Upper Savannah Council of Governments
Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy
Annual Report Overview 2026

During the summer of 2022, Upper Savannah released a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) document for our six-county region in western South Carolina. The revised CEDS provided information generated and gathered from economic development and community representatives from across the region. The document, accessible online at www.uppersavannah.com, provided content and discussion regarding the background of the region, a SWOT analysis, strategic direction, an action plan, information on disaster resilience, as well as a framework for evaluating progress toward the goals formed by the CEDS committee. This annual report will provide updates for all those areas, as well as a general discussion of conditions and circumstances encountered in the Upper Savannah region over the past year, as well as an outlook for the immediate future.

A. Summary Background: A summary background of the economic development conditions of the region

The Upper Savannah Council of Governments (USCOG) region encompasses Abbeville, Edgefield, Greenwood, Laurens, McCormick, and Saluda counties in South Carolina. The region is a predominantly rural, six-county area located along the state's northwestern and western borders, with strong economic and commuting relationships to the Upstate, the Augusta, Georgia metropolitan area, and the broader South Carolina economy. USCOG serves as the regional planning and development organization for these six counties and works with local governments, businesses, workforce organizations, and state and federal partners on economic and community development.

The Upper Savannah economy is characterized by a combination of advanced and traditional manufacturing, health care, education, retail and services, logistics, agriculture, forestry, tourism, and small business activity. Manufacturing remains the region's dominant economic sector and represents an important competitive advantage because of the area's established industrial base, available land, transportation connections, skilled production workforce, and proximity to larger markets.

Recent workforce data demonstrate the importance of manufacturing to the regional economy. In the broader Upper Savannah Workforce Development area, which also includes Newberry County, manufacturing accounted for approximately 28 percent of employment in 2025, followed by health care and social assistance, educational services, retail trade, public administration, and accommodation and food services.

The region also experienced substantial announced private investment during the 2020–2024 period. Workforce development data identify approximately $1.14 billion in announced investment and 3,289 announced jobs, with manufacturing accounting for approximately 84 percent of the announced jobs and warehousing and distribution accounting for another 15 percent. While these figures include Newberry County, they demonstrate the broader economic environment in which the six-county USCOG region competes for industrial investment.

The economic base is therefore both an asset and a vulnerability. Manufacturing provides relatively high concentrations of employment and supports substantial supplier, transportation, logistics, and service activity; however, the region's reliance on manufacturing also creates exposure to changes in global markets, automation, supply chains, tariffs, technological change, and corporate restructuring. Economic development efforts increasingly need to balance industrial recruitment with existing-business retention and expansion, entrepreneurship, small-business development, workforce development, and diversification into higher-value services and emerging industries.

The six-county region had an estimated approximately 227,000 residents in 2025, based on the latest U.S. Census Bureau County estimates. Population is concentrated primarily in Greenwood and Laurens counties, with smaller populations in Abbeville, Edgefield, Saluda, and McCormick counties. The 2025 estimates are approximately 24,836 in Abbeville County, 29,808 in Edgefield County, 70,379 in Greenwood County, 71,848 in Laurens County, 10,215 in McCormick County, and 19,680 in Saluda County.

Population trends, however, vary considerably among the counties. Edgefield County has experienced particularly strong recent growth, increasing approximately 16.2 percent from its 2020 estimates base to 2025. Laurens County increased approximately 6.4 percent, McCormick County 7.2 percent, Saluda County 3.9 percent, and Greenwood County 1.5 percent. Abbeville County increased approximately 2.2 percent from its 2020 estimates base.

These trends point to an important distinction within the region: the Upper Savannah area is not experiencing uniform population growth. Growth is strongest in locations benefiting from proximity to larger metropolitan areas and major transportation corridors, while other rural areas continue to experience population stagnation, aging, or long-term decline. Previous USCOG transportation planning analysis similarly identified the Laurens–Fountain Inn area, northern and central Greenwood County, southern Edgefield County, eastern Saluda County, and selected portions of Abbeville County as areas with greater potential for future population and development activity.

Population aging is another significant economic consideration. Several counties have relatively large shares of residents age 65 and older, particularly McCormick County, where approximately 45 percent of residents were age 65 or older in the latest Census estimates. Abbeville, Greenwood, Laurens, Edgefield, and Saluda counties also have older populations than many rapidly growing areas of South Carolina. An aging population creates increased demand for healthcare and supportive services while simultaneously reducing the size of the traditional working-age labor pool.

Labor Force and Workforce Conditions

The regional labor market remains relatively tight compared with historical levels, although unemployment varies among the six counties. In late 2025, South Carolina labor-market data showed unemployment rates of approximately 4.7 percent in Edgefield, 5.4 percent in Abbeville and Laurens, 5.9 percent in Greenwood, 6.2 percent in McCormick, and 4.6 percent in Saluda. These differences reflect the varying industrial bases, labor-force participation rates, commuting patterns, and demographic characteristics of the counties.

The relatively low unemployment rates indicate that economic growth is increasingly constrained by labor availability rather than simply the availability of workers seeking employment. This makes workforce development, recruitment, retention, transportation, childcare, housing, and skills training increasingly important components of economic development.

The region's workforce also faces an educational attainment challenge. Recent Upper Savannah workforce data show that the region has a substantial population with a high school diploma or some college experience, but comparatively smaller shares with bachelor's and graduate degrees. At the same time, the region has an established technical and community-college infrastructure that can be leveraged to provide industry-specific training, apprenticeships, certifications, and upskilling opportunities.

Future workforce strategies should therefore focus not only on attracting new workers, but also on increasing labor-force participation, connecting residents to available jobs, expanding credential attainment, supporting incumbent-worker training, and aligning education and training programs with employer demand.

Manufacturing and Industrial Development

Manufacturing remains the defining component of the Upper Savannah economic base. The region has a long history of textile, apparel, advanced materials, plastics, automotive-related, chemical, fabricated-product, and other industrial activity. Existing manufacturers provide an important foundation for supplier development and industrial recruitment.

The current economic environment presents an opportunity to build upon this foundation while transitioning toward more technologically advanced and higher-productivity manufacturing. The region is positioned to compete for projects involving advanced manufacturing, automotive and transportation suppliers, plastics and composites, engineered materials, food processing, machinery and equipment, clean-energy-related manufacturing, and logistics.

Industrial recruitment should increasingly emphasize the availability and reliability of water, wastewater, electric power, broadband, industrial sites, transportation infrastructure, and workforce capacity. Smaller communities frequently face limitations in the scale of infrastructure required to compete for major projects, making regional cooperation and strategic infrastructure investment particularly important.

Small Business and Entrepreneurship

Small businesses remain an important component of the region's economic resiliency, particularly in rural communities and smaller municipalities. Local retail, professional services, construction, agriculture, tourism, food services, health-related businesses, and other locally owned enterprises contribute significantly to employment and community vitality.

However, rural businesses often face challenges associated with access to capital, succession planning, workforce recruitment, technology adoption, broadband connectivity, marketing, and access to larger markets. The CEDS should therefore continue to recognize entrepreneurship and existing-business development as equally important to traditional business recruitment.

USCOG's role in providing economic development assistance, small-business financing, grant assistance, planning, and technical assistance provides an important regional mechanism for addressing these needs.

Infrastructure and Connectivity

Infrastructure remains a fundamental economic development issue throughout the region. The Upper Savannah's rural character creates challenges in providing and maintaining water, wastewater, transportation, broadband, and other infrastructure at the scale and cost required to support economic growth.

Transportation connectivity is particularly important because the region's economy is closely tied to larger employment and population centers. Interstate 385 provides a major economic connection for Laurens County and the northern portion of the region, while other major state and U.S. highways connect the region to Greenville, Anderson, Augusta, Aiken, Columbia, and other markets.

The region's transportation system must serve two complementary purposes: supporting the movement of goods for manufacturing and agriculture, while also improving access to employment, education, health care, and services for residents. Continued investment in highways, local roads, freight routes, public transportation, pedestrian facilities, and multimodal connections will therefore contribute directly to regional economic competitiveness.

Broadband and digital connectivity are similarly important. Reliable high-speed internet is increasingly necessary for business operations, education, health care, remote work, entrepreneurship, and access to government services. Continued broadband deployment should be treated as basic economic infrastructure rather than solely as a telecommunications issue.

Agriculture, Forestry, Natural Resources, and Tourism

Although manufacturing dominates the formal employment structure, agriculture and forestry remain important components of the regional economy and rural landscape. Agricultural production, timber, forest products, and related businesses contribute to land-based economic activity and provide opportunities for value-added processing and diversification.

The region also possesses significant natural and recreational assets associated with Lake Greenwood, Lake Murray, Lake Thurmond, the Savannah River, Sumter National Forest, rural landscapes, historic communities, and outdoor recreation. These resources provide opportunities for tourism, recreation, retirement development, agritourism, hospitality, and quality-of-life initiatives.

Tourism and recreation should be viewed as complementary economic development strategies rather than substitutes for industrial development. Investments in downtown revitalization, trails, waterfronts, historic resources, festivals, outdoor recreation, and local businesses can strengthen community identity while generating additional spending and supporting small businesses.

Income, Poverty, and Economic Opportunity

The region continues to face economic disparities among communities and population groups. Although economic growth and industrial investment have created new opportunities, portions of the region continue to experience relatively low household incomes, elevated poverty, limited access to transportation, and barriers to workforce participation.

These conditions make inclusive economic development particularly important. Economic growth should result not only in additional jobs but also in improved wages, career advancement, business ownership, household stability, and access to opportunity.

A successful regional economic strategy should therefore connect economic development with housing, transportation, education, health care, childcare, broadband, and community development. These factors increasingly influence whether employers can recruit and retain workers and whether residents can participate in the regional economy.

Recent Economic Performance and Outlook

The broader South Carolina economy entered 2026 from a position of relative strength. South Carolina's real GDP increased approximately 4.5 percent in 2024, ranking among the fastest-growing states nationally. Nationally, real GDP increased 2.8 percent in 2024. County-level performance varied considerably, underscoring the importance of understanding local economic conditions rather than relying solely on statewide trends.

The latest BEA county data available for the 2026 CEDS update are the 2024 county GDP and personal-income estimates, released in February 2026. These data provide the most current comprehensive county-level measures of economic output and income available at the time of the 2026 update. BEA has scheduled its next county GDP and personal-income release, covering 2025, for December 2026.

The economic outlook for the Upper Savannah is consequently mixed but provides substantial opportunities. The region benefits from South Carolina's strong overall economy, its proximity to major metropolitan areas, an established manufacturing base, available land, relatively affordable communities, and significant natural and cultural resources. At the same time, population aging, uneven population growth, workforce availability, infrastructure limitations, rural poverty, housing needs, and the concentration of employment in manufacturing create important challenges.

Overall Economic Condition

The Upper Savannah region enters 2027 with an economy that can best be characterized as stable, increasingly competitive, but uneven in its distribution of growth. The region possesses a strong industrial foundation and has demonstrated the ability to attract substantial private investment. At the same time, economic performance differs significantly from county to county, with the strongest population and development pressures occurring near major transportation corridors and metropolitan areas.

The central economic development challenge for the region is therefore not simply to create more jobs, but to create a more diverse, resilient, productive, and inclusive regional economy. Future CEDS updates should emphasize strategies that:

1. Retain and expand existing industries and businesses;
2. Attract new manufacturing and value-added industrial investment;
3. Diversify the economy beyond traditional manufacturing;
4. Develop and retain a skilled workforce;
5. Increase labor-force participation and access to employment;
6. Support entrepreneurship and small businesses;
7. Invest strategically in water, wastewater, transportation, broadband, and industrial infrastructure;
8. Strengthen rural communities and address persistent economic disparities;
9. Leverage agriculture, forestry, tourism, recreation, and natural resources;
10. Coordinate economic development among the six counties and their municipalities.

The fundamental strength of the Upper Savannah Region is its ability to function as a connected regional economy rather than six isolated county economies. Regional cooperation allows communities to combine workforce resources, infrastructure investments, industrial sites, transportation assets, educational institutions, natural resources, and economic-development capacity. The CEDS should build on that regional approach by positioning the Upper Savannah to capture investment generated by growth in the Upstate, Augusta region, and South Carolina while ensuring that rural communities and existing residents participate in the resulting economic opportunities.

B. SWOT Analysis: An in-depth analysis of regional strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats

The SWOT analysis completed in late 2022 has been reviewed by district staff and remains relevant and consistent with the needs and challenges of the region today.

C. Strategic Direction/Action Plan: Actions supporting the implementation of the CEDS include the following:

- Staff are implementing grant management activities through EDGE.
- Implementation of EDA grant awards in Greenwood County and Laurens County.
- Currently working on two EDA applications.
- Facilitated Planning Commissioner training. Economic development is a component of each county and municipal Comprehensive Plan
- Assisted with grant writing activities in several communities.
- Continued comprehensive plan updates.
- Workforce Development Division partnered with Piedmont Technical College to host regional job fairs.
- Maintained and updated the regional Long Range Transportation Plan.
- Continued public transit feasibility studies for the counties in the region currently without access to public transit.
- Continued administering nine Rural Infrastructure Authority grants.

D. <u>Evaluation Framework</u>: Performance measures used to evaluate the organization's implementation of the CEDS and its impact on the regional economy

Number of Jobs Created After Implementation of the
Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy

I. Regional unemployment rate was 4.5% in September 2017 and 4.1% in May 2026

Upper Savannah Regional Unemployment Trends

County	COVID-19 Peak Apr. 2020	Hurricane Helene Oct. 2024	2025 Annual Avg.	Latest Verified County Rate May 2026
Abbeville	12.0%	4.3%	4.8%	4.1%
Edgefield	9.2%	3.8%	3.9%	3.3%
Greenwood	10.5%	5.6%	5.4%	4.5%
Laurens	10.0%	4.6%	4.8%	4.0%
McCormick	10.5%	5.2%	5.3%	4.2%
Saluda	9.0%	3.5%	3.9%	3.3%

II. Regional total number of unemployed people decreased from 5,304 in September 2017, to 4,933 in June 2026

III. Total regional labor force decreased from 106,070 in August 2023 to 99,871 in June 2026

Regional labor-market snapshot — June 2026
Using the county-level LAUS data:

- Civilian labor force: 99,871
- Unemployment rates: 3.8%–5.0% across the six counties
- Largest labor force: Laurens County — 33,249
- Second largest: Greenwood County — 30,147
- Smallest: McCormick County — 3,588

Number and Types of Public Sector Investments Undertaken in the Region

- Laurens County Metric Road Water System Upgrades is $5,422,800 in EDA funding and $1,355,700 in local funding
- Piedmont Technical College Health Sciences Building is $11,271,697 in EDA funding and $2,817,924 in local funding
- City of Abbeville Upper Long Cane Waterline Connection $3,450,000 in SC Infrastructure Investment Program (SCIIP) funding through the SC Rural Investment Authority (RIA) and federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding
- Town of Due West Wastewater Treatment Plant Upgrades $1,950,000 in SC Infrastructure Investment Program (SCIIP) funding through the SC Rural Investment Authority (RIA) and federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding
- Town of Edgefield Gymnasium Stormwater Improvements $790,000 in SC Infrastructure Investment Program (SCIIP) funding through the SC Rural Investment Authority (RIA) and federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding
- Ninety Six Commission of Public Works Water and Sewer System Viability Study $930,500 in SC Infrastructure Investment Program (SCIIP) funding through the SC Rural Investment Authority (RIA) and federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding (Closed out this year)
- Town of Ware Shoals Water and Sewer System Viability Study $600,000 in SC Infrastructure Investment Program (SCIIP) funding through the SC Rural Investment Authority (RIA) and federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding (Closed out this year)
- City of Clinton Miller's Fork Basin Sewer Rehabilitation $4,250,000 in SC Infrastructure Investment Program (SCIIP) funding through the SC Rural Investment Authority (RIA) and federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding
- Laurens Commission of Public Works Water System Improvements $10,000,000 in SC Infrastructure Investment Program (SCIIP) funding through the SC Rural Investment Authority (RIA) and federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding (Closed out this year)
- McCormick Commission of Public Works Mechanical Bar Screen and Raw Water Pump Improvements $4,128,219 in SC Infrastructure Investment Program (SCIIP) funding through the SC Rural Investment Authority (RIA) and federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding
- Town of Ridge Spring Water System and Storm Drainage Evaluation $500,000 in SC Infrastructure Investment Program (SCIIP) funding through the SC Rural Investment Authority (RIA) and federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding (Closed out this year)
- City of Abbeville Harry's Plaza Southeast Crescent Regional Commission Funding of $250,000
- Town of Ware Shoals Katherine Hall Parking Lot Renovations Southeast Crescent Regional Commission Funding of $150,000

E. <u>Economic Resilience</u>: Planning for and Implementing Resilience

I. Implementing EDA, RIA, and CDBG funded projects to make local water and sewer providers more resilient in the event of natural hazards

II. Continued meeting with state Resilience Office staff to discuss partnering and working together on future projects

Upper Savannah COG staff can continue strengthening regional economic resilience by integrating resilience into all economic development, transportation, infrastructure, workforce, and community planning activities. The region should continue to diversify its economic base, support existing businesses and entrepreneurs, and reduce reliance on any single industry or employer. Particular attention should be given to strengthening manufacturing supply chains, supporting small businesses, and encouraging emerging industries and value-added activities.

Resilience planning should also focus on critical infrastructure and business continuity, including reliable water and wastewater systems, transportation networks, broadband, electric power, and communications. USCOG can help communities identify infrastructure vulnerabilities, prioritize investments, pursue state and federal funding, and coordinate regional responses to disruptions such as hurricanes, severe weather, utility failures, and economic downturns.

Finally, economic resilience depends on the region's workforce and communities. Upper Savannah COG should continue coordinating workforce development, housing, transportation, childcare, education, and skills-training strategies so residents can participate in the regional economy, and employers can maintain access to workers. By incorporating risk assessment, regional coordination, data monitoring, and resilience criteria into the annual CEDS implementation process, USCOG can help the six-county region anticipate disruptions, recover more quickly, adapt to changing economic conditions, and position itself for sustainable long-term growth.