therefore, reap the economic benefits of such a developed sense of identity, such as the ability to draw tourists. In addition, by

developing a regional identity, communities can also position themselves to attract new industries and residents to the area, thus strengthening the regional economy.

#### Assessment

Throughout the River Valley region, communities have been consistently working to strengthen their sense of place and identity through a variety of strategies, including improvements to traditional downtowns and neighborhoods, protecting greenspace and rural lands from encroachment, and promoting tourism within their communities. The RVRC has aided in these efforts by providing downtown design trainings, updating zoning ordinances, providing technical support for grant applications and tourism efforts, and marketing efforts to promote available services.

# Regional Issues and Opportunities

## Population

### **Issue**

- Securing needed funds for new infrastructure such as water lines, sewage, roads and community facilities in areas of population growth, and funds for the maintenance of existing infrastructure and community facilities in areas off growth and no growth.
- Sustaining a balanced budget with limited revenue options and no or minimal population growth throughout the rural areas of the region.
- Providing housing, transportation and health services to an increasingly older, fixed income base population.

### **Opportunities**

- Fort Benning's BRAC, West Point's Kia plant, Cordele's inland port, and Americus' chopstick factory, financial call center, and motor sports complex will recruit skilled workers to the area and expand the population, thereby expanding the tax base from residential, commercial, and industrial growth.

## Economic Development

### **Issues**

- Economic growth is hindered due to education levels that lag far behind those of the state and nation; and an undereducated workforce that in general is unprepared for skilled and higher - paying jobs.
- Retail sales in the region have decreased due to fixed incomes associated with high unemployment levels and high rates of the regional population on public assistance programs.

### **Opportunities**

- Improving communication technology should be combined with local and regional efforts to improve education and diversify the regional economic base; increasing the number of regional employers and marketing efforts promoting the River Valley region's rural qualities and low cost of living.

- An opportunity exists to holistically promote/market the River Valley region as a natural, cultural, and agricultural wonder to out-of-state tourists and Georgia residents alike.

## Housing

### **Issues**

- Providing citizens with affordable housing that is in close proximity to their place of work.
- Balancing the costs of housing with the quality of housing to progress toward more owner-occupied housing over rentals.
- Manufactured housing and impact on tax digest
- Providing suitable housing for an aging population

### **Opportunities**

- Fort Benning's BRAC will expand the housing market by bringing approximately 23,000 citizens to the area.
- Industrial, commercial and agricultural development in rural areas will increase the demand for affordable housing within a close proximity to job sites.
- Opportunity to form a public/private partnership to develop new housing development and in-fill housing in existing urban areas to provide the public with better access to public/private services motorized and non-motorized methods of transportation, with walk-able and bike-able neighborhoods.

## Community Facilities

### **Issues**

- Counties and cities struggle with meeting the service demands of population growth in specific portions of the region. Service issues include storm water management, water, sewer, and recreational facility upgrades.
- Lack of broadband services and inadequate area coverage of existing service.
- River Valley cities and counties declining in population experience a drop in revenue from property taxes and fees that put a strain on the local government's ability to provide needed services.
- Lack of capital improvement programs in the region.

## **Opportunities**

- Within the region, the water and sewer systems provide needed infrastructure for meaningful infill development and revenue opportunities in such areas such as downtowns and traditional neighborhoods.
- As new businesses are established and infill development progresses, local governments have the opportunity to reassess various fees, including impact fees, subdivision review fees, and/or service tax districts, to compensate for the investment required to spur new growth.
- Within the region, there are ample opportunities to capitalize on the cultural, historic, natural and recreational tourism assets that the region possesses.

## **Intergovernmental**

### **Issues**

- Increasing water demand over the next 50 years for both agricultural (27%) and municipal (63%) users will impact both groundwater and surface water sources in the River Valley region.
- Pollution and water level of the Crustaceous Tertiary groundwater recharge area is of primary importance since the recharge area covers 67% of the River Valley region.
- Outside of the Columbus Metropolitan Area, transportation, or the lack thereof, is a major issue with approximately 30% of households within the region not having reliable access to an automobile.
- Cost of making transportation improvements and maintaining existing transportation infrastructure is also a problem in the River Valley region.
- The lack of desire of city and county citizens to participate in regional transportation planning programs and services. Low- to - moderate income riders, limited routes and convenience issues, creates a stigma about rural transit and discourages others from using the transit system.
- Local problems turn to regional problems when crumbling infrastructure, such as deteriorating water or sewer lines, impact state and regional waterways.

## **Opportunities**

- With a moderate population growth projected for the River Valley Region, and massive infrastructure repair needs for the River Valley cities and counties. A great opportunity exists to promote and propagate existing regional services as a viable solution to common local issues that transcend the River Valley region.
- Two Regional Plans for The Upper Flint and The Middle Chattahoochee watersheds have been completed. Thru the regional planning process an opportunity exists to incorporate many of the suggested implementation measures and development practices of those watershed plans into the River Valley regional plan.

## **Transportation**

### **Issues**

- The majority of state highways and local roads in the region are relatively old and do not possess sufficient shoulder width to construct bicycle or pedestrian facilities.
- Improving vehicle parking and streetscapes through downtowns must be provided in such a way that it does not negatively impact the character of existing downtowns.
- Lack of signs controlling and managing traffic flow on State Highway 27, US Routes 1, 354 and 18, especially within town and city limits, impede traffic flow and make it difficult for visitors to travel within the region.
- Sign control in the region is limited which threatens potential scenic routes.
- Finding funds to upgrade existing signs to reflective signs, to improve visibility is an issue.
- Cities and counties are limited in their ability to retrofit neighborhoods so that sidewalks and other bicycle/pedestrian facilities are built into new developments and retrofit existing developments in order to provide better pedestrian connectivity between new and existing neighborhoods.

### **Opportunities**

- Due to the continuous growth in the region's metropolitan areas, the possibility exists that METRA (Columbus-Muscogee County public transportation) could expand services to surrounding counties and make connections with River Valley rural transit services .

- The opportunity exists to capitalize on major new developments in the region such as the Inland Port, Ft Benning expansion and the proposed Americus Raceway to improve transportation infrastructure and the region's economy at the same time.
- Due to an increase in the number of alternative commuters, as well as an increase in cycling as a recreational activity throughout the River Valley region, an opportunity exist to expand existing bicycle trails and on-road lanes to provide regional connectivity.

## **Land Use**

### **Issues**

- Conserving natural and cultural resources, such as the region's plentiful water sources, state parks, and rural lands.
- Conserving existing open space and creating open space in new developments, focusing on infill and redevelopment versus greenfield construction, and maintaining forested and rural lands.
- Protecting cultural and historic resources not only to preserve the region's heritage, but also as a viable tool for promoting tourism and increasing economic development opportunities for local communities.
- Safeguarding historic and environmentally sensitive sites to ensure that non-compatible land uses do not continue to encroach upon historic areas.
- Lack of tree planting ordinances or community tree planting programs.
- Diversifying the current land use base within communities to create a more stable mix of residential and commercial uses.
- Outdated zoning and subdivision ordinances that do not allow flexible and non-traditional development and lack of consistent zoning/subdivision enforcement throughout the region.

### **Opportunities**

- Utilizing vacant land within city limits for mixed development, including single family attached residential growth and commercial growth to preserve existing rural land and greenspace, while targeting new investment towards existing infrastructure.
- Encouraging traditional neighborhood development adjacent to existing downtowns and in new developments.
- Requiring traditional neighborhood development patterns when developing adjacent to or within a historic district to allow local

governments to capitalize on existing traditional development patterns throughout the region.

- Promoting a variety of conservation techniques including protective ordinances such as conservation subdivision and stream buffer ordinances, and devise an incentive to create greenway connections in order to protect the region's natural resources.
- Identifying potential Brownfields to clean up potentially hazardous sites, but also to market those sites to developers for redevelopment with available federal and state incentives for cleaning up brownfield sites.
- An overall land use plan that enhances watershed protection.

# Data Elements and Analysis

**The Data Elements and Analysis portion** of the Community Assessment includes facts, figures and data analysis of many aspects of the River Valley region. These areas of analysis include Population, Economic Development, Housing, Natural and Cultural Resources, Community Facilities, Intergovernmental, Transportation, Land Use, and Areas Requiring Special Attention. The data collected and analyzed in this portion of the Community Assessment is to provide a picture of the River Valley region as it exists now, and to provide a better understanding of the needs of the region in the future. Additional charts, tables, and graphs to support the information provided in these sections is included in the Community Assessment Data Appendix.



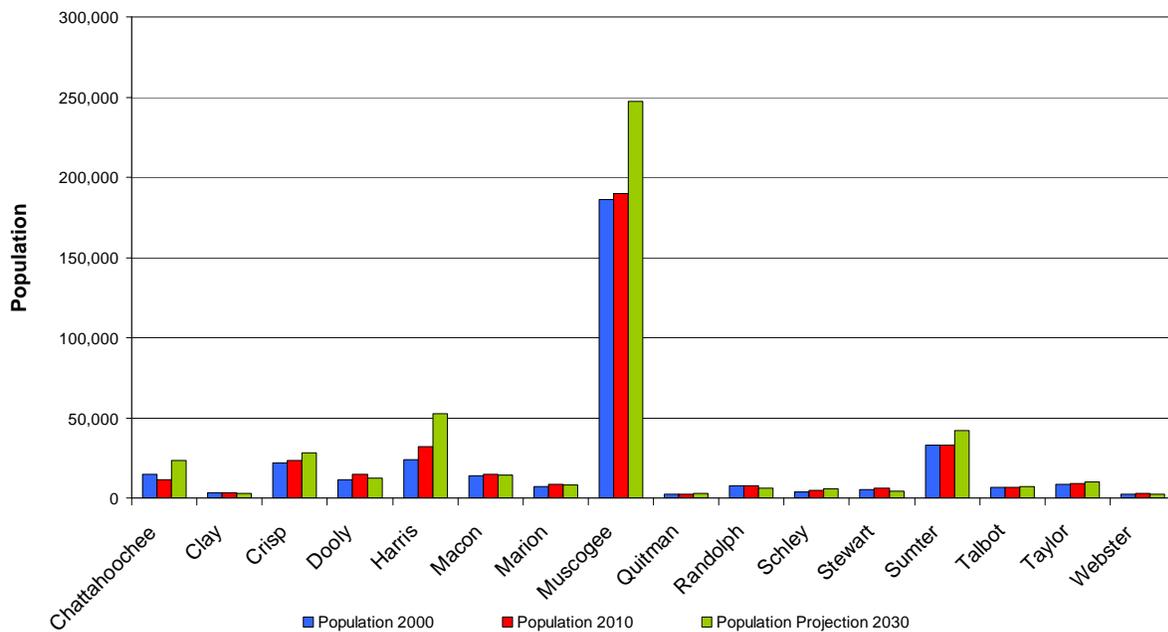
# Population

## Total Population

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the region has seen an increase in population by 5.0% from 2000 to 2010. The population increased from 353,274 to 370,887 during that time. During the same time period, the population of the state of Georgia increased from 8,186,453 to 9,687,653 – an 18.3% increase of about 1.5 million people. Figure 1 shows the population of the region, by county, for 2000 and 2010, and the projected population for 2030.

**Figure 1**

**Population for RVRC Counties for 2000, 2010, and 2030 Projection**



Source: 2000 and 2010 Population - U.S Census Bureau, 2030 Population Projection - State Office of Planning & Budget

The 2010 population for the region was 370,887 according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Based on estimates from the State Office of Planning and Budget, the population for the region in 2030 is projected to increase by 27.0%, totaling to 471,121 people. This is significantly lower than the state of Georgia projection, expected to increase by 51.6%. However, the projected regional increase is closer to the national projection, which is an increase of 21.0%. The largest increase in the region is projected to be in Cusseta-Chattahoochee County at 109%, which is primarily due to the Fort Benning expansion and the arrival of military personnel from Fort Knox; the largest decrease, 28.4%, is projected for Stewart County.

The population of the region varies from county to county. A majority of the counties in the region have a population less than 15,000 people, excluding Crisp, Harris, Muscogee, and Sumter Counties. Muscogee County, which shares the same boundaries as the City

of Columbus, holds the largest population in the region at 189,885 people for the year 2010. The lowest population for 2010 was in Georgetown-Quitman County at 2,513. The region's population of 370,887 for 2010 represented 3.8% of Georgia's total population.

**Age Distribution**

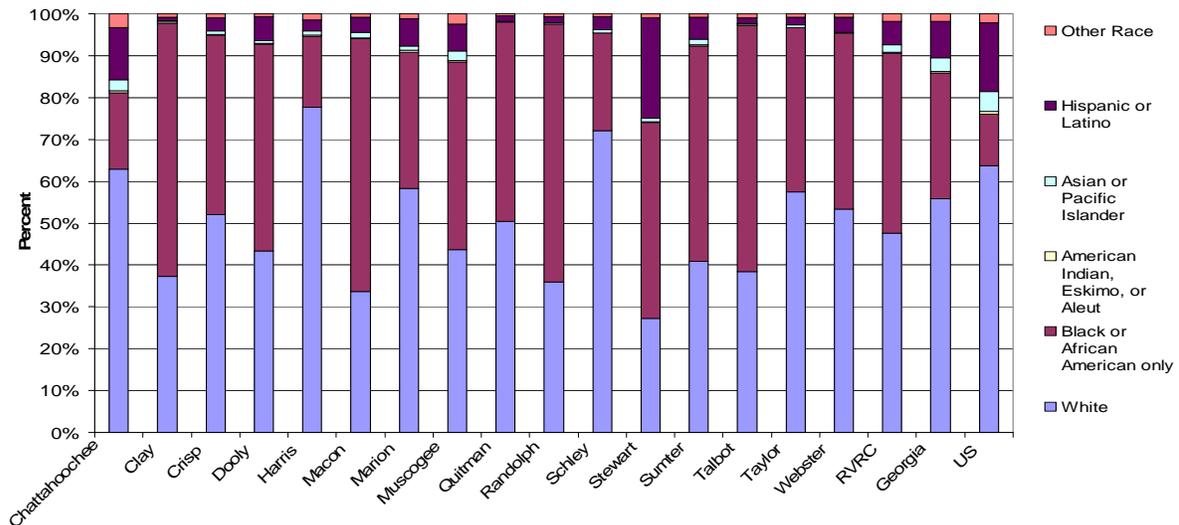
From 2000 to 2010 the population of persons ages 50 and older within the RVRC region significantly increased. The population for persons age 50 to 59 increased by 36.7%. The population for persons age 60 and up increased by 21.7%. Alternatively, the populations for persons age 49 or less decreased by 2.6%. During this same time period, the state of Georgia had a population increase of people ages 49 or less by 11.0%, age 50 to 59 by 40.7%, and age 60 and up by 42.7%. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 data shows that the greatest percentage (at 31.5%) of persons 60 years of age or older resided in Quitman County. The lowest percentage was found in Chattahoochee County at 5.8% (See Figure 1 in the Data Appendix). The region's elderly population is likely to continue to grow, which will increase the demand for a number of services, including health care and alternative transportation services.

Chattahoochee County exhibited the greatest percentage of persons ages 20-29 at 32.5%, while all of the other counties in the region ranged from 8.8% (Harris County) to 19.0% (Stewart County). This high population of young adults within Chattahoochee County may be a result of the proximity of the Fort Benning Military Reservation, which overlaps a large portion of Chattahoochee County.

**Race and Ethnicity**

Figure 2 shows the race distribution for the region in 2010. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the region experienced an increase in the Latino population by 56.5% and an increase in the Asian population by 53.4% from 2000 to 2010. During the same time period, Georgia had an increase by 96.2% and 81.3% for Latinos and Asians respectively.

**Figure 2**  
**Race Distribution 2010**



All of the region's counties had an increase in the Latino population with an exception of two (Chattahoochee and Clay). Stewart County increased its Latino population by 1,741% from 79 in 2000 to 1,454 in 2010.

### **Income**

The median household income for the River Valley region in 2009 was \$30,754, which is 37.8% lower than the Georgia median household income of \$49,466. Twenty-five percent of the households make between \$10,000 and \$24,999 and 28% of the households make between \$25,000 and \$49,999. Sixteen percent of the region's households bring in \$75,000 or more. Approximately 20% of the region's households are below the poverty level. Crisp and Clay Counties have the highest poverty rates at 31.8% and 31.5% respectively. Harris County demonstrated the lowest poverty rate at 8.8%.

Income levels are expected to increase over the next 20 years throughout different parts of the RVRC region. Cordele (Crisp County) has created an inland port that will create economic growth for the county and surrounding businesses. Americus (Sumter County) has several opportunities developing for economic growth; skilled jobs will be required for a chopstick factory, financial call center, and motor sports complex. Columbus (Muscogee County) and the surrounding counties will experience economic growth as a result of BRAC (Base Realignment and Closure) in Fort Benning and the Kia plant located in West Point, Georgia. BRAC will bring many military contracts to the region as the base expands its population and infrastructure, while Kia will provide manufacturing jobs to those in the region that are qualified.

### **Issues and Opportunities**

#### **Issues**

Securing needed funds to provide new infrastructure for the population is a prevailing issue for the region. Adequate water lines, sewage pipes and treatment facilities, and road surfaces are in constant demand as wear and tear from the region's population use this infrastructure. Affordable housing, transportation, and health services are needed for the increasingly older, fixed income population. In addition, funds are needed for growing communities as residential and commercial development encroach on uninhabited land, and as city centers are renovated. Developed land also yields increasing property values and thus, potentially increases taxes; this makes it more difficult for individuals within a population to sustain a healthy budget.

#### **Opportunities**

This region has several opportunities to expand the population base. Fort Benning, undergoing BRAC, will bring more individuals to the surrounding communities. The Kia plant in West Point will recruit skilled workers to the area. The inland port of Cordele and the chopstick factory, financial call center, and motor sports complex of Americus will also attract people to this region, thereby expanding the tax base from new residential families, commercial business, and industrial factories.

# **Economic Development**

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## **Economic Synopsis**

The River Valley Region, like the rest of the nation, has and will continue to deal with significant economic problems. Fifteen of the sixteen counties that make up the River Valley Region have historically maintained a level of approximately 70% of the State and National Per Capita Income, while still progressing in a positive direction. Harris County is the exception to this statistic, having been the only county in the region which has met or exceeded the U. S. and Georgia Per Capita Income since 1999. The average Weekly Wage Rate has risen by 13.2% from 2004 to 2008 and the Per Capita Income has increased steadily at 10%.

The current national recession has already lasted longer than many experts predicted. While several economic indicators show the beginning of a rebound, unemployment still remains high. In the River Valley Region, two major factors have affected the western side of the region economically: Growth at Fort Benning and construction of the Kia plant in West Point (Troup County).

Since 1919, Fort Benning has continued to grow in importance to the U.S. Army as a premier training facility. The importance of the installation at Fort Benning was emphasized in December 2005 with the issuance of the formal report from the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) Commission. Due to the convergence of several Department of Defense initiatives, the BRAC Commission recommended relocating the Armor Center and School from Fort Knox (KY) to Fort Benning combining the Infantry and the Armor branches and creating a unified Maneuver Center of Excellence. As a result of this decision, approximately 23,000 new residents are expected to arrive in the area, both in Georgia and Alabama, by 2011.

The Kia plant has brought several suppliers to the region. While this number is not as high as originally anticipated, businesses such as Johnson Controls and Daehan Solutions Georgia (Harris County) have created much needed jobs.

The impact for both of these projects has not been region-wide. However, they have mitigated the impact of the recession for both Harris and Muscogee Counties.

## **Economic Base**

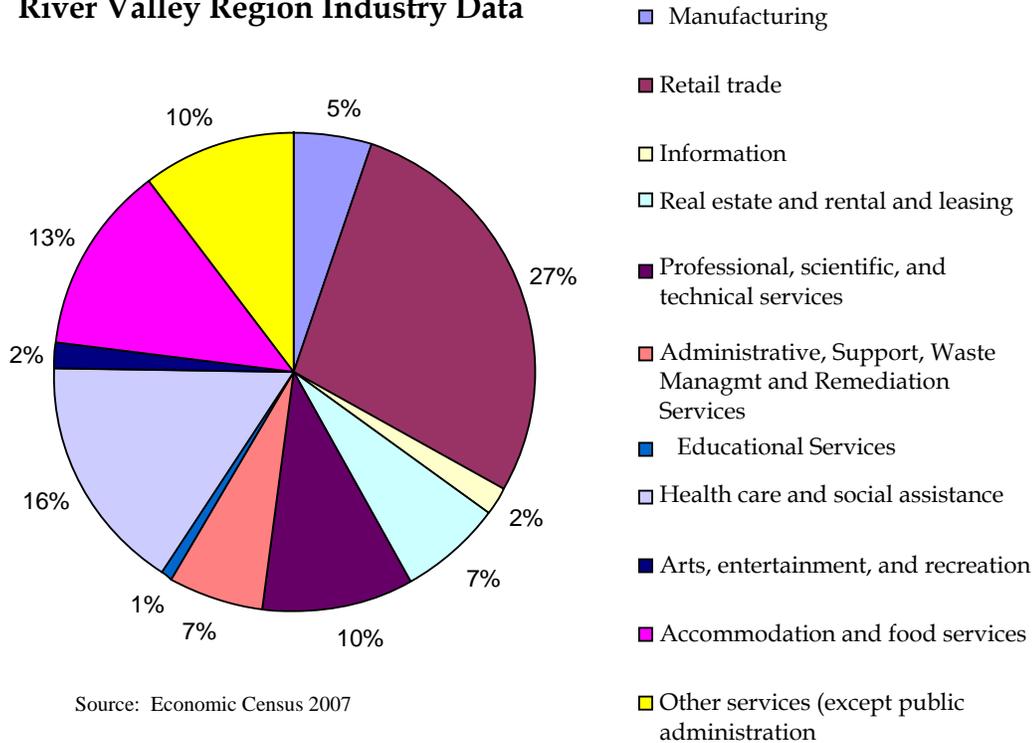
The River Valley Region has employers representing all major industry types within the market area. Muscogee County, Harris County, Sumter County and Crisp County are the regional commercial and industrial centers. The region heavily depends on these communities for employment availability essential to support the region.

Muscogee County offers the highest number of employees for the region with Harris County having the second highest number of jobs in the region. During the early part of the decade, Harris County was fourth in the region in terms of jobs located in a County.

The increase in Harris County employment levels is primarily due to the Kia plant and the cluster suppliers which have located primarily along the I-85 corridor.

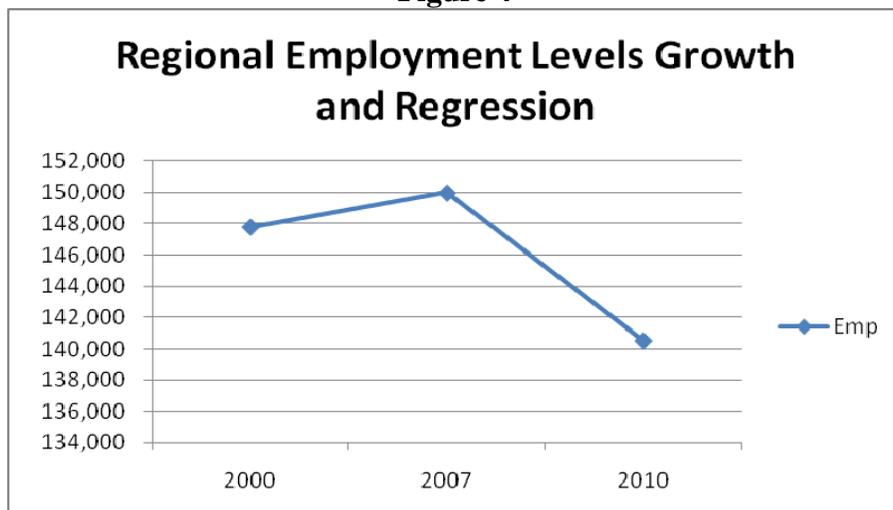
**Figure 3**

**River Valley Region Industry Data**



The regional job market grew during the early part of the decade and then retracted well below the starting levels. The region lost 3,352 jobs between 2009 and 2010 accounting for a 2.3% job loss for the period. The regional unemployment percentage rate has also grown significantly during the last seven years and has nearly doubled since 2007.

**Figure 4**



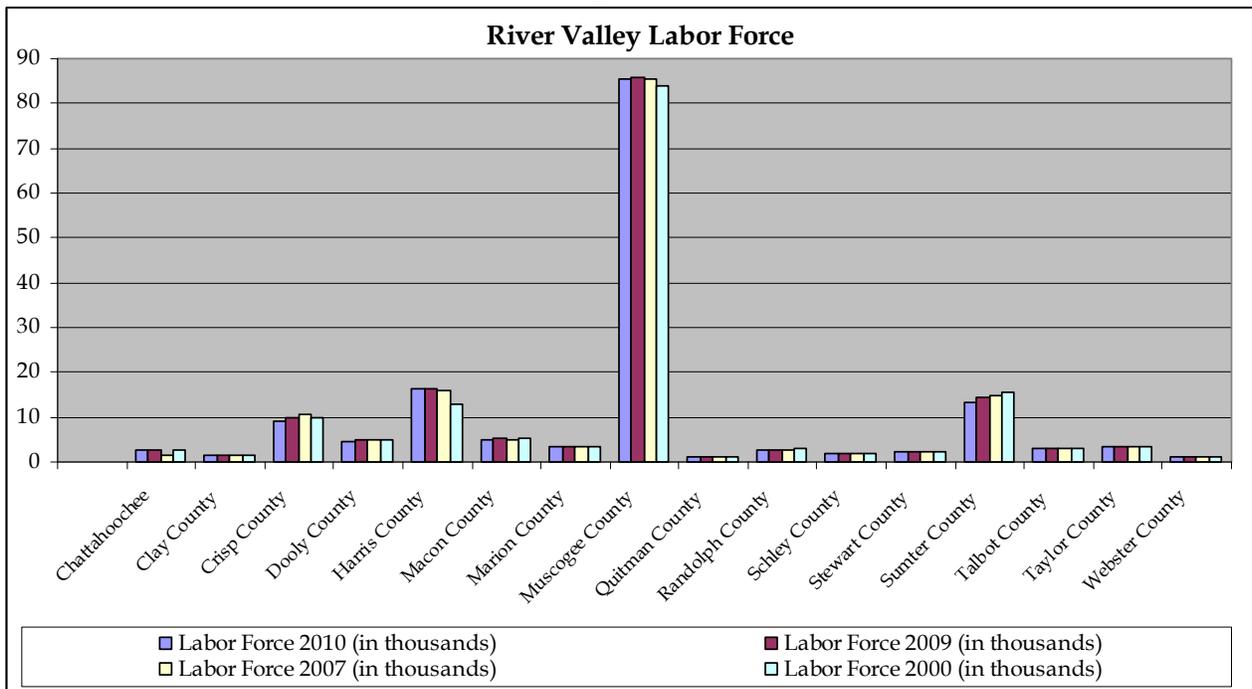
As noted above, the peak of job creation was in 2007, which was then followed by a downturn. All counties lost jobs with the exception of Chattahoochee County. The positive factor in Chattahoochee’s job growth is related to the buildup of troops at Fort Benning, directly impacting the county numbers. Georgia Department of Labor data shows that the reduction in jobs within the River Valley Region may be slowing.

The major commercial and industrial centers of Muscogee, Sumter, and Crisp Counties have the most jobs to offer and the highest levels of job loss. The job losses noted in excess of one hundred in Dooly, Macon, Randolph and Taylor Counties reflect the general trend of downsizing or relocating companies to other areas.

**Labor Force**

The labor force is the population of persons employed and those looking for (and available) to work. It retracts and expands with job availability within a region. When reflecting upon the region’s labor force, multiple factors must be taken into account, such as the skills of the labor force to meet the needs of the employers, and the availability of jobs. Too many people in the labor force relative to the job base results in unemployment or low wages. With high unemployment levels, employers have an opportunity to obtain highly skilled workers for lower wages. If there are too few persons in the labor force, a community can have a labor shortage. The lack of skilled labor capable of providing a quality product can negatively impact a company, limiting its ability to grow.

**Figure 5**



Source: Georgia Department of Labor, 2011

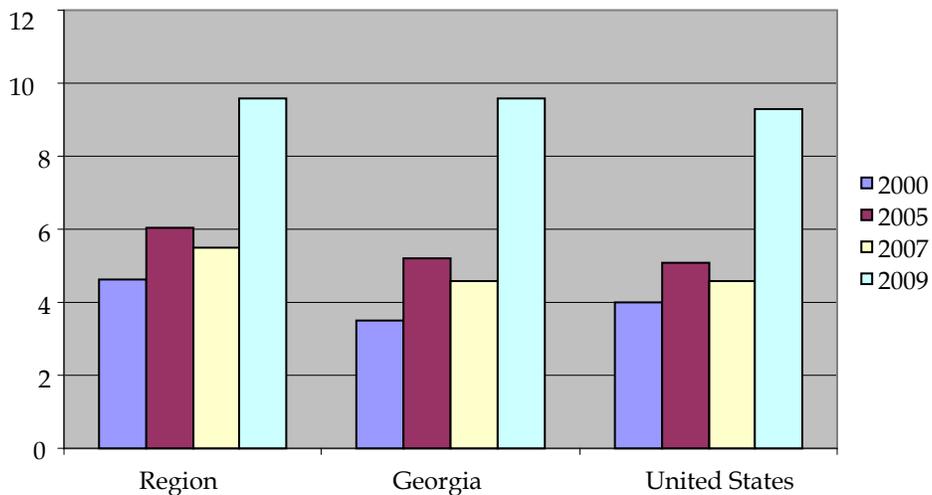
There has been a demonstrated outflow of the labor force between 2009 and 2010 but an overall slight positive growth since the early part of the decade. Overall, the regional labor force has remained relatively steady with the increase and decrease of jobs within the region.

**Unemployment Rates**

Historically the regional unemployment rate has been 1% or higher than state and national rates. A change occurred in 2009 and continued in 2010. The regional rate was slightly higher than the national rate but slightly less than the state unemployment rate. The 2010 average annual rate of unemployment for the River Valley counties ranged from a high of 14.4% for Schley County to a low of 7.4% for Harris County. It could be stated that while the regional unemployment levels have typically been much higher than the state and nation, for the year 2010 the region was no worse off than the state and nation.

**Figure 6**

**Unemployment Levels by Percentage**



Source: Georgia Department of Labor, 2011

In 2000, the regional unemployment rate was at an average 4.64% as compared to the state rate of 3.5% and national rate of 4%. Within the 2000 period, the annual rate for the counties ranged from a high of 8.1% for Clay County, to a low of 3.1% for Harris County. Georgia Department of Labor data demonstrates for 2010 a range of unemployment rates from 16% to 7.4% within the region.

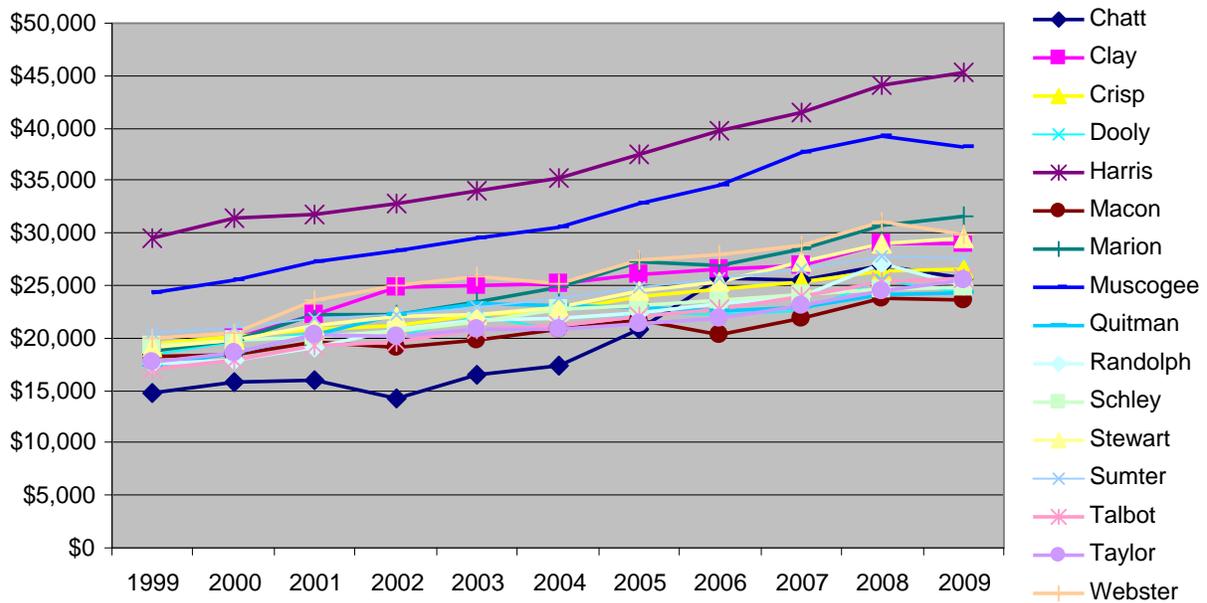
Unemployment rates for the region have increased steadily over the past ten years. Each year Muscogee County accounts for approximately 50% of the total unemployed people in the region. Harris, Crisp, and Sumter Counties account for the numbers of unemployed above 1,000 during the year 2010.

**Per Capita Income**

Per Capita income (PCI) is determined by dividing the total amount of income earned in an area by the number of residents, including a portion of the population that might not be generating income, such as children and the elderly. The River Valley Region overall experiences a lower PCI level than that of the United States and the State of Georgia. In 2008, seven of the sixteen counties had a PCI that was less than or equal to 76% of the state PCI and 66% of the national PCI. In 2008 only Harris County and Muscogee County were at or above the PCI for the state. All other River Valley counties were significantly lower.

**Figure 7**

**Per Capita Income by County**



Source: Georgia County Guide 1999 – 2008 and 2009 U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis

Each county of the region has demonstrated positive per capita income growth rates. There is a minimum PCI increase from 1999 to 2008. The positive growth for each county ranges from a 32.93% increase to an 86.36% increase.

The numbers demonstrate that the gap between the richest county and the poorest county has declined over the time period. In other words, while the wealthy counties continue to increase their wealth, poorer counties are doing the same at a much faster rate.

**Wage Rates**

In general the average weekly income level of the River Valley region is much lower than the state average and slightly less than the national average. In 2009, the Georgia

average weekly wage for all industries was \$824 whereas Macon County, the county with the highest earning weekly wage in the region, was only \$727. Four counties in the region actually experienced a negative growth rate in weekly wage rates. While the region, overall, experiences much lower income levels than the state, the ratio has kept pace with the state increase and maintained a positive growth rate overall.

<b>Table 1</b>					
<b>River Valley Region Wage Rates by County</b>					
<b>All Industry = Private and Governmental Employers</b>		<b>Weekly Wages</b>	<b>Weekly Wages</b>	<b>Weekly Wages</b>	<b>Change</b>
<b>County</b>		<b>2004</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2008-2010</b>
1	Chattahoochee County	\$435	\$636	\$798	\$162.00
2	Clay County	\$441	\$628	\$539	(\$89.00)
3	Crisp County	\$472	\$531	\$550	\$19.00
4	Dooly County	\$486	\$547	\$543	(\$4.00)
5	Harris County	\$431	\$510	\$521	\$11.00
6	Macon County	\$552	\$587	\$608	\$21.00
7	Marion County	\$439	\$490	\$503	\$13.00
8	Muscogee County	\$598	\$693	\$719	\$26.00
9	Quitman County	\$442	\$502	\$494	(\$8.00)
10	Randolph County	\$464	\$550	\$548	(\$2.00)
11	Schley County	\$530	\$610	\$629	\$19.00
12	Stewart County	\$428	\$541	\$606	\$65.00
13	Sumter County	\$503	\$553	\$561	\$8.00
14	Talbot County	\$525	\$560	\$625	\$65.00
15	Taylor County	\$527	\$595	\$574	(\$21.00)
16	Webster County	\$458	\$550	\$576	\$26.00
	<b>Georgia</b>	<b>\$728</b>	<b>\$819</b>	<b>\$848</b>	<b>\$29.00</b>

Source: Georgia Department of Labor, 2011

When wage rate data is evaluated between the years 2008 and 2010, there is a wide range in the region from an average net increase of \$162 to a decrease by \$89. All told, the weekly wage rates range from 58% of the state average to 95% of the state average.

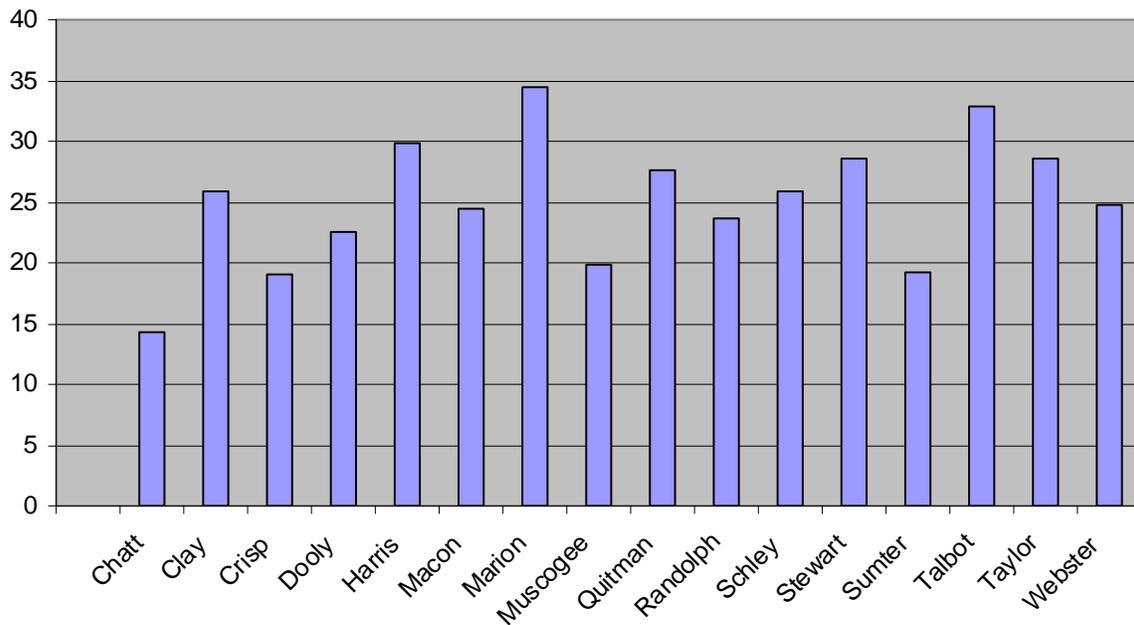
### Commuting Patterns

Within the River Valley region, there is a total of 7,995 miles of road (all modes). Commuting within the River Valley region has three main purposes: work, education, and leisure. Columbus-Muscogee County, the City of Americus, and Crisp County are the largest employment centers. Since the River Valley Region is primarily rural, most residents commute to and from their place of work. Residents in Chattahoochee County have the shortest commute time in the region at 14.3 minutes, while Marion County residents have the longest commute time at 34.4 minutes.

In the 16-county region, Muscogee has the largest percent of residents working and residing within the same county at 86.6%. Sumter is next in line with 83.4% of residents living and employed within the same county. Crisp has 79.4% of residents who live and work in the county.

In the River Valley Region, Quitman County has the most people who work outside of their county of residence at 76.4%. Talbot is next with 76% of residents working outside the county, and Harris County follows with 75.7%.

**Figure 8**  
**Commuters Mean Travel Time in Minutes 2000**



Source: Georgia County Guide 2008

## Issues and Opportunities

### **Issues**

The issues confronting the region remain much the same. The population of the region has not grown significantly since 2000. As to the level of education for the population, the amount of education per individual has significantly increased, but still lags far behind the levels of the state and the nation. The critical issue is that the workforce is not well prepared for the higher skilled jobs, which equate to higher paying jobs. The region is primarily agricultural based, seeking to improve the economy and maintain a quality lifestyle. Sales for the region have tended to increase for the 2000 to 2005 time period with a slight decrease in 2008. Although the number of employed individuals has decreased for the past few years, the number of employers providing jobs has increased during the 2000 to 2009 time frame.

## **Opportunities**

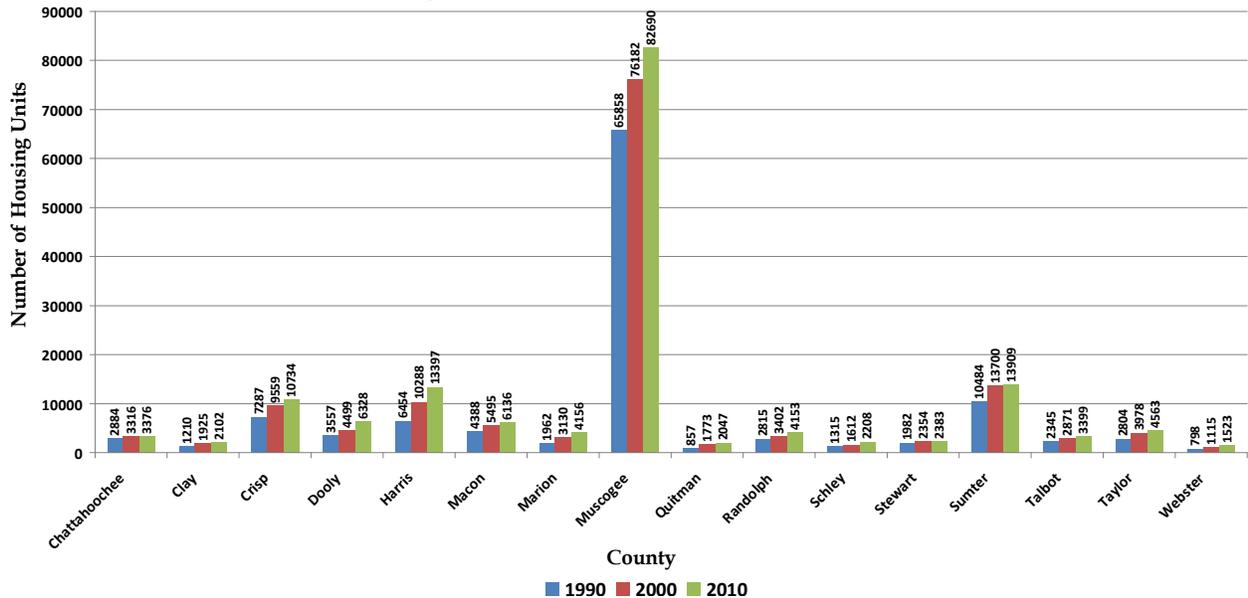
The number of employers in the region has increased. However, work still needs to be done to strengthen and broaden the economic base. Efforts toward quality education and training for skilled jobs should be improved. Developing better communication technology throughout the region would assist to enhance education, training and the area's economic base. The many natural resources in the region and the agricultural character of much of the area are a draw for tourists. Tourism should be viewed in a holistic manner. Marketing and promoting the rural qualities and natural resources of the region paired with well-maintained small downtowns should be used as an economic catalyst in the region.

# Housing

## Housing Types and Mix

The River Valley Region has experienced moderate growth from 1990 to 2010, as new residents continue to move to the area. As shown in Figures 9, the region has experienced an increase in total housing units by 39.4%. Of the 16 counties in the region, Quitman County has experienced the highest increase in total housing units at 139%. Alternatively, Chattahoochee County has experienced the least significant increase in housing units by 17.1%. Nevertheless, as a result of the U.S Army’s BRAC (Base Realignment and Closure), Fort Benning will gain approximately 5,000 active military personnel and nearly 2,000 new civilian employees by 2012. Including additional defense contractors and families, growth in the region as a result of Fort Benning's transformation will have a direct impact of nearly 23,000 people. In 2008, Fort Benning trained over 115,000 Soldiers; when the Armor Center and School relocated from Fort Knox to Fort Benning beginning in October 2009, the post began training an additional 30,000 Soldiers every year.

**Figure 9**  
**Total Housing Units for RVRC Counties in 1990, 2000, and 2010**



Source: 1990 U.S Census Bureau, 2000 and 2010 American Community Survey

Housing units in the River Valley Region can be classified into three categories: single-family, multi-family, and manufactured homes. In 2009, 64.3% of the region was comprised of single family homes; 20.1% of the region was comprised of multi-family homes; and 11.8% of the region was comprised of manufactured homes. Harris County had the highest percentage of single family homes at 81.9%, while Webster County had the lowest at 34.9%. The highest percentage of multi-family homes was found in Chattahoochee County, at 36.1%, whereas the lowest percentage of multi-family homes

was found in Quitman County at 1.5%. Manufactured homes were most prevalent in Quitman County at 49.0%, whereas they were found to be least prevalent in Muscogee County at 2.8%. See Table 2 below for individual county statistics.

The number of each specific housing classification in the region has changed dramatically from 1990 to 2009. Single family housing units have increased by 34.0%; multi-family housing units have increased by 35.3%; and manufactured housing units have increased by 45.2%.

Table 2									
Total Housing Units and Housing Unit Types 2009									
County	Total Units	Single Family	%	Multi Family	%	Manu-factured Houses	%	Others	%
Chattahoochee	3,376	1,585	46.9%	1,220	36.1%	558	16.5%	0	0.0%
Clay	2,102	1,314	62.5%	166	7.9%	707	33.6%	0	0.0%
Crisp	10,734	6,263	58.3%	1,830	17.0%	2,070	19.3%	0	0.0%
Dooly	6,328	2,791	44.1%	387	6.1%	1,442	22.8%	0	0.0%
Harris	13,397	10,977	81.9%	369	2.8%	1,329	9.9%	0	0.0%
Macon	6,136	3,635	59.2%	636	10.4%	1,410	23.0%	3	0.0%
Marion	4,156	1,718	41.3%	307	7.4%	1,222	29.4%	0	0.0%
Muscogee	82,690	56,186	67.9%	24,264	29.3%	2,319	2.8%	11	0.0%
Quitman	2,047	887	43.3%	30	1.5%	1,003	49.0%	0	0.0%
Randolph	4,153	2,705	65.1%	131	3.2%	591	14.2%	0	0.0%
Schley	2,208	1,097	49.7%	120	5.4%	666	30.2%	4	0.2%
Stewart	2,383	1,544	64.8%	69	2.9%	454	19.1%	0	0.0%
Sumter	13,909	8,943	64.3%	2,739	19.7%	2,605	18.7%	0	0.0%
Talbot	3,399	2,191	64.5%	179	5.3%	738	21.7%	0	0.0%
Taylor	4,563	2,448	53.6%	275	6.0%	1,510	33.1%	0	0.0%
Webster	1,523	532	34.9%	58	3.8%	554	36.4%	0	0.0%
<b>RVRC</b>	<b>163,104</b>	<b>104,816</b>	<b>64.3%</b>	<b>32,780</b>	<b>20.1%</b>	<b>19178</b>	<b>11.8%</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>0.0%</b>
Georgia	3,944,621	2,743,120	69.5%	806,802	20.5%	393,447	10.0%	1,252	0.0%
US	127,699,712	85,899,738	67.3%	33,057,700	25.9%	8,639,239	6.8%	103,035	0.1%

Source: 2009 American Community Survey

### Condition and Occupancy

Construction of housing units in the River Valley region gradually increased from the 1980s to the 1990s, but declined after 2000, more than likely as a result of the housing market crash. The age of the housing stock is a general indicator of the maintenance costs that can be expected. Table 10 (located in the Data Appendix) indicates the age of housing units within each county in the region. The majority of housing units in the region were built prior to 1980 (59.2%), with 51.2% of these units built between 1960 and 1979. Between 1980 and 2009, 65,452 units were built, with 76.1% being built between 1980 and 1999. From 2000 to 2009, 58.3% of the region's newly constructed homes were

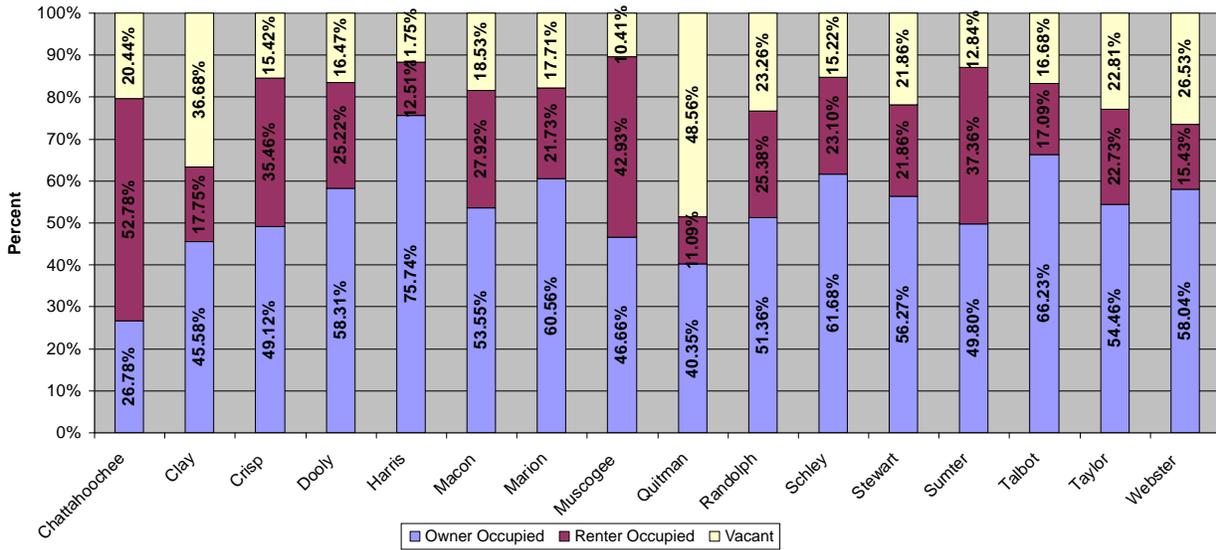
built in Muscogee County, whereas only 0.08% of newly constructed homes were built in Stewart County.

Vacancy Rate:

Vacant houses and apartments are necessary to provide a choice of location and price for housing consumers. A healthy vacancy rate is between, approximately, four and five percent and fluctuates according to the housing market. Table 10 shows the vacancy rate for each county in the region. Too few vacant units may drive up prices and limit housing choices, while too many reduces the demand for new units, limiting available options. As shown in Figure 10, in 2010, 51.2% of the region’s housing units were owner-occupied, while 34.8% were renter-occupied. This left 14% of the region’s housing units vacant. Harris County had the highest owner-occupied rate in the region with 75.7%, while Chattahoochee County had the lowest at 26.8%. Renter occupied units were highest in Chattahoochee County at 52.8%, and they were lowest in Quitman County at 11.1%. Quitman County also demonstrated the highest vacancy in the region at 48.6%, followed by Clay County at 36.7%. Vacancies were not as prevalent in Muscogee County, who demonstrated a rate of 10.4%. Low vacancies were also seen in Harris County at 11.8%.

**Figure 10**

**Occupancy Status: Owner, Rentor, and Vacancy 2010**



Source: 2010 U.S Census Bureau

Cost of Housing

Many different factors contribute to the overall cost of housing within the River Valley region, such as the affordability of land, changing costs of construction, the availability of financing from local banks, and regulatory policies that can affect the cost of new development. These different factors, combined with the changing supply and demand of housing stock throughout the region, determine the cost of housing.

Median Home Value:

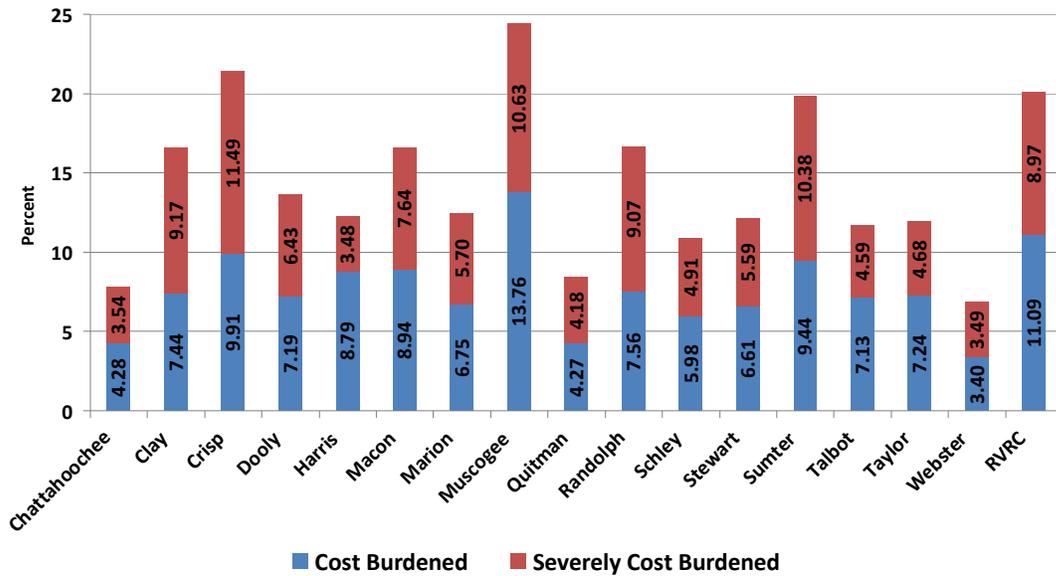
The average value of homes in the River Valley region is substantially lower than both state and national medians. Nationally, the median value of a home is \$185,400, whereas the state median value is \$160,100. Forty-five percent (45%) of the homes in the region are valued at less than \$99,999. In Georgia, 48.7% of renters pay \$749 or less in monthly rent compared to 67.6% in the region. Table 13 (located in the Data Appendix) demonstrates the stock and value of homes that are owner occupied. Table 14 (also located in the Data Appendix) demonstrates the stock of homes and rate of rent.

Cost Burdened Households

The definition of affordable housing is one of the most difficult to relay because of the negative stigma attached to the term. Affordable housing relates to the supply of housing available for the residents of the jurisdiction, whether they are highly educated professionals, minimum wage retail employees, or retired senior citizens. Assessing affordability is a measure of the housing cost burden that is placed on households. More specifically, federal standards consider a household to be cost-burdened if it pays more than 30% of its gross income on housing. Figure 11 shows the percentage of cost burdened homes within the region for the year 2000.

Figure 11

Percentage of Cost-Burdened Homes for RVRC Counties in 2000



Source: 2000 U.S. Census Bureau

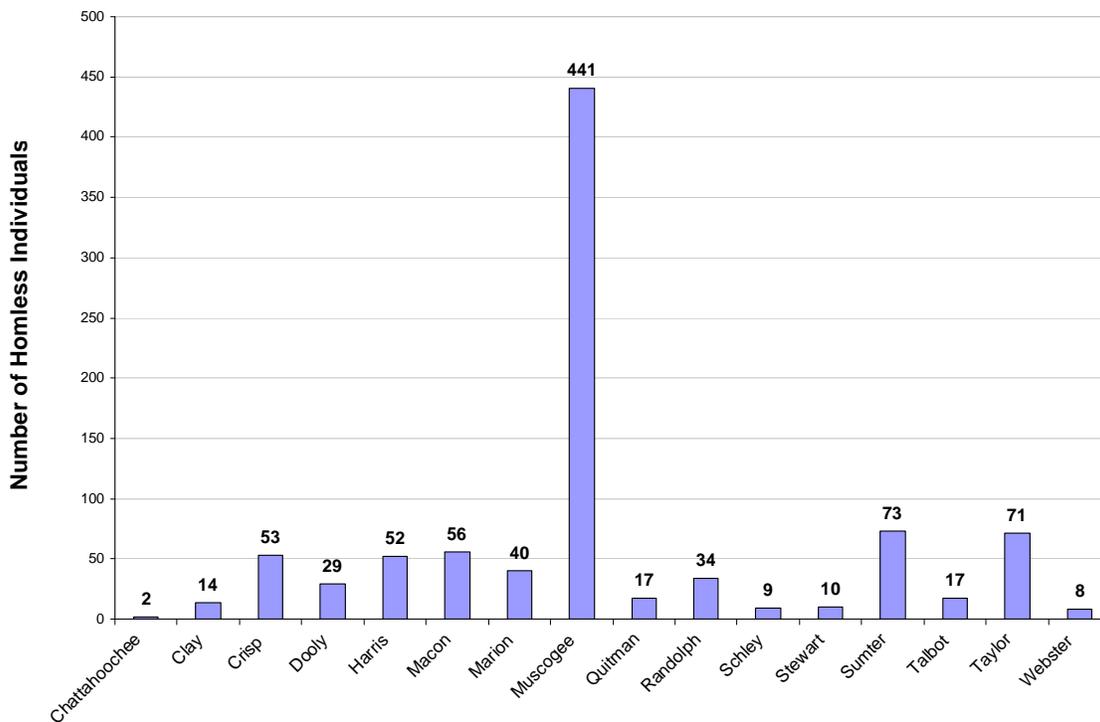
Muscogee County had the greatest percentage of cost-burdened homes within the region at 24.39% followed by Crisp County at 16.61%. The least cost-burdened counties were Webster, Chattahoochee, and Quitman at 6.89%, 7.82%, and 8.45% respectively.

## Special Housing Needs

An additional aspect to be considered, when examining the housing needs of the region, is the amount of service required by the special needs residents within the region.

There were 693 cases of HIV/Aids reported in the region during 2009. In 2010, there were 510 police actions of domestic violence reported in the region. Also in 2000, 20.5% of the population within the region five years of age and older had a disability. Figure 12 illustrates the number of individuals that are homeless within each county of the River Valley region. In 2009, Muscogee County had the highest count of homeless individuals at 441 while Chattahoochee had the lowest at 2.

**Figure 12**  
**Homeless Count 2009**



Source: 2009 Report on Homelessness, DCA

Overall, the current housing stock is supporting the total special needs population. While the disabled and elderly populations increase, future housing to meet needs of the disabled and elderly populations will have to increase. The growth of these two groups is prevalent throughout the state and region.

## Jobs-Housing Balance

Jobs-housing balance is a measure of the relationship between housing units and employment in a county, city, or community. Jobs-housing balance is measured by a jobs/housing ratio, which is the number of jobs in a geographic area (i.e. county, city, region) divided by the number of housing units in that geographic area. Jobs-housing balance seeks a geographic equilibrium between housing and jobs. The underlying

theory is that as jobs and housing are more evenly distributed and mixed, people will be able to live closer to their jobs, and traffic congestion and vehicular traffic will be reduced. A balanced community generally has a jobs-housing ratio of 1.25 to 1.75, with 1.4 considered ideal. A low jobs-housing ratio indicates a bedroom community, while a high ratio indicates an area of employment opportunities.

Table 3 illustrates the jobs-housing ratio within each county of the RVRC region. The least favorable jobs-housing ratio for 2010 was located in Quitman County at 0.197. The most favorable jobs-housing ratio was located in Muscogee County at 1.11.

Table 3			
Jobs-Housing Ratio 2010			
County	# Jobs	# Housing Units	Jobs-Housing Ratio
Chattahoochee	2,402	3,376	0.711492891
Clay	710	2,102	0.337773549
Crisp	7,201	10,734	0.670858953
Dooly	3,105	6,328	0.490676359
Harris	3,757	13,397	0.280435918
Macon	3,165	6,136	0.515808344
Marion	1,491	4,156	0.358758422
Muscogee	91,707	82,690	1.109045834
Quitman	404	2,047	0.197361993
Randolph	1,898	4,153	0.457019022
Schley	1,103	2,208	0.499547101
Stewart	1,236	2,383	0.51867394
Sumter	10,716	13,909	0.770436408
Talbot	829	3,399	0.243895263
Taylor	1,843	4,563	0.403900942
Webster	460	1,523	0.302035456
<b>RVRC</b>	<b>132,027</b>	<b>163,104</b>	<b>0.809465127</b>
Georgia	3,752,981	4,088,801	0.917868343

Source: Georgia Department of Labor, U.S. Census 2010

## Issues and Opportunities

### **Issues**

The River Valley region is mostly composed of low-to-moderate income citizens and only one considerable metropolitan area (Columbus-Muscogee County). With the considerable increase in housing costs, this puts a significant burden on our rural communities. With the majority of jobs being closer the metropolitan areas, housing is not only becoming scarce, but very costly. The rise in housing costs does not allow for those seeking employment to be able to live closer to work, and has increased the numbers of those living further from their place of work and into rural communities where housing costs are somewhat more affordable. Furthermore, it has been increasingly difficult to provide suitable housing for the aging population.

As a result of increased housing costs, the percentage of owner-occupied houses has decreased in the past few years. Unaffordable houses and high numbers of unemployed citizens have led to an increase in renter-occupied units. The population living in manufactured housing units decrease the communities tax digest. Balancing the costs of housing with the quality of housing is also an issue which affects both the potential buyer and seller of homes.

### **Opportunities**

Despite the increase in the price of homes and the slow economy, there is a need to provide good, quality, affordable housing within the River Valley region. With BRAC (Base Realignment and Closure) at Ft. Benning, an additional 23,000 citizens, both civilian and military, are expected to arrive in the coming years. Furthermore, with new industrial sites and agricultural areas being developed in the rural portions of the region, there will clearly be a need to satisfy an increased demand for affordable housing. Potential development firms as well as housing contractors should be able to maintain single-family, site-built units as the primary housing type in the region. Developers can also identify areas for quality, single-family attached units (town houses, condominiums, etc.) which would appeal to different segments of the housing markets.

Future housing developments should be able to provide communities with better access for motorized and non-motorized methods of transportation. Newer developments, rehabilitation of single family units in rural areas and small cities, and infill should provide walk-able and bike-able housing developments that, in turn, generate a better sense of community. New developments seeking to retrofit existing structures/communities should also abide by this principle.

These opportunities could serve as ways to provide better, more affordable home-ownership opportunities, and, in return, increase the percentage of owner-occupied units in relation to renter-occupied units.

# Community Facilities

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## Community Facilities Survey

River Valley staff mailed a Community Facilities Survey to every city and county government in the River Valley region. The RVRC received responses from a total of 33 out of 51 surveys sent out to local communities, representing 65% of the River Valley region. Below is a summary of survey responses and a synopsis of results.

### Water Supply and Sewer Treatment

- Ninety-seven percent of water supply distribution systems and 95% of sewage treatment systems are publicly owned and operated.
- Eighty-five percent of water supply systems and 76% of sewage systems are adequate to meet current conditions.
- Seventy-six percent of water supply systems and 72% of sewage treatment systems are adequate to meet future needs.
- Seventy-two percent of communities have septic tanks.
- Ninety-two percent report no negative environmental impacts.

### Fire Protection, Public Safety, and Recreation

- Ninety-one percent of communities have fire protection, including fire departments and hydrants.
- Seventy-eight percent of respondents feel their fire service is either good, very good, or excellent.
- Sixty-one percent agree that fire protection services are well prepared to meet future demand, while 39% of respondents disagree.
- Ninety-four percent of communities have either police or sheriff service.
- Ninety-four percent of respondents rate the police or sheriff service as good, very good, or excellent.
- Eighty percent of survey participants agree or strongly agree that their communities' public safety services are well prepared for the needs of the River Valley area.
- Eighty-two percent of respondents indicate that their community has local parks or recreation facilities.
- Ninety-four percent believe that it is important or very important to provide local parks and recreation facilities.
- Fifty-eight percent stated that their local parks/recreation facilities are in good, very good, or excellent condition, while 13% say the parks/recreation facilities are poor, and 29% state that the parks/recreation facilities are fair.
- Fifty-one percent of communities agree or strongly agree that the existing facilities can meet future demand, while 49% do not believe that the parks and recreation facilities can meet future demand of residents.
- The majority of cities/counties responding utilize a ditch section to handle storm water.

- Fifty-five percent of respondents state that the condition of their storm water system is poor (23%) or fair (42%).
- Fifty-three percent of respondents agree that their existing storm management system can meet future demand, while 47% disagree.
- Fifty-nine percent estimate that their storm water system can meet future needs for less than 10 years, while 34% estimate their storm water system can meet future needs for 10-20 years, and 7% estimate their storm water system can meet future needs for 20+ years.
- Only 18% of communities reported having a solid waste facility; 64% also feel that their facility is capable of meeting future needs.

## Water

River Valley Regional Commission has three primary sources of water the Chattahoochee River, the Flint River, and an abundant supply of ground water consisting of four recharge areas (including the Claiborne, Clayton, Floridian/Jackson and the Cretaceous-Tertiary). The Cretaceous-Tertiary covers the most acreage of the four aquifers in the River Valley region. The four aquifers in total cover 58% of the land area in the River Valley region. All municipal and individual potable water supplies in the region are supplied by the Chattahoochee River or from one of the four aquifers. There is a surface water impoundment fed by Big Lazer Creek, located in Talbot County, owned by the city of Manchester, that supplies water to Manchester residents and serves as a back-up water supply to Talbot County. No county or city in the River Valley area currently uses the Flint River as a water source. Surface and groundwater is utilized for municipal, commercial, industrial and agricultural use within the region. All the cities have municipal water supply and distribution systems. The unincorporated areas, with the exception of Harris County, Talbot County and Chattahoochee County, usually have water in the urban fringe areas and at industrial parks. The aforementioned counties have water service in 60% to 80% of the unincorporated area. There are numerous public suppliers of water in the River Valley area that provide service outside of their jurisdictional boundaries. For the most part, these cities or counties offer limited service to residential and commercial developments adjacent to city limits or to another county's boundary. In 2011, 91% of the region's population was served by a public water supply.

Many local water systems need major improvements. Many infrastructure systems are relatively old and are in need of repair. Many municipalities and counties depend solely on CDBG funding to make upgrades to improve lines, which is a very competitive process that is not guaranteed. Due to very low water and sewer rates in the River Valley Region, many municipalities and counties cannot afford the large capital improvement that is necessary to upgrade and repair the systems. USDA and GEFA loans are often overlooked due to the necessity of raising water rates to an already impoverished region. The majority of homes and businesses within the unincorporated portions of the Region not served by county or city water systems are served by private wells.

Forecasts of increases in municipal and agricultural water demand for the Region are relatively significant due to the slight population growth projected in the River Valley

Region. Municipal/county water demand is projected to be adequately met through the planning period, given sufficient preparation. Based on 2011 information, the River Valley Region has 190,113,881 gallons per day of pumping capacity and only 45,641,697 gallons per day of consumption. Therefore, the region is only utilizing roughly 24% of its capacity. However, lowering of the ground water tables in the region from other uses could potentially impact the supply of water at wells providing agricultural water supply.

From 2010 to 2050, the water demand of the Middle Chattahoochee Region is projected to increase by 30%; agricultural needs are projected to increase by 10% and the municipal needs by 70%. The wastewater flow is expected to increase by 41%, with a 69% increase for municipal wastewater. Total consumption for industrial and energy uses is projected to remain the same.

From 2010 to 2050, the Upper Flint Region will experience an increase in water demand by 24%. Agricultural uses will increase by 16% and municipal by 55%. The wastewater flow is projected to increase by 51%; a 52% and 50% increase for municipal and industrial wastewater flows, respectively. Significant increases in the demand for agricultural water have been recorded within the past ten years, and its importance to the economy of West-Central Georgia has become vital.

Most of the River Valley Region is located within a Significant Groundwater Recharge Area and most of that area is considered to have a High Pollution Susceptibility. Given the extent of this sensitive environmental area, the lack of centralized sanitation serving individual residential developments within the region must be considered as an important regional issue. It is expected that EPD will adjust point source permit limits over time as needed to address pollution issues.

The State of Georgia has been involved in a tri-state water debate with Alabama and Florida, which remains unresolved. The implications of the outcome of these water issues leave the use and utilization of water in Georgia hard to define. Many of the issues related to future water use and allocation in the Region are related to the dynamics between the surface water flows and the groundwater in the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint river basins and the surface water flow across the State line into the Apalachicola River and Bay in Florida. Flow targets, lake levels, and environmental flows along the rivers are not agreed upon between the three states. The Army Corps of Engineers' operating practices for the river systems and uses of the projects have been challenged in State and Federal court. Rulings issued by Federal Courts indicate much of the Corps' current operating plans are inadequate and new plans are under development.

### **Sewer**

In general, the unincorporated areas, aside from urban fringe areas and industrial parks, are not served by sanitary sewer systems. Septic systems are used in areas not served by sanitary sewer systems. Although septic systems can cause groundwater pollution problems, they are generally not an issue in the region due to the lack of population density where the systems are utilized.

Sewage treatment is provided by the cities of Fort Gaines, Cordele, Byromville, Pinehurst, Unadilla, Vienna, Georgetown-Quitman County, Hamilton, Pine Mountain, Ideal, Marshallville, Montezuma, Oglethorpe, Buena Vista, Columbus-Muscogee County, Cuthbert Shellman, Ellaville, Lumpkin, Richland, Americus, Andersonville, Plains, Talbotton, Butler and Reynolds. In the survey mailed to city and county staff in the River Valley area, 72% of communities have septic tanks, with 92% reporting no negative environmental impacts. The majority of the city systems have ample reserve capacity. In the region, sewage capacity is 58%, leaving 42% of the system available to meet future needs. In the region's unincorporated areas, the septic tank provides the solution to waste disposal. Planned sewage system improvements will meet the needs of the community over the planning period. The provisions of service in the larger cities are adequate to meet the projected growth. Development of sewage treatment facilities in smaller cities is often financially prohibitive as a result of customer base. However, the provision of sewer treatment would be beneficial in terms of attracting commercial and industrial development. The use of individual septic tanks is proliferating throughout the region, particularly in response to residential development in the unincorporated areas. There are numerous concentrated areas of residential development in the region, that could become environmentally sensitive issues over the planning period.

The current level of municipal service provided within each community is generally adequate, although there are certainly areas where extensions and improvements to local systems are warranted. For the most part, however, individual systems will grow with their populations. If greater emphasis is placed on promoting growth in urban centers, the need for improved and extended systems will follow annexations and/or updated service delivery strategies. Nearly every industrial park in the region has adequate water and sewer capacity to keep up with the demand for growth.

County	Sewer Plant Capacity (Gal/Day)	Sewer Plant Load (Gal/Day)
Clay County	300,000	100,000
Crisp County	2,500,000	5,000,000
Cusseta-Chattahoochee County	20,000	20,000
Dooly County	1,450,000	790,000
Georgetown-Quitman County	380,000	40,000
Taylor County	900,000	265,000
Harris County	515,000	165,000
Macon County	2,700,000	1,013,000
Marion County	325,000	225,000
Muscogee County	72,000,000	42,000,000
Randolph County	700,000	450,000
Schley County	400,000	250,000
Stewart County	800,000	275,000
Sumter County	7,750,000	2,450,000
Talbot County	100,000	45,000
Webster County	0	0
Source: River Valley Region Local Governments For breakdown by municipality, please refer to Table 23 of the Data Appendix		

### **Solid Waste**

Municipal solid waste facilities are located in Muscogee County, Crisp County, Taylor County and Macon County. All facilities also handle construction and demolition (C&D) material. Municipal solid waste permitted capacity is adequate to meet the regions needs over the planning period. The C&D landfills in Muscogee County and Macon County have only 13 years and 12 years of capacity left, respectively. All counties have inert landfills.

### **Storm Water**

The majority of counties and cities in the region use ditches to handle storm water, with many of the cities having minor curb and gutter systems. Fifty-five percent of survey respondents state the condition of their storm water system is in poor to fair condition. Fifty-three percent of respondents agree that their existing storm water system can meet future demand while 47% disagree. There are twelve local issuing authorities in the River Valley region that receive Phase II National Pollutant Discharge Elimination Systems (NPDES) coverage: Columbus-Muscogee County; Sumter County, Plains, and Americus; Crisp County and Cordele; Dooly County, Pinehurst, and Unadilla; Harris County, Hamilton and Pine Mountain.

### **Fire Protection**

The International Standard for Standardization (ISO) collects information on municipal fire-protection efforts in communities throughout the United States, analyzes the data, and assigns a Public Protection Classification from 1 to 10. Class 1 represents superior property fire protection, and Class 10 indicates that the area's fire-suppression program does not meet ISO's minimum criteria. These criteria include but are not limited to fire station service areas, station staffing, the availability of public water, pumping and storage capacity among others. The class in which a community is placed plays a major role in determining individual fire insurance rates. According to the ISO, a fire station should have an efficient service area of five miles in any direction from the station. The ISO recommends that each non-reserve piece of equipment should be staffed with six firefighters.

Fire protection is one of the greatest concerns when developing land use regulations. In the long run, land use regulations can improve the efficiency of fire protection service and reduce the impact of fire, if and when one occurs. For the Southwest Georgia Region, the larger cities typically have paid professional fire departments and for the most part, the smaller unincorporated areas have volunteer fire departments. The majority of the fire departments (both professional and volunteer) have informal mutual agreements for back up protection services.

### **Public Safety**

Generally, police functions are handled by municipal police departments in the incorporated areas, and county sheriff's departments in unincorporated areas. In several of the smaller cities there are no police departments and the cities depend on the county sheriff's department.

### **Law Enforcement**

The Georgia constitution allows for each county to maintain certain services. In the area of law enforcement, the Sheriff and their deputies are primarily responsible for the court system and operating and maintaining the county jail facilities. Additional duties include providing security at the courthouse and serving judicial warrants. The local Sheriff's Departments and jail facilities are considered to be of regional significance in that they serve all of the unincorporated areas within the County. As criminal trends continue to rise, opportunities exist for public safety entities to study the potential for cross-training safety personnel.

Police Departments are not of regional significance; however, they do contribute to the overall public safety and welfare of the local communities. The Georgia Bureau of Investigations (GBI) and the Georgia State Patrol Offices serve as resources for the local law enforcement agencies. Often the GBI and the Georgia State Patrol Officers offer technical assistance and back-up support to smaller jurisdictions that need assistance in investigating crimes, assessing crime scenes, and drug enforcement. There are several smaller jurisdictions that do not have police departments and depend on the Sheriff, other local municipalities, or the state, for assistance.

### **Emergency Medical Service**

Emergency Medical Service (EMS) is an important component of public safety as well. These services are a fundamental part of public safety and should be considered along with fire and police protection. EMS provides pre-hospital care and transportation to hospitals. All of the counties in the River Valley Region have Emergency Medical Services and participate with E-911.

### **Schools**

The River Valley Region operates a K-12 school system that has 57,076 students. In most counties, the school system is the largest employer, currently employing a total of 4,358 people in the region. The education system has 107 public schools and 22 private or charter schools to serve area residents.

Post secondary education is also available throughout the River Valley Region. Two four-year universities (Columbus State University and Georgia Southwestern State University) offer Bachelor's and Master's degrees. There are four technical colleges located in the region. Columbus Technical College has a main campus in Muscogee County, while South Georgia Technical College has a main campus in Americus, with an additional satellite campus in the City of Cordele. Albany Technical College has a satellite campus located in the City of Cuthbert, and Southern Crescent Technical College has a satellite campus located in the City of Butler.

### **Parks and Recreation**

The River Valley region contains a mix of local, state, and Federal recreation parks/facilities. The local facilities include football, baseball, and soccer fields; basketball courts; and play grounds and small passive parks. State and Federal facilities include parks such as F. D. Roosevelt State Park, Eufaula National Wildlife

area, Providence Canyon State Park, George Bagby State Park, Blanton Creek Wildlife Management Area, and private facilities such as Callaway Gardens.

In total, the River Valley Region has 65,073 acres of local, state, and Federal park recreation acreage. The majority of the acreage is either state-owned or federal-owned, which totals to approximately 43,995 acres. Local park acreage, including conservation areas, totals to 21,078 acres.

Overall, state and Federal parks/facilities are in good, working order. Although the State of Georgia budget problems have closed a few state park and recreation facilities, none were closed in the River Valley region.

Smaller, local recreational facilities in Columbus, Harris County, Sumter County and Crisp County are also in good shape. Many of our smaller communities and counties are, however, having difficulties in maintaining recreational parks or facilities. In the Community Facilities survey, 58% of the respondents state that their local parks are in good to excellent condition, 13% say park and recreation facilities are in poor condition and 29% state that recreation facilities are in fair condition. Forty-nine percent of respondents do not believe that their existing park and recreational facilities can meet future demand.

#### Andersonville National Historic Site

Andersonville National Historic Site is the only national park to serve as a memorial to all American prisoners of war throughout the nation's history. The 515-acre park consists of the historic prison site and the National Cemetery. Congress stated in the authorizing legislation that this park's purpose is "to provide an understanding of the overall prisoner-of-war story of the Civil War, to interpret the role of prisoner-of-war camps in history, to commemorate the sacrifice of Americans who lost their lives in such camps, and to preserve the monuments located within the site". In 1998 the National Prisoner of War Museum opened at Andersonville, dedicated to the men and women of this country who have suffered captivity.

#### Big Lazer Wildlife Management Area

This 195-acre public fishing lake is located in Talbot County, between Talbotton and Thomaston, Georgia. Big Lazer Creek Public Fishing Area (PFA) offers excellent fishing for bluegill, channel catfish, crappie and largemouth bass. Approximately 15 acres of standing timber remain along the old creek channel and around a small island. The upper end of the lake is fairly shallow, averaging less than five feet deep. Fish attractors have been installed around the fishing pier to improve fishing. This is one of Georgia's many wildlife management areas.

#### Blanton Creek Wildlife Management Area

This WMA is located on Georgia's western border with Alabama. The wildlife management area extends over 4,800 acres, and provides endless, year-round activities to participate in, including bicycling, camping, fishing, hiking, horseback

riding, hunting and picnicking. A variety of hunting is available including deer, turkey, dove, waterfowl, small game and furbearers.

#### Callaway Gardens

This is a 13,000-acre resort complex located in Pine Mountain, Georgia, just outside of Columbus, Georgia, that draws over 750,000 visitors annually. Callaway Gardens was founded in 1952 by Cason J. and Virginia Hand Callaway to promote and protect native azalea species. Their son, Bo Callaway, helped develop and run the garden. Today, the complex features a wide variety of recreational attractions including a large enclosed butterfly habitat (the Cecil B. Day Butterfly Center) and the John Sibley Horticultural Center, known for its wide variety of cultivars and native plants, such as the *Sabal minor*, a native palm that maintains one of its northernmost populations in the area.

#### Cordele Fish Hatchery

This is a 160-acre fish hatchery with an associated wetland viewing area. Located in the Upper Coastal Plain, the facility contains 27 hatcheries intensively managed to produce a variety of species of fish, including channel catfish, hybrid bass, shoal bass, and golden shiners. These ponds range from .2 to 2.5 acres in size. The best seasons for viewing these operations are during the spring spawning and fall harvest activities.

#### Eufaula NWR

The Eufaula National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1964 through community support and in cooperation with the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers. It is located on both banks of the Chattahoochee River in southeast Alabama and southwest Georgia. Named after the city of Eufaula, the refuge offers a variety of wetland and upland habitats for diverse fauna. A prominent feature of the abundant wetlands is Lake Eufaula (Walter F. George Reservoir) and several feeder streams. The refuge's primary purposes are to provide habitat for wintering waterfowl, other migratory birds and resident species; to provide habitat and protection for endangered or threatened species; and to provide wildlife oriented recreational opportunities for the public.

#### Fall Line Sandhills National Area

This is an 876 acre natural area open to seasonal hunting. Pre-season scouting, hiking, picnicking, canoeing, and other recreational uses are allowed year-round, unless otherwise posted at the WMA check station, or at a specific recreation site. However, horseback riding and bicycling are restricted to open, improved roads, designated trails, and/or designated areas.

#### Flint River Wildlife Management Area

This is a 2,300 acre Wildlife Management Area open to seasonal hunting. Camping, pre-season scouting, hiking, picnicking, canoeing, and other recreational uses are allowed year-round, unless otherwise posted at the WMA check station or at a

specific recreation site. However, horseback riding and bicycling are restricted to open, improved roads, designated trails or designated areas.

#### F. D. Roosevelt State Park

Located near Callaway Gardens and the quaint town of Warm Springs, this park is deeply rooted in the historical era of four-time president, Franklin D. Roosevelt. Seeking a place for treatment after he was stricken with polio in 1921, Roosevelt traveled to Warm Springs and built the Little White House. Several structures within the park were built by Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) during the Great Depression.

Above Kings Gap is Dowdell's Knob, Roosevelt's favorite picnic spot overlooking a magnificent view of the valley below. A life-size sculpture of the beloved president welcomes visitors to the overlook. Hikers will enjoy the scenic trails in Georgia's largest state park, especially the Pine Mountain Trail, which winds through a mix of hardwoods and pines. The trail's highest elevation is 1,395 feet.

#### Florence Marina State Park

Situated at the northern end of 45,000-acre Lake Walter F. George, this quiet park offers the perfect setting for those who love water sports. It is adjacent to a natural deep-water marina with an accessible deep-water fishing pier, boat slips and boat ramp. Anglers will be excited to know that a state record blue catfish was captured in the park's lake in February 2010. Birders are sure to see herons and egrets, and possibly bald eagles. The park's Kirbo Interpretive Center teaches visitors about Native Americans, nature and local history, and it displays snakes, turtles, fish and artifacts from the prehistoric Paleo-Indian period through the early 20th century.

#### George Bagby State Park

Located on the shores of Lake Walter F. George in southwest Georgia, this resort park features a 60-room lodge; conference center; restaurant; cottages; and award-winning, 18-hole Meadow Links Golf Course. The park's marina and boat ramp offer easy access to the 48,000-acre lake for fishing and boating. The large picnic shelter and numerous picnic sites are perfect places for families to enjoy their catch. Facilities are available for meetings, reunions, weddings and other group gatherings. Visitors may also look for wildlife along the three-mile nature trail, which winds through hardwoods and pines.

#### George Veterans State Park

Established as a memorial to U.S. veterans, this park features a museum with aircraft, armored vehicles, uniforms, weapons, medals and other items from the Revolutionary War through the Gulf War. An 18-hole golf course and pro shop, along with 8,600-acre Lake Blackshear, make this one of Georgia's most popular state parks. The Lake Blackshear Resort and Golf Club is a privately operated conference center with 78 lodge rooms, 10 cottages, and a restaurant. The SAM Shortline Excursion Train runs through the park on its way from Cordele to Plains, allowing riders to see an antique telephone museum, Habitat for Humanity's Global Village, President Jimmy Carter's boyhood farm, and other attractions.

### Hannahatchee Wildlife Management Area

This is a 5,600 acre Wildlife Management Area open to seasonal hunting. Camping, pre-season scouting, hiking, picnicking, canoeing, and other recreational uses are allowed year-round, unless otherwise posted at the WMA check station or at a specific recreation site. However, horseback riding and bicycling are restricted to open, improved roads, designated trails or designated areas.

### Lake George Wildlife Management Area

Lake Walter F. George Wildlife Management Area is one of Georgia's many wildlife management areas. It lies along the western border of Georgia on the shores of Lake Walter F. George, which is a 45,700 acre reservoir owned and operated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The WMA itself is 1,800 acres consisting of 8 different tracts of land that can be found at various points along the lake shore. A popular activity here is hunting, including deer, turkey, alligator, water fowl, small game and fur bearers.

### Montezuma Bluffs National Area

This is a 500 acre Natural Area open to seasonal hunting and other activities year-round. Montezuma Bluffs National Area contains rare species and sensitive habitats. To protect these resources, vehicular access is limited to the boat landing road. No ATVs or horses allowed.

### Providence Canyon State park

Also known as "Georgia's Little Grand Canyon", Providence Canyon State Park has massive gullies as deep as 150 feet that were caused by poor farming practices during the 1800s. Hikers who explore the deepest canyons will usually find a thin layer of water along the trail, indicative of the water table below. Colorful wildflowers, as well as the pink, orange, red and purple hues of the soft canyon soil, make a beautiful natural "painting" at this unique park. The rare Plumleaf Azalea grows only in this region and blooms during July and August when most azaleas have lost their color. While the park's visitor center is no longer open, hikers can enjoy views of the canyons from the rim trail; backpackers can stay overnight along the backcountry trail. Visitors are urged to use caution on trails and to not go beyond fences or overlooks. Erosion can cause the canyon walls to collapse.

### Sprewell Bluff State Park and Wildlife Management Area

This little-known gem on the Flint River is the perfect location for a daytime getaway. The 2,800 acre Natural Area is open to hunting, while the 1,372 acre State Park borders the gently flowing Flint River. A three-mile trail winds along the bank and up rocky bluffs, offering excellent views from high above the river. A boat ramp is available for canoeists, kayakers, rafters and anglers. Canoes may be rented from nearby outfitters, and camping and cottages are available 25 miles west at F.D. Roosevelt State Park in Pine Mountain.

### Standing Boy Creek State Park

Standing Boy Creek State Park is located approximately 30 miles south of West Point Lake in Columbus, Georgia (on Lake Oliver). The park is over 1,500 acres large. Here, there are opportunities for fishing, swimming and boating. Additionally, the wooded trails along throughout the grounds provide great opportunities for hiking.

## Issues and Opportunities

### **Issues**

Within the River Valley region, the service needs of many communities are very similar. Counties and cities often struggle with meeting the service demands of population growth in specific portions of the region. If growth projections for these areas prove to be accurate, the demand for public services will increase. As a result, careful planning will be required to ensure adequate services are available over the next twenty (20) years. In particular, the needs to focus on storm water management, water, sewer and facility upgrades for maintenance shops, recreation facilities, etc. are vital. Although not a public service, the lack of broadband service and inadequate area coverage of existing service is a major concern for the River Valley elected officials and citizens. However, in areas of the region that the population has not seen population growth, but rather a population loss, the drop in revenue from property taxes and fees has put a strain on the local government's ability to provide needed services. Finally, the majority of River Valley cities and counties do not have a capital improvement program, but many communities have expressed an interest in creating a formal program.

### **Opportunities**

Within the region, the water and sewer systems often provide the needed infrastructure for meaningful infill development and revenue opportunities. Communities should take advantage of existing infrastructure to promote new development within core downtowns and traditional neighborhoods. As new businesses are established and infill development progresses, local governments will have the opportunity to reassess various fees, including impact fees, subdivision review fees, and/or service tax districts, to compensate for the investment required to spur new growth. Existing public parks and recreational infrastructure should be incorporated into plans to attract new businesses, residents, and tourists. Within the region, there are ample opportunities to capitalize on the cultural, historic, and environmental assets that the region possesses.

## **Intergovernmental**

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Certain issues in the region are best dealt with in a coordinated manner, rather than by individual governments or authorities acting on their own. In many cases some local governments work together, either on an informal basis or through jointly-controlled agencies. State and Federal regulations provide standards, which may be voluntary or mandatory.

### **Economic Development**

Cooperation is important to promote economic development; local governments often lack resources to promote their economic potential without cooperation. The Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) is a broad-based continuous planning process developed by the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) that addresses the economic opportunities of the region. There are also a number of joint Development Authorities, Chambers of Commerce and Industrial Parks that include multiple governments.

### **Service Delivery Strategy**

The service delivery strategy is a document that specifies how certain services and related facilities are provided within counties. Services include water, sewer, solid waste, road maintenance, jails, police, fire, E-911, EMS, economic development, animal control, etc. The service delivery strategy is where intergovernmental coordination and cooperation is outlined.

### **Upper Flint Regional Water Plan**

The Upper Flint River Regional Water Development and Conservation Plan is a comprehensive review of water development, conservation and sustainable use. It promotes the conservation and reuse of water, guards against a shortage of water, and promotes efficient use of the water resources over much of the Upper Flint region and the overlapping local governments.

### **Middle Chattahoochee Regional Water Plan**

The Middle Chattahoochee Region Water Plan, to be developed by the Middle Chattahoochee Water Planning Council, will determine the preferred water management practices to meet the region's future water resources needs. The recommended regional water plan, which must be submitted to the Georgia Environmental Protection Division by June 30, 2011, will identify a range of expected future water needs for the Middle Chattahoochee region and the corresponding local governments.

### **Regionally Important Resources Plan**

The intent of the plan is to provide an enhanced focus on protection and management of important natural and cultural resources throughout the region, careful consideration of, and planning for, impacts of new development on these important resources, and improved local and regional coordination for the protection and management of these important resources.

### **Regional Transit**

The RVRC works closely with the Georgia Department of Human Resources (DHR) to promote the efficient use of available transportation resources as a broker for the DHR region. The system is now operating more than 75 vehicles providing transit services to the public and the Division of Aging Services, Department of Family and Children Services, Mental Health, Development Disabilities and Addictive Disease, and public transit service provide nearly 175,000 trips per year to work, businesses for shopping, and other activities.

### **Issues and Opportunities**

#### **Issues**

Within the region, communities have begun to coordinate efforts to propel regional initiatives and efforts. Two other Regional Plans for The Upper Flint and The Middle Chattahoochee watersheds have been completed. Forecasts for 2050 predict an increase in municipal water demand (63% on average for both watersheds) and a 27% increase on average for agricultural water demand. Waste water flow will increase by 46% on average for both watersheds. Both groundwater and surface water will be impacted in the RVRC Region. The potential pollution and water level of the Crustaceous Tertiary groundwater recharge area is of primary importance since the recharge covers 67% of the River valley region. Outside of the Columbus Metropolitan Area, transportation, or the lack thereof, is a major concern. Approximately 30% of households do not have reliable access to an automobile. This fact underlies the importance of the need for rural Regional Transit in that many of the daily living necessities such as health care, food, and employment are found in the metro areas of Columbus, Albany, and Macon as well in the smaller cities of Americus and Cordele. Many households in the River Valley Region must rely on rural transit, or, if available, a friend or family member to provide transportation service.

Improving and maintaining transportation infrastructure is also a problem in our region, including Columbus, due to the cost of said activities. The rural areas are hit especially hard due to limited financial resources. Regional support on the Transportation Investment Act is imperative to improve upon our regional and local transportation systems, and, thus, stay economically competitive in the state to move goods, services, and people safely and effectively to desired destinations.

Another regional transportation issue is the lack of desire of city and county citizens to participate in regional transportation planning programs and

services. The rural transit services located in the RVRC Region primarily have a client base that is of low-to-moderate income. This, along with limited routes and convenience issues, creates a stigma about rural transit and discourages others from using the transit system. Most rural transit facilities need to expand their ridership base, in order to do so the aforementioned issues must be addressed.

A major problem in the River Valley region is deteriorating community facilities and infrastructure. As tax bases decline due to stagnant or declining population growth in many of our smaller cities and counties, a financial burden is placed on local governments and their ability to raise funds to fix ongoing infrastructure problems. This is especially a problem when many of our local city and county residents live on social security or disability incomes. These local problems turn to regional problems when crumbling infrastructure, such as deteriorating water or sewer lines, impact state and regional waterways. Finding funding or developing more cost effective solutions to existing problems is critical to maintaining fiscal and environmental health within the River Valley region.

### **Opportunities**

With a moderate population growth projected for the River Valley Region, and massive infrastructure repair needs for financially challenged River Valley cities and counties, there is a great opportunity to promote and propagate existing regional services as a viable solution to common local issues that transcend the River Valley region. Developing a regional economy of scale and sharing resources when necessary will develop stronger work relationships between local governments, and thus serve to better solve local and regional issues.

# Transportation

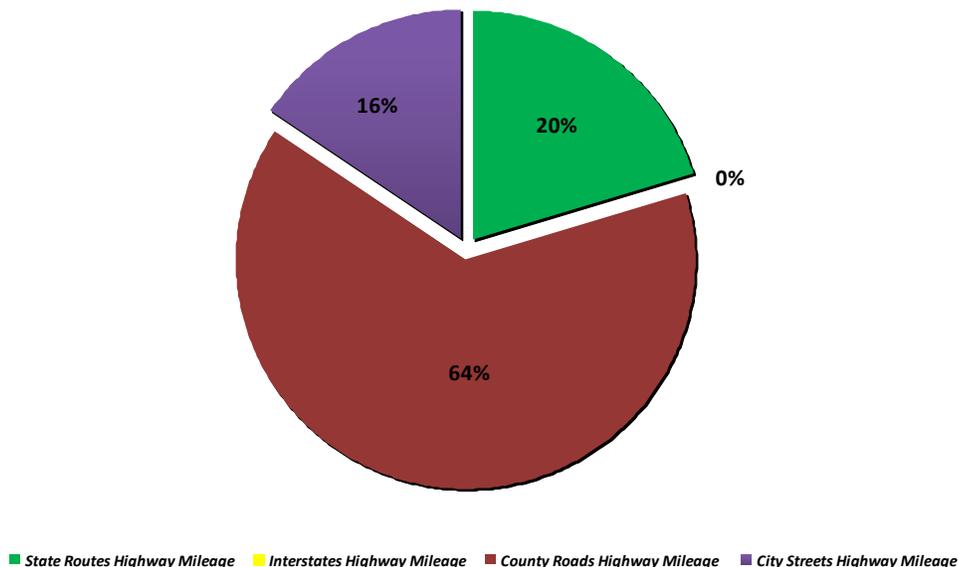
The River Valley Region’s transportation network, which plays an important role in the region’s economic and infrastructural growth, is composed of a mix of U.S highways, state highways, interstates, and county and city roads. These networks also include paved and unpaved roads. Alternative modes of transportation in the River Valley Region, to include walking and cycling, have become more popular in recent years, which are leading to increased usage of the region’s various bicycle and pedestrian paths and trails. In addition to roads used for conventional transportation and paths used for alternative commuting, the region also has various railroads, trucking facilities, port facilities, and airports.

## Road Network

The River Valley Region is composed of 7,995 miles of state highways, interstates, and county and city roads. This road network allows for an average of 12,095 vehicle miles traveled daily within the region, which is less than double the existing road mileage in the region. Traffic congestion and management, therefore, is not a major issue in the region.

**Figure 13**

**Percentage of Highway Mileage in RVRC Counties 2009**  
Based on ( Source: Georgia County Guide )



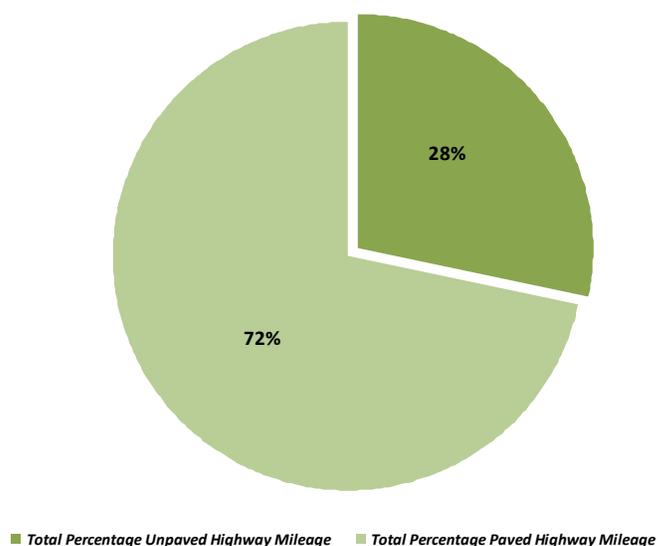
The region’s road network is composed of the following:

- 1,626 state highway miles.
- 71 interstate miles.

- 6,369 city and county street miles

Approximately 30% of this road network is currently unpaved and accounts for 2,255 miles of rural, unpaved roads. This percentage is relatively high, and can affect future land use strategies and developments within the region. Unpaved roads represent undeveloped areas without vehicular connectivity. Not having access to motor vehicles represents additional costs in new developments, as well as additional planning regarding the transport of materials, personnel, and technology. Providing adequate road connectivity is a crucial factor in assessing growth opportunities; therefore, although mostly rural, this may affect economic growth in certain parts of the region.

**Figure 14**  
**Percentage of Total Paved & Unpaved in RVRC Counties 2009**  
 Based on ( Source: Georgia County Guide )



### Alternative Modes

The River Valley Region’s current bicycle and pedestrian system is comprised of 15 routes, totaling approximately 285 miles in length. Of these 15 routes, 5 are on state highways that make up approximately 235 miles of the region’s 285 miles of bike paths. The remaining 10 routes are existing bicycle and pedestrian trails and pathways throughout the region totaling approximately 56 miles.

Facilities in the region include sidewalks, crosswalks, paved shoulders, and bike lanes already incorporated in the current transportation system. These facilities also include 14 miles of the Columbus River Walk and 7 miles of the Columbus Fall Line Trace (both of which are multi-use, shared paths—See Table 5).

The majority of the River Valley Region is rural, with the exception of the city of Columbus (Muscogee County). Cycling and walking activities as means of non-motorized transportation are limited because travel distances tend to be lengthy. In

addition to length, rural communities do not have adequate roadways and other facilities to accommodate bicycle and pedestrian needs. Columbus, however, is able to accommodate non-motorized transportation for bicyclists and pedestrians. Serving as the regional center for the River Valley Region, Columbus has a higher population density and can, therefore, provide many opportunities for bicycle and pedestrian activity. Continuous improvements of existing streets within the city (which include sidewalks into residential developments) and the continued growth of educational institutions are leading to a greater interest in cycling and walking as an alternative transportation method. However, just as in rural communities, most commuters depend on motorized transportation as a means of getting to and from their destination.

Table 5	
Route Mileage: River Valley Region	
Route -Trail Number and Name	Total Mileage
5- Chattahoochee Trace	111
40- TransGeorgia GA HWY 96	63
15- Central Route US. 41/GA 7	38
Pine Mountain Trail	23
45- Little White House	17
Columbus Riverwalk	14
Columbus Fall Line Trace	11
Discovery Bicycle Trail	10
Harris County Palmetto Creek Pedestrian and Biking Trail	4.6
Woodland Pedestrian and Bike Trail	1
Waverly Hall Walking Trail	1
GA Veterans Memorial Park Walking/Hiking Trail, Crisp County	1
Shiloh Walking Trail	1
Shellman Walking Trail	1
<b>Total Mileage</b>	<b>296.6</b>
Source: River Valley Regional Commission 2011 Bicycle-Pedestrian Plan	

### **Railroads, Trucking, Port Facilities and Airports**

There are currently 4 major freight railroad systems operating in the RVRC region. These rail networks cover approximately 4,000 nationwide. Within the region, these freight rail systems provide connectivity between the following communities:

Based on Georgia Department of Transportation 2010 data, there are currently two passenger railroad systems operating within the RVRC region. These passenger rail systems provide connectivity between different cities and offer the necessary transportation tools for generating tourism developments, jobs and economic growth. Passenger rail accessibility in Georgia is rare, and therefore, when available, could provide great economic growth for the region.

These passenger rails are:

1. Inner City (Columbus to Griffin)
2. Inner City (Americus to Macon)

There are also two proposed passenger rail systems which are as follows:

1. First Priority Corridors (Macon to Albany via Americus)
2. Second Priority (Atlanta to Columbus via Griffin)

### **Ports**

Due to the geographical location of the RVRC region within Georgia, there is only one maritime port in the region. The Port Columbus is owned by the Georgia Ports Authority and leased to a private terminal operator (S.T. Services). Port Columbus is located on the Chattahoochee River with convenient access to the U.S. Gulf via the Tri-Rivers System (Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint Waterway). The dedicated liquid bulk facility totals 14 acres and is equipped to handle a variety of liquid bulk cargoes via barge traffic, providing port-users with an economic alternative to other transport.

### **Airports**

There are nine operating airports in the RVRC region, two of which are metropolitan with connecting hubs for major airline companies. The remaining airports serve mostly commercial and agricultural purposes. Considering the size and population make up of the RVRC region, it provides a well established network of airports, allowing commercial, passenger and agricultural access for air transportation. The vast majority of the RVRC region is rural, which provides an open market opportunity for businesses, such as crop dusting and aerial photography. Furthermore, with the presence of Fort Benning Military Reservation, this adds an additional airport that strictly provides services to the Department of Defense, and allows for better and more efficient transport of troops between the various United States Military Bases.

### **Issues and Opportunities**

#### **Issues**

With an increase in the number of alternative commuters, as well as an increase in cycling as a recreational activity throughout the River Valley region, expanding existing bicycle trails and on-road lanes can provide regional connectivity. However, most state highways in the region are relatively old and do not possess sufficient shoulder width to construct these facilities. Therefore, it is important to include bicycle and pedestrian facilities for new city, county, and state roads to accommodate these individuals.

Providing parking through downtowns, regionally, can have a positive impact on tourism, sales of good and services, and cities as they address redeveloping their communities. However, parking must be provided in such a way that it does not negatively impact existing downtowns and streetscapes.

Providing signage control and managing traffic flow on State Highway 27, US Routes 1, 354 and 18 will aid in traffic congestion and help guide visitors within the area. Signage must not disrupt scenic routes and should abide by state codes and regulations. Traffic signage must also be properly maintained and provide sufficient reflectivity for it to be visible.

A final transportation opportunity within the region stems from the ability to retrofit neighborhoods so that sidewalks and other bicycle/pedestrian facilities are built into new developments. This would allow for the creation of pedestrian connectivity between new and existing neighborhoods.

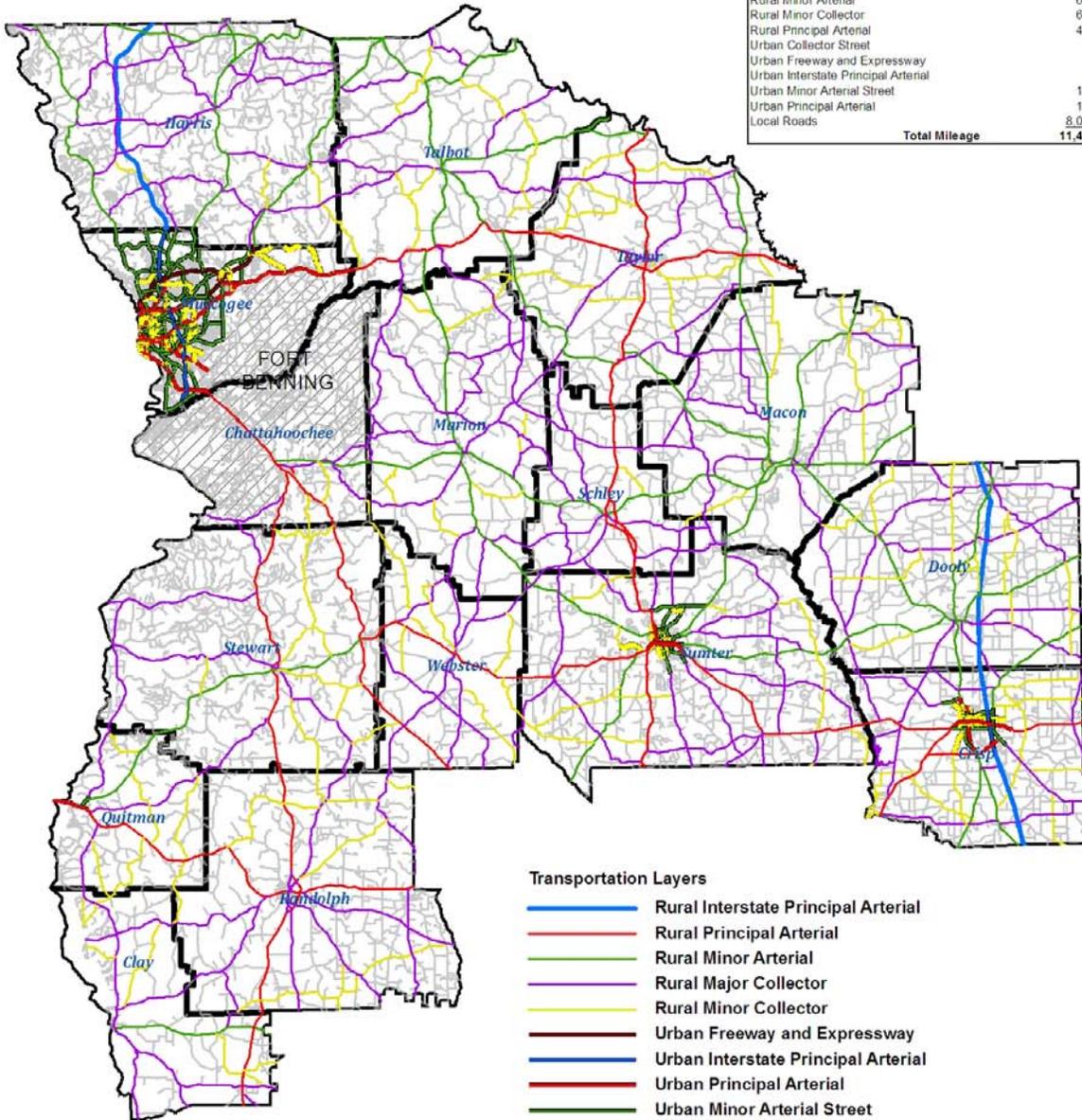
### **Opportunities**

With the continuous growth that the region's metropolitan areas are experiencing, there is a great opportunity for METRA (Columbus-Muscogee County public transportation) to provide services from Columbus to Harris County. Harris County has the highest percentage of single-family units in the region, mainly due to the fact that the county provides affordable housing to those working in Columbus. Furthermore, providing public transportation between Harris County and Columbus will allow other citizens to receive important services, such as health care, better access to basic goods and services, etc.

Finally, along with housing and new developments in the region, there is an opportunity to create communities where walking and cycling are addressed as a top priorities. Developing communities with sidewalk connectivity, bicycle lanes, bicycle parking, and adequate handicap-accessible facilities will address health and environmental issues for local residents.

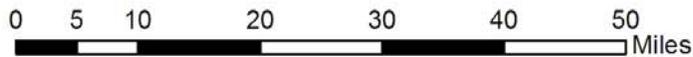
## River Valley Regional Commission Region's Transportation Map

ROADS BY FUNCTION	LINEAR MILES
Rural Interstate Principal Arterial	110.95
Rural Major Collector	1,241.33
Rural Minor Arterial	604.88
Rural Minor Collector	608.13
Rural Principal Arterial	411.37
Urban Collector Street	87.94
Urban Freeway and Expressway	38.20
Urban Interstate Principal Arterial	48.01
Urban Minor Arterial Street	186.98
Urban Principal Arterial	110.64
Local Roads	8,010.62
<b>Total Mileage</b>	<b>11,459.04</b>



### Transportation Layers

- Rural Interstate Principal Arterial
- Rural Principal Arterial
- Rural Minor Arterial
- Rural Major Collector
- Rural Minor Collector
- Urban Freeway and Expressway
- Urban Interstate Principal Arterial
- Urban Principal Arterial
- Urban Minor Arterial Street
- Urban Collector Street
- Local Roads



# Land Use

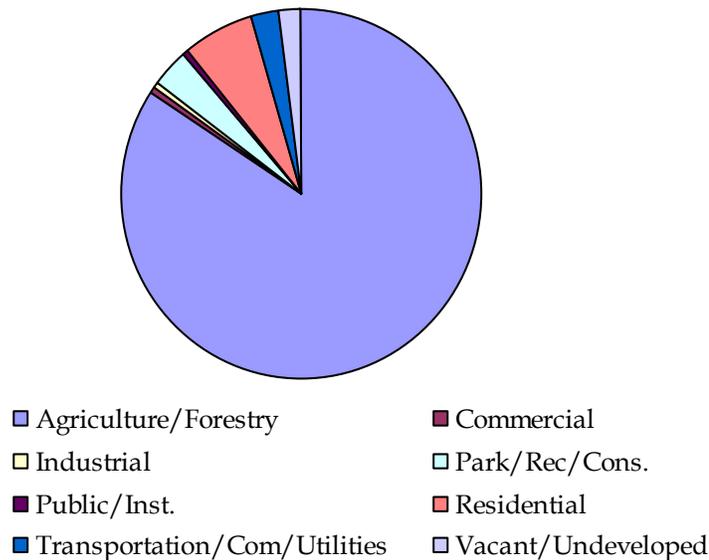
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The citizens of the River Valley Region wish to maximize land development opportunities while maintaining open space and protecting natural and cultural resources. Key challenges throughout the sixteen counties include protecting natural resources while encouraging residential and light industrial development, as well as establishing new commercial development while maintaining the viability of existing downtowns. Another key challenge is integrating alternative transportation options by increasing walking and biking opportunities throughout local communities. This will increase connectivity between future and existing developments.

## Existing Land Use

The following graph illustrates the percentage of total land dedicated to existing land uses within the River Valley Region.

**Figure 15**  
**Existing Land Use**



Source: RVRC Staff, local governments 2011

## Issues and Opportunities

### **Issues**

There are many issues and potential opportunities in the River Valley region in terms of land use development and protection. Some of the key issues to consider as the region continues to develop will include conserving natural and cultural resources, such as the region's plentiful water sources, state parks, and rural lands. This also involves conserving existing open space and creating open space in new developments, focusing on infill and redevelopment versus greenfield construction, and maintaining forested and rural lands. Cultural resources within the River Valley region are also plentiful, and should be

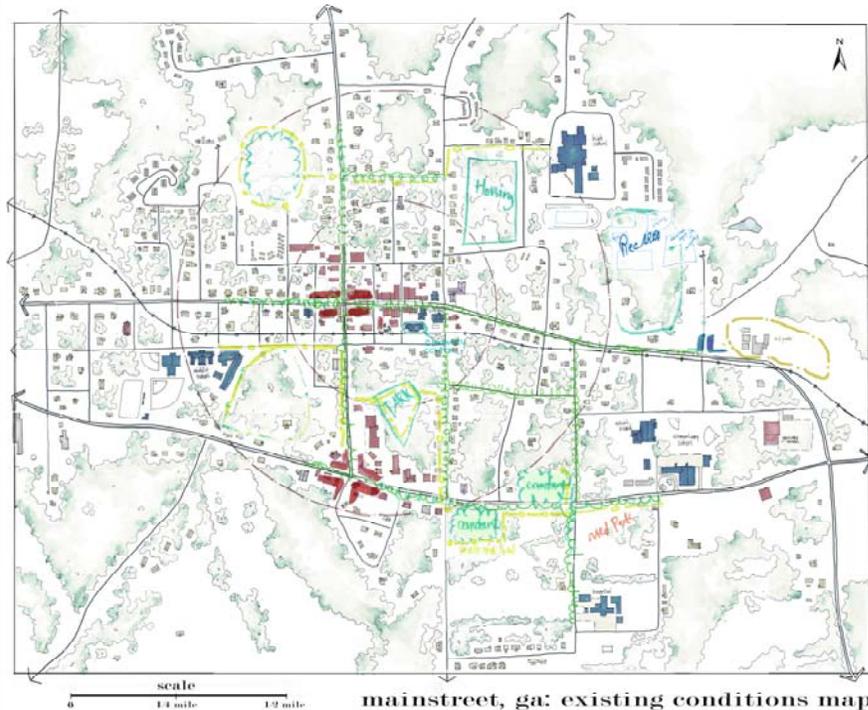
protected not only to preserve the region's heritage, but also as a viable tool for promoting tourism and increasing economic development opportunities for local communities. Safeguarding these sites will include ensuring that non-compatible land uses do not continue to encroach upon historic areas. In terms of the type of land uses within the region, land use mixes are often heavily favored towards residential and commercial use. As a result, there is a need to further diversify land use base. Another key issue within the region that impedes growth within communities is the existence of outdated zoning and subdivision ordinances. Often these ordinances do not reflect the wishes of the community as identified in their comprehensive plans, and often times prevent innovative development within the downtown areas.

### **Opportunities**

A number of opportunities for further development also exist within the region to address many of the issues mentioned above. For example, vacant land within city limits can be reserved for mixed development including single family attached residential growth and commercial growth. This strategy will help to preserve existing rural land and greenspace, while targeting new investment towards existing infrastructure. By encouraging traditional neighborhood development adjacent to existing downtowns and in new developments, this goal can also be achieved. Additionally, traditional neighborhood development patterns should be required when developing adjacent to or within a historic district. This strategy will allow local governments to capitalize on existing traditional development patterns throughout the region, when looking to expand or grow. To protect the region's natural resources, local governments should promote a variety of conservation techniques, including protective ordinances such as conservation subdivision and stream buffer ordinances, and devise an incentive to create greenway connections. In addition, by identifying potential brownfields, local governments have an opportunity to clean up potentially hazardous sites, but also to market those sites to developers for redevelopment with available federal and state incentives for cleaning up brownfield sites. Another opportunity within the region is the ability to create a regionwide land use plan that will not only identify watersheds throughout the sixteen counties, but include provisions to enhance their protection.

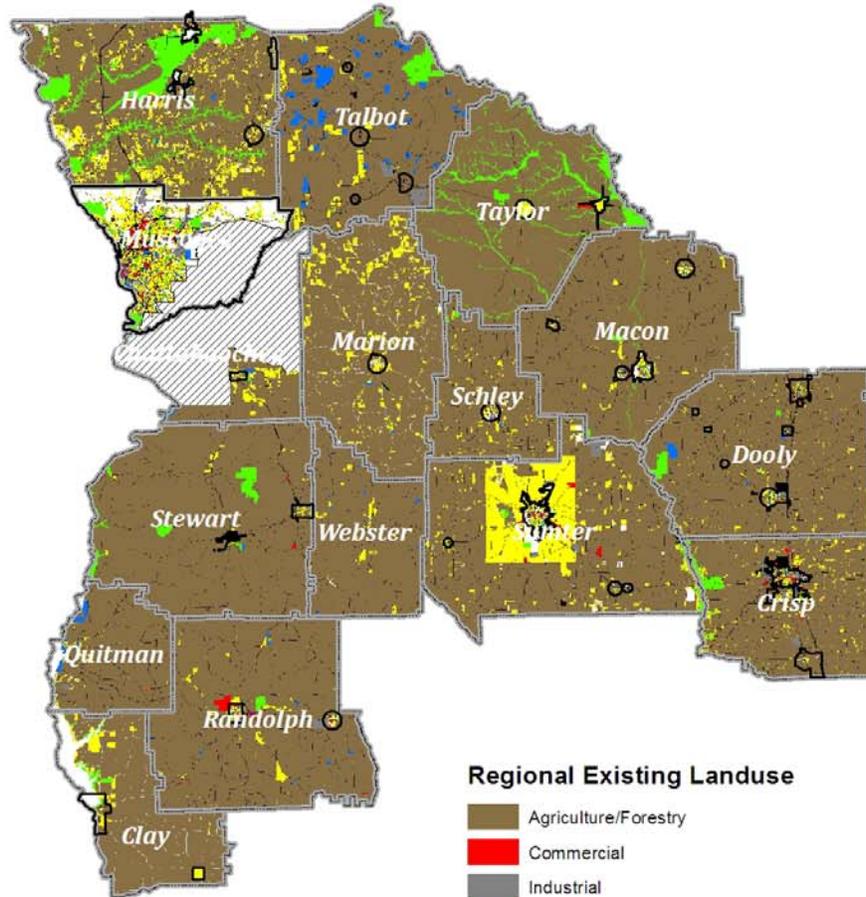
# Analysis of Existing and Future Regional Development Patterns

**An Analysis of Existing and Future Regional Development Patterns** provides an understanding of how land is used at a specific point in time. An existing land use map is the first step in gaining an understanding of not only what land uses exist and where they are, but how they interact. The purpose of this section is to map and review existing land use in the River Valley Region, as well as to examine areas in need of special attention. The last task is the analysis of projected development patterns, which projects the possible growth within the region over the upcoming twenty year planning period.



The image above was created during the Pattern and Place Charrette Workshops, hosted by the RVRC for local communities in the River Valley region.

## River Valley Regional Commission Region's Existing Landuse Map



### Regional Existing Landuse

- Agriculture/Forestry
- Commercial
- Industrial
- Park/Recreation/Conservation
- Public/Institutional
- Residential
- Transportation/Communication/Utilities
- Vacant/Undeveloped

Fort Benning



Name: Existing Landuse Map

20      10      0      20 Miles



Date: 9/5/2011

## Existing Land Use

The total acreage for the River Valley region is 3,216,296 acres. These acres are divided into eleven separate land use categories, which are defined below. These number of acres and percentage of total land within the region are shown in Table 26 within the Data Appendix.

<b>Table 6</b>	
<b>Existing Land Use Definitions</b>	
<b>Existing Land Use</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Residential</b>	Single-family residential uses, and manufactured and mobile home units (all normally located on no less than a one-quarter of an acre lots).
<b>Agriculture/Forestry</b>	Land used for agricultural purposes such as farming and/or livestock production and timber production.
<b>Commercial</b>	Commercial uses including office use, retail, restaurants, convenience store, car dealerships, etc.
<b>Industrial</b>	Land dedicated to industrial uses (includes both light and heavy industrial uses).
<b>Parks/Recreation/Conservation</b>	Local, state, and federal parks, active and passive recreation activities, and protected land (includes land preserved in land trust).
<b>Public/Institutional</b>	Community facilities excluding utilities, government (schools, public safety facilities, courthouse, jail, health facilities, churches, and libraries).
<b>Transportation/Communication/Utilities</b>	Land used for transportation, communication or utility facilities (cell towers, power stations, water tower, and water treatment facilities).
<b>Road Right-of-Way</b>	Land dedicated to road use including right of way.
<b>Undeveloped/Vacant</b>	Land where no apparent active uses exist; property with dilapidated or abandoned structures or overgrown vacant lots.
<b>Multi-Family Residential</b>	Existing multi-family residential uses such as apartments and duplexes
<b>Mixed-Use</b>	Existing buildings that contain a variety of uses such as residential, commercial, office and retail.

### **Residential**

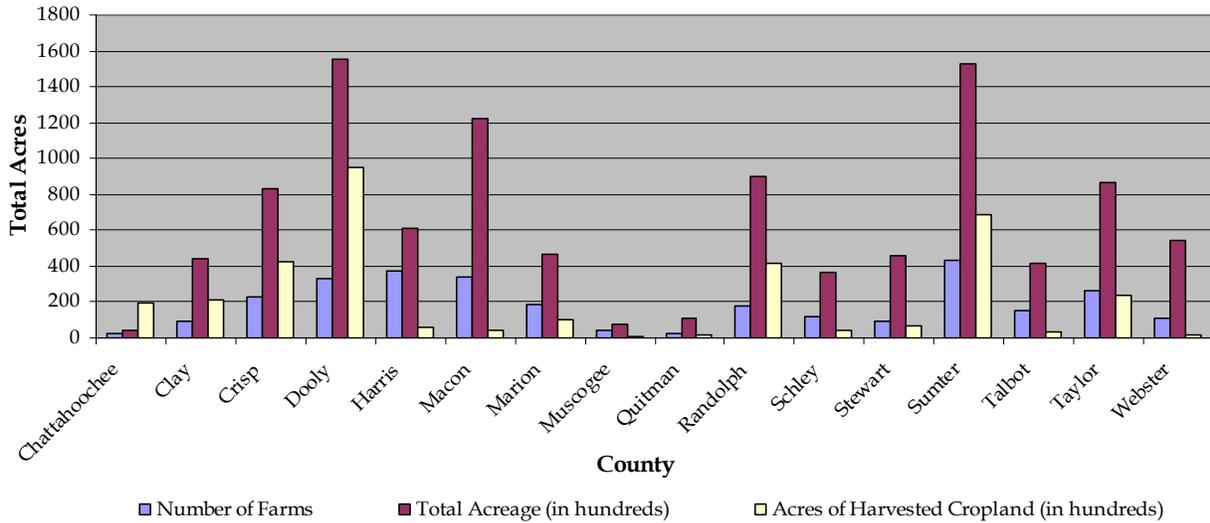
The residential land uses (including single-family residential uses, manufactured and mobile home units, and multi-family residential), composed of existing multi-family residential uses such as apartments and duplexes (all normally located on no less than a one-quarter of an acre lots), represent a total of 201,759 acres of land within the River Valley region, or 6.27% of the total existing land use. While the amount of new homes constructed within the region boomed in the mid to late 2000's, the current housing market issues coupled with the recession has resulted in a significant decrease in residential construction throughout the region. As the economy strengthens, however,

new investment in residential development is expected throughout the region, especially in the major population centers of Columbus and Americus.

**Agriculture/Forestry**

The agricultural and forestry land, used for agricultural purposes such as farming and/or livestock production and timber production, represents a total of 2,709,824 acres of land within the River Valley region. The table below lists the agricultural trends in the region, including the number of farms per county, the total acreage of those farms, and how much of that land is harvested. Within the RVRC, there are a total of 2,977 farms, 1,004,952 total acreage of farmland, and 382,805 acres of harvested cropland.

**Figure 16  
Agricultural Trends in the River Valley Region**



According to the data, the southern portion of the region not only has a significant number of acres devoted to farms, but the percentage of harvested crops was also much higher than other parts of the region. Dooly County leads the region, with 329 farms covering 155,600 acres, 61.2% of which were harvested in 2007. In terms of productivity, Dooly is followed by Crisp County, Clay County, Randolph County and Sumter County, which all had harvest percentages over forty-five percent (45%). The leading crops produced in the region were cotton, peanuts, soybeans, corn, and wheat.

**Commercial**

The commercial land uses (including office use; retail, restaurants, convenience store, car dealerships) as well as mixed-use commercial (comprised of existing buildings that contain a variety of uses such as residential, commercial, office and retail) represent a total of 11,745 acres of land within the River Valley region.

**Industrial**

Industrial land, including both light and heavy industrial uses, represents a total of 18,347 acres of land within the River Valley region. The majority of light industrial activity and industrial parks are located in the cities of Columbus, Americus, and Cordele, as these are the largest economic and population centers in the region. BRAC

(Base Realignment and Closure) in Columbus, new factories in Americus, and the inland port in Cordele are all expected to increase industrial opportunities within the region. Other industrial activities within the region, most notably mining activities, are concentrated in Talbot County, Taylor County, Harris County and portions of Muscogee County.

#### **Parks/Recreation/Conservation**

The park/recreation and conservation land uses include local, state, and federal parks, active and passive recreation activities, and protected land (such as land preserved in land trusts) represents a total of 106,844 acres of land within the River Valley region.

#### **Public/Institutional**

The public/institutional land uses within the region include community facilities excluding utilities, and government buildings (such as schools, public safety facilities, courthouse, jail, health facilities, churches, and libraries). Totaled, this land covers 22,701 acres within the River Valley region.

#### **Transportation/Communication/Utilities**

The transportation/communication and utilities land (used for transportation, communication or utility facilities, such as cell towers, power stations, water tower, and water treatment facilities) represents a total of 78,035 acres of land within the River Valley region. It is essential for the future prosperity of the River Valley region to continue to develop transportation/communication and utilities facilities within the region. This will ensure that the region will have the necessary facilities to attract new businesses, as well as an educated work force.

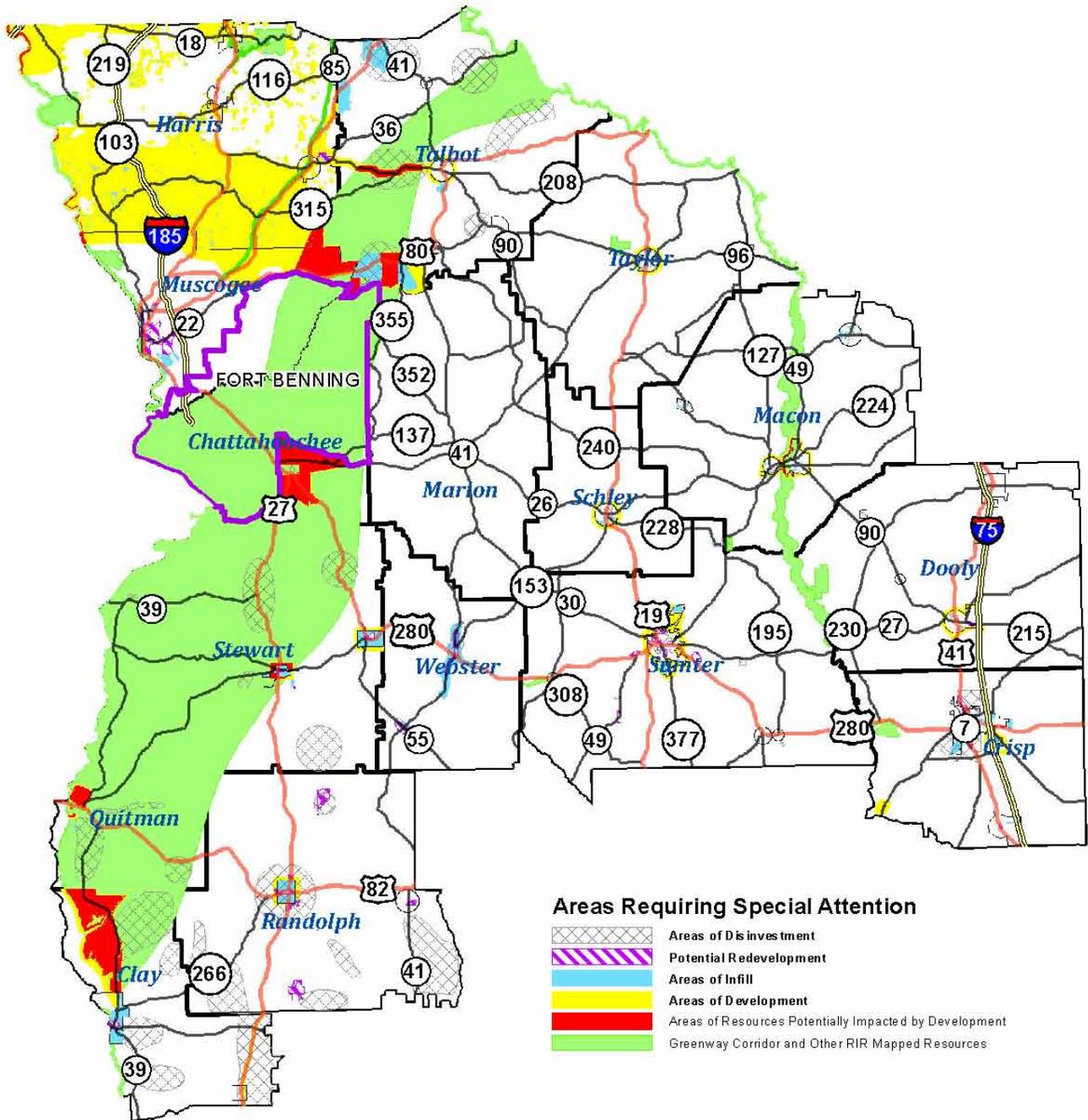
#### **Undeveloped/Vacant**

In the undeveloped and vacant land, defined as land in which apparent active uses exist, property with dilapidated or abandoned structures, or overgrown vacant lots comprise a total of 67,041 acres of land within the River Valley region.

#### **Road Right-of-Way**

The land that is dedicated to road use, including right-of-way within the River Valley Region covers a total of 7,995 miles. For further information, please refer to the transportation section of this plan.

## River Valley Regional Commission Region's Areas Requiring Special Attention



Date: 12/22/2011

# **Areas Requiring Special Attention**

## **Conservation**

The conservation land uses within the River Valley region include local, state, and federal parks; active and passive recreation activities; and protected land (such as land preserved in land trusts). These areas also include designated Wildlife Management Areas. Currently, these protected lands comprise over 100,000 acres. The protection of conservation areas is beneficial not only for the environmental sustainability of the region, but also for long-term economic success. The River Valley region should promote these recreational tourism opportunities provided by parks and protected lands.

## **Areas of Development**

While the River Valley region is predominately rural, there are several counties that have recently experienced significant growth and development, and are expected to continue to grow in the near future. For example, both Dooly and Crisp County have seen growth related to the continued development of the inland port in the City of Cordele. This project will result in tremendous economic development opportunities for that portion of the region, and as a result, will attract new business and residents to the area. On the western side of the region, the city of Columbus and its neighboring jurisdictions have seen growth related to the BRAC (Base Realignment and Closure Process), as troops from the Armor School at Fort Knox are relocated to Fort Benning. The preparations made for the BRAC process have resulted in new jobs and an estimated 23,000 or more new residents in the Columbus area.

## **Areas of Disinvestment**

Most communities throughout the state of Georgia have some areas of disinvestment, or areas in need of improvement, and the River Valley region is no exception. However, these areas also provide opportunities for redevelopment and reinvestment in the community as well. Both residential and commercial redevelopment opportunities exist in the region. In terms of commercial redevelopment, many of the cities in the region have vacant retail space available in their traditional downtown areas. Reinvestment in these buildings could also lead to new residential options, as well, if loft apartments/condos were developed above the new commercial spaces. In addition to available commercial space in downtowns, many communities also have greyfields that could also be redeveloped or improved. These commercial buildings that have been vacant or abandoned have a negative impact on the community as a whole. Reinvestment in these spaces would be a positive economic impact and help to improve the overall aesthetics of the community.

## **Areas Identified as Regionally Important Resources**

The River Valley Region's natural resources are a vital part of the economy, history, and future of this area, and should be cherished. The environmental and natural resources within the region include national parks, protected rivers, lakes and wildlife management areas. These areas are not only valuable to the region, but are also susceptible to damage caused by different human activities.

The large areas of undisturbed vegetation and natural habitats found throughout the River Valley Region improve the environmental health of the area in a variety of ways, such as providing sun and wind protection, mitigating stormwater runoff and reducing flooding, and improving air quality by reducing carbon dioxide and releasing oxygen into the atmosphere. These areas also play a large role in the quality of life for the residents of the region. Not only do parks and recreational areas provide access to the natural beauty of the region, but they serve as an important contributor to the local tourism industry by drawing visitors and residents alike, which in turn contributes to the economy of the region.

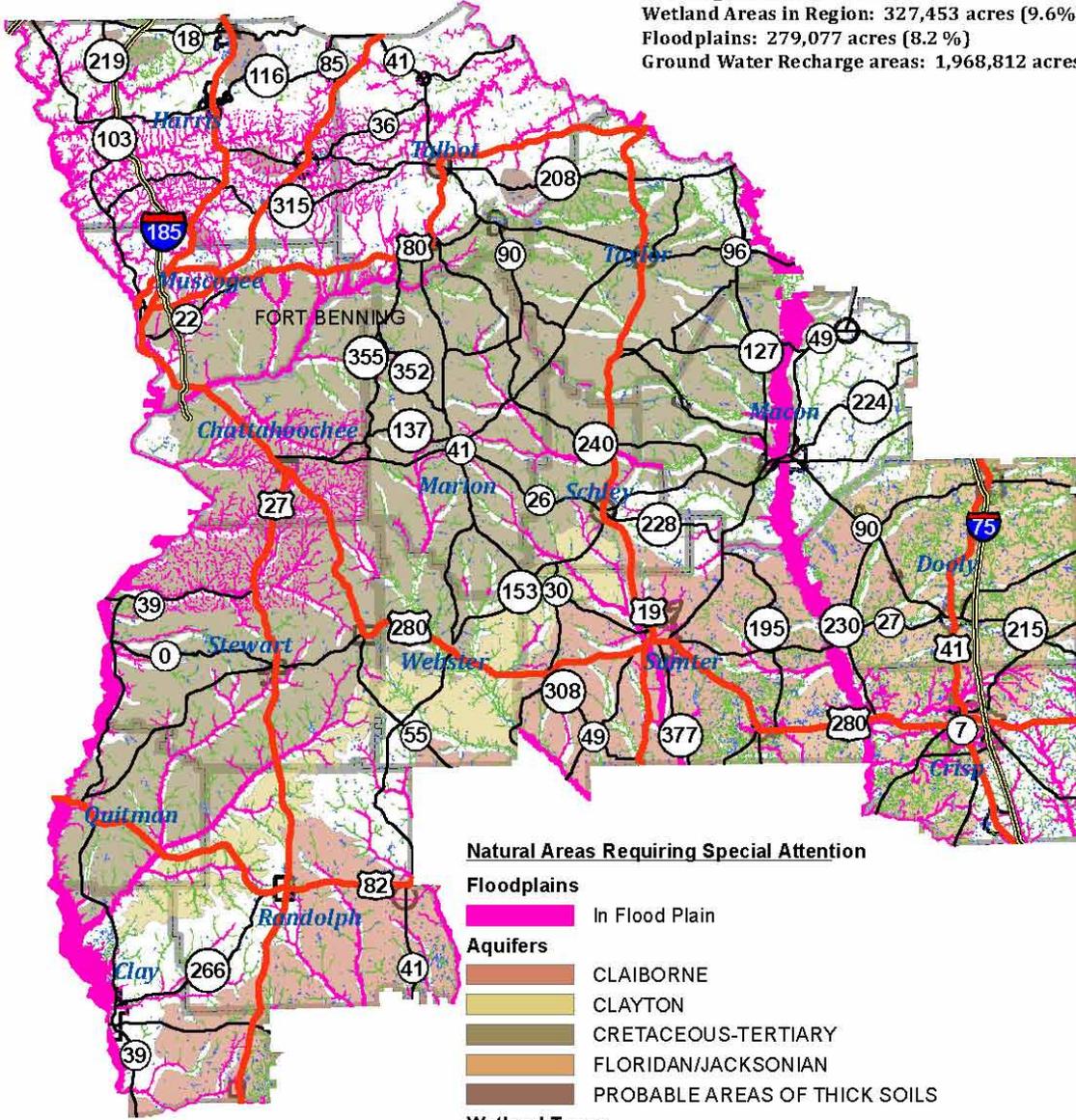
The region's natural resources need to be protected, not only for their value to the ecological and environmental health of the region, but also as a way of protecting the heritage and character of the River Valley Region. Ensuring the protection of lands located in environmentally sensitive areas from encroaching development or growth will allow these areas to continue to contribute to the health of the region and be available for recreational use by future generations.

The Regionally Important Resources included on the Areas Requiring Special Attention map and the Projected Development map include the protected river corridors, RIR resources, and the greenway network. For the full RIR Composite map, please refer to pg. 64.

## Areas Requiring Special Attention Natural Resources

**Acreeage:**

Total Region: 3,403,045 acres  
 Wetland Areas in Region: 327,453 acres (9.6%)  
 Floodplains: 279,077 acres (8.2 %)  
 Ground Water Recharge areas: 1,968,812 acres (5.8 %)



**Natural Areas Requiring Special Attention**

**Floodplains**

In Flood Plain

**Aquifers**

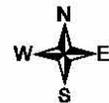
- CLAIBORNE
- CLAYTON
- CRETACEOUS-TERTIARY
- FLORIDAN/JACKSONIAN
- PROBABLE AREAS OF THICK SOILS

**Wetland Types**

- Forested Wetland
- Non-Forested Emergent Wetland
- Open Water
- Scrub/Shrub Wetland



Name: AreasReqSpecialAttention\_Natural



Date: 9/2/2011

## **Areas of Infill Development**

There are many infill development and/or redevelopment opportunities throughout the River Valley Region. However, due to the rural nature of the region, most of these will occur in the developed cities. While most redevelopment will occur in city centers and downtowns, further from the city core, potential for infill development increases. Due to more sprawling and more widespread development patterns, developers will have the opportunity to build within these areas to increase density and create more pedestrian-oriented development. These areas could include strip commercial development, as well as housing infill opportunities in newer subdivisions, or as older multi-family structures need renovation or replacement.

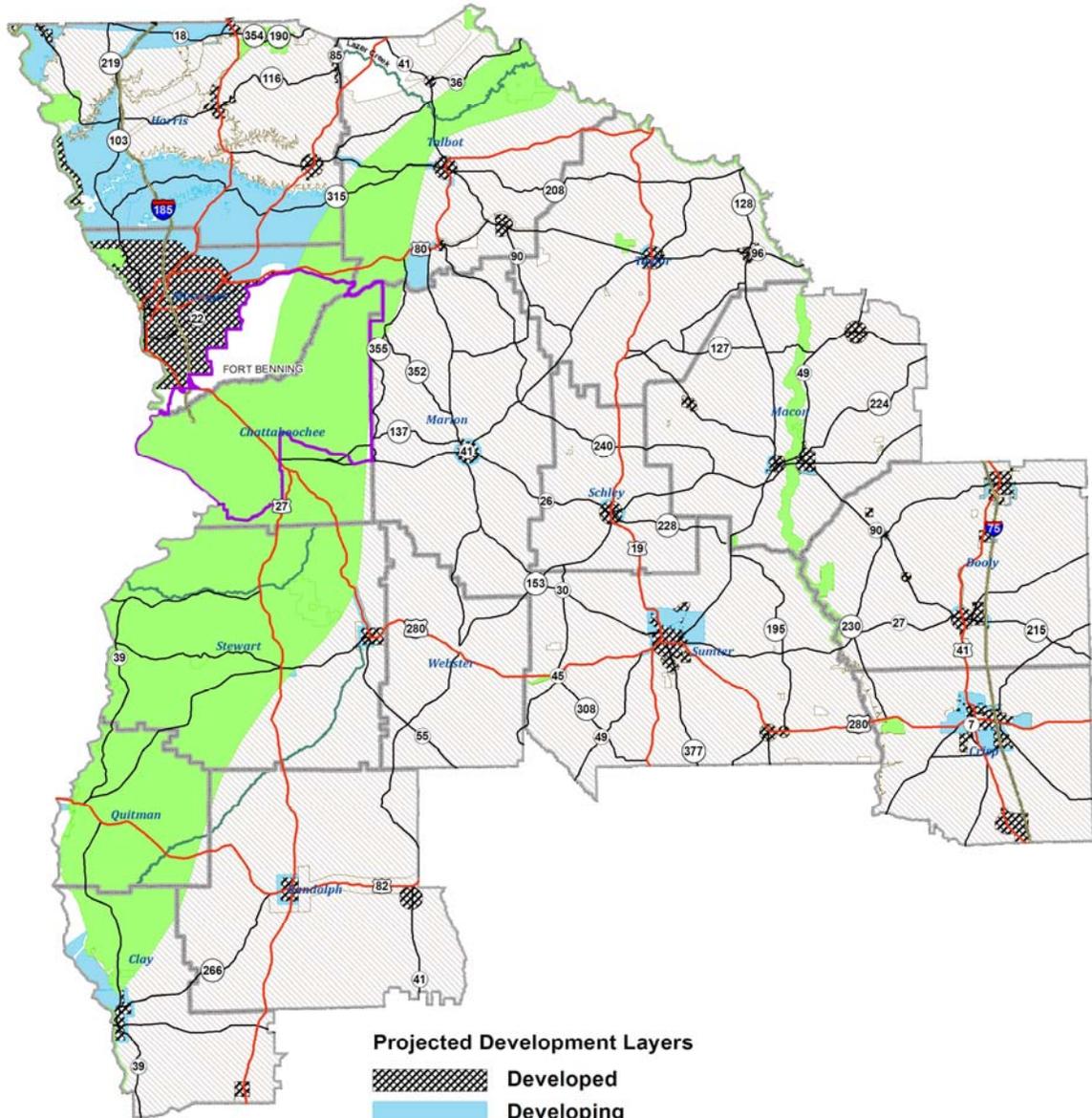
Other areas of potential infill development include brownfield sites located throughout the region. In general terms, brownfields are abandoned or underused industrial or commercial properties where redevelopment is complicated by actual or perceived environmental contamination. Some examples of brownfields include abandoned gas stations and unused former manufacturing plants. Redeveloping brownfields can restore property to productive use, increase property values, improve public health and the environment, utilize existing public infrastructure, and increase job opportunities and local tax revenues. Throughout the River Valley region, there are a number of potential brownfields, mostly from abandoned gas stations. As these properties are often in prime locations, they provide excellent opportunities for highly visible redevelopment opportunities within the community.

## **Areas of Potential Redevelopment**

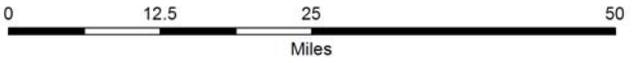
Redevelopment efforts will be most prevalent within the existing traditional neighborhoods that surround downtowns. In many communities, the condition of these properties varies from pristine to dilapidated. However, assistance and support for the renovation of these historic structures can be found at both the state and national level. In addition, many communities offer tax freezes, job tax credits, and other incentives to encourage redevelopment within targeted areas.

In addition to commercial areas, older homes that are in disrepair could be restored or replaced with compatible new construction that would maintain the historic character of the many cities within the region.

## River Valley Regional Commission Region's Projected Development Map



- Projected Development Layers**
- Developed**
  - Developing**
  - Greenway Corridor and Other RIR Mapped Resources**
  - Rural**
  - Fort Benning**



Date: 12/22/2011

# **Projected Development**

---

## **Conservation**

Lands designated as conservation areas in the River Valley are projected to remain as such. Currently, these areas include local, state, and federal parks; active and passive recreation activities; protected land (such as land preserved in land trusts); and designated Wildlife Management Areas. While these lands constitute only 3% of the region's total acreage, the areas designated for conservation will hopefully continue to grow in the upcoming twenty years. This will ensure not only that the region's valuable natural resources are protected for future generations, but also will provide economic opportunities for eco and recreational tourism.

## **Developed**

Developed areas are defined by urban-type development patterns and urban services (i.e. water, sewer, etc.) provided by city and/or county governments. In general, developed areas in the rural portions of the River Valley region include all areas within the city limits in each town or city. Within these areas, the greatest issue will be to encourage revitalization and renovation of existing structures. This will serve to both capitalize on the existing infrastructure, and to curb sprawling development patterns along the rural/urban fringes. By focusing on infill development as well, communities will be better equipped to protect rural lands, and maintain their agricultural heritage.

## **Developing**

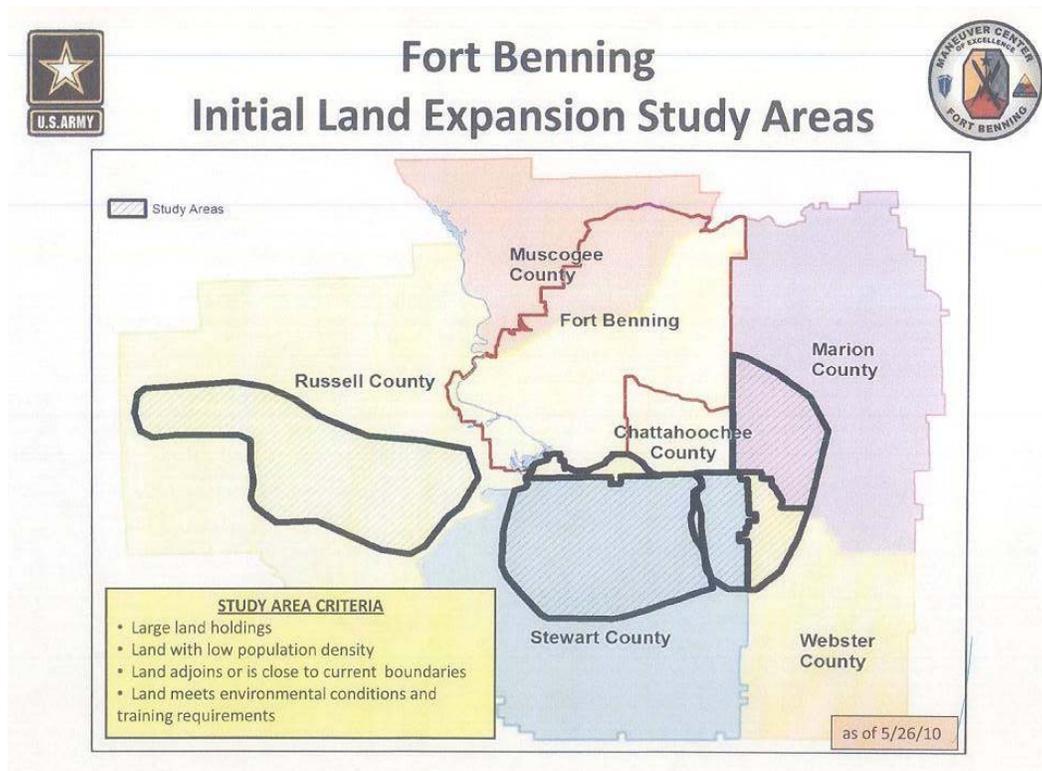
Developing areas are land areas that will likely become urbanized and require the provision of new urban services (i.e. water, sewer, etc.) during the next twenty years. Developing areas in non-metropolitan areas of the region are adjacent to city/town limit lines, along major federal and state transportation routes, and intersections with major and minor collector roads. The City of Columbus is one of the region's high-growth areas, which currently faces development pressure from BRAC, as well as continued population growth, being that it is the region's largest metropolitan area. The metropolitan growth area of the City of Columbus extends north to the Harris County line and east to the Talbot County line. Other high growth areas in the region are the City of Cordele, which will face development pressure related to the continued growth and success of the inland port. As more and more goods are shipped through the area, the population is expected to rise, as workers will be needed to operate the facility move to the area. As a result, the highway corridor along I-75 through Dooly and Crisp County is expected to develop further. In addition, the highway corridor running east/west on US 280 will also experience greater traffic and continued development. These two corridors should be given special attention, perhaps with corridor management plans to effectively handle the growth. Finally, the City of Americus will experience growth related to the construction of a state-of-the-art racetrack. This facility will draw numerous tourists from across the country and will also positively impact jobs creation in the area, as both full-time and part-time employees will manage the facility.

## Rural

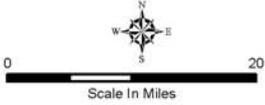
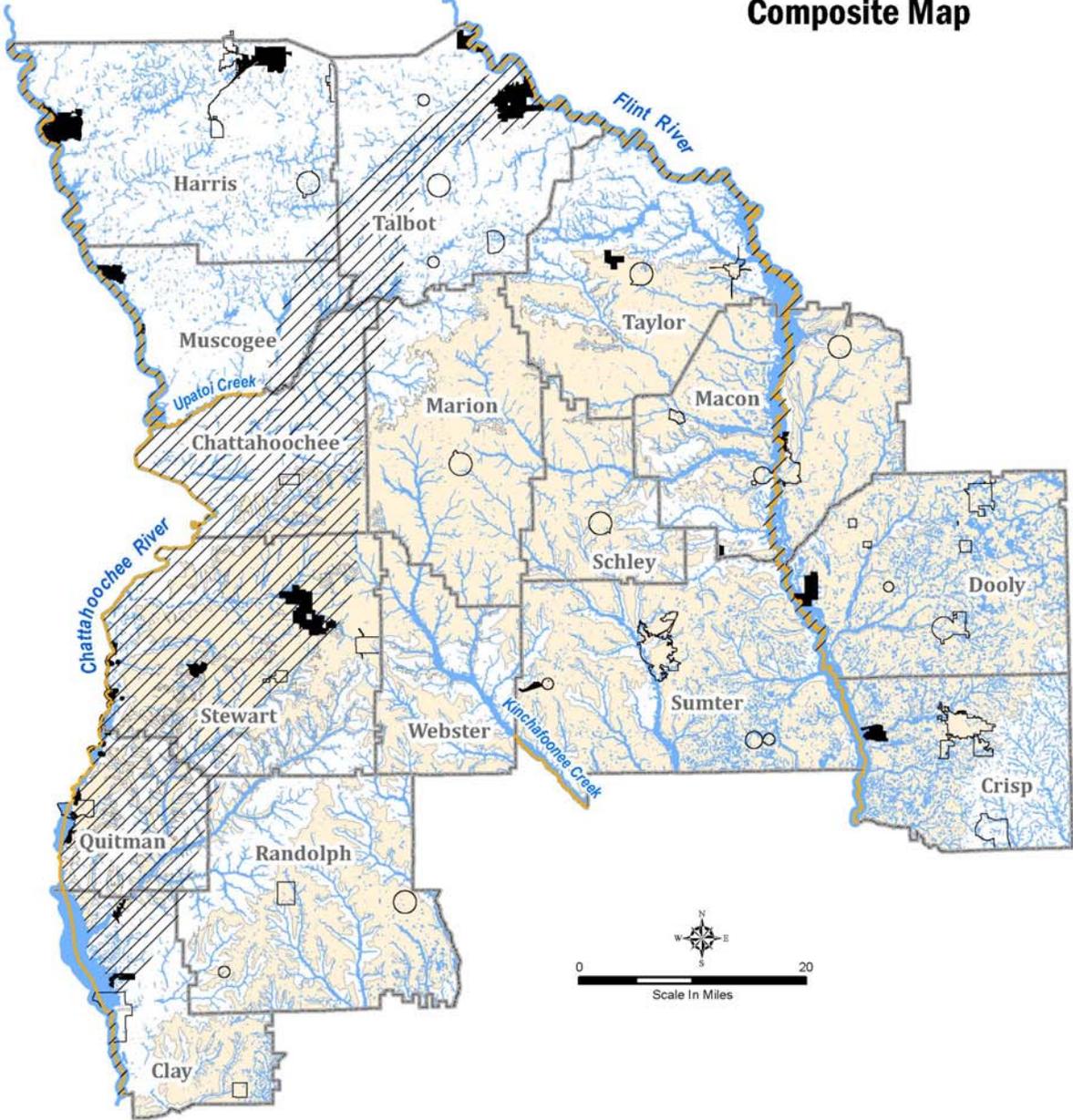
Rural area identified on the Projected Development Map encompasses 2,752,222 acres of the River Valley area, or 85.6%. Rural area is defined as areas not expected to become urbanized or require provision of urban services over the next twenty years. Many of the River Valley counties have water lines extended into area defined as rural. However, this fact alone does not mean that those areas with municipal/county water supply will develop over the next twenty years. Rural areas also encompass agricultural lands within the River Valley region. A total of 1,004,952 acres are dedicated to agricultural activities. A more detailed description of the region's farming activities is located on Table 25 of the Data Appendix.

## Fort Benning

It is important to note that Fort Benning is considering a possible expansion of up to 216,365 acres in Stewart, Marion, and Webster, Counties. The expansion could also occur in Russell County in Alabama. Within these counties the number of acres proposed to be included in the expansion varies, though the acreage proposed to be added from Stewart County is the greatest, at 123,003 acres. In both Chattahoochee and Marion Counties the acreage proposed acreage to be acquired is very close at 38,034 and 38,021, respectively. The land proposed to be included in the expansion from Webster County is considerably less at 17,307 acres. This expansion will affect the local tax base of these jurisdictions; coordination and discussion with Fort Benning is ongoing. A map of the proposed expansions is shown below.



# Regionally Important Resources Composite Map



-  Greenway Network
-  Areas of High Pollution Susceptibility
-  Jurisdictional Wetlands
-  Protected River Corridors (4)
-  Other RIR  
These resources are located and identified on separate natural resources and aquatic resources maps

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