

WHAT'S NEXT, CHAMBERS COUNTY?

#1 WHERE ARE WE NOW?

IDEAS + CONCERNS

Where are we now?

- The closing of textile mills in the 80s, while it has highlighted the resilience within Chambers County, has remained a “deep cut to the community that can still be felt now” and created/contributed to an identity crisis in the community, as well as multifaceted economic struggles.

What are existing assets and ideas?

- Hospital, Circle of Care, Chamber of Commerce,
- Southern Union Community College - the Valley campus is particularly invaluable for local students struggling with transportation issues
- Ecotourism. The sportsplex is a wonderful facility. Beyond that, there are beautiful natural resources (lake, river, etc.) that could be better utilized by community residents and to attract potential future residents.
- Solar farm and 10 gig capacity for the area - additional info?
- Businesses can temporarily bring in new families and demographics
- “I don’t think we tell our story well enough” when it comes to what’s already working well - to each other and to outsiders. Identify what makes Chambers County unique and special from Lee County, for example, so the community takes a step beyond the branding process.
- Related to the above: identify what platform(s) are best for the community to “share our story”
- “We know Longhorns is not coming to Chambers County, so how do we help someone open up a restaurant here?” Farmers’ market as an idea to test-drive new businesses
- Buy local

CHALLENGES

COSTS, CONSEQUENCES + TRADE-OFFS

Where are we now?

- Transportation is one of the biggest barriers for Chambers County residents, when it comes to access to services and resources. There are limited transportation services for specific groups (seniors, mothers + children who qualify) but “nothing overarching to connect those different fibers – currently only addressing most critical needs.”

What are existing challenges and trade-offs to ideas and assets?

- “Classification of ‘rural’ – Chambers County not in that category; wonderful because industries are coming into the area, but also raises the bar in terms of other programs that would really be useful for day to day life [like transportation] – “caught in the middle” with funding for resources, but still unmet needs
- notion that the lake water is not clean, although it is; not everyone knows about or uses these natural resources
- Tension between need to create jobs and perception of decision makers “giving away the farm.” Other workforce issues - passing drug test, having the soft skills and the drive to work hard
- Recruiting new residents/identifying a target population who wants to be here - “who are we selling to?”
- Being able to cater to new residents who move here or folks who commute here for work
- The desired businesses and resources, or acceptable alternatives, so that folks **can** buy local. “If I need new sneakers, I have to go to Opelika.”

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Closing of textile mills – one challenge (that led to resilience) about 8-10 yrs ago...highest employee rate in state at one time, many employees had no need for advanced degrees until mill closed, had to get GEDs

Previous generations – history of working in many mills around the area (and related industries – truck drivers) and were impacted by this industry declining; also affected summer employment and small businesses in the area (depended on mills to provide services – restaurants, gas stations, etc)

Deeper impact – communities were built around the mill: housing, benefits, - mills closing led to a multifaceted struggle – “like they lost their identity when they went away” in the late 80s – deep cut to the community at the time that can still be felt now

Why did mills close? Globalization is the consensus; a lot of people haven't been able to regain the standard of living they had – sense this has contributed to a lack of commitment and folks leaving the community – wary of “putting eggs in one basket” now – “what's going to happen now?”

-closing was a slow process of the companies trying to work with new global trends, but ultimately couldn't compete. All these little local communities were built around the mills – company provided recreation, kindergarten, brought in the high school – now mills are gone

history of Southern Union: for Valley campus, a former dean donated land to the community college, got funding, campus opened doors ~40 years ago. Before, had classes in some high schools. At one time, had 1000 students here. Wadley & Opelika other campuses – can help students get into Auburn eventually, as well. For students without transportation, especially, Valley campus serves those who can't make it to Opelika

-began as a Christian school (Wadley) – “the school outgrew us” into a state school, cut tuition in half. 1st to become member of AL community college system 1964 or 5; began from Ivy League representatives wanting to

Challenge to educational programming in the current situation – may be due to transportation issues, the two time zones (which originated to accommodate the mills – Eastern time)

Transportation is a big problem – even school kids affected, can't attend extracurricular activities in other towns

Here, jobs focused in local, specific areas – without a city center, there's a need to bring people to events but they don't happen often enough to justify the expense

There was a bus (via community action) service, lasted a few years – lack of funding caused it to shut down/pause

-re: something missing that's within the community's reach? Technology industry – some cities have seriously invested in faster internet and tech infrastructure, could go towards making Chambers County area a destination

-one of our biggest barriers is transportation – getting to services, especially with poverty level, is a challenge – some issues with price gouging; sometimes companies and businesses have been so burned by employees not having reliable transportation won't consider someone qualified but without means of transportation...puts young adults who ARE getting job training at a great disadvantage – have skills and could be productive, but can't afford a car yet

-any existing assets to be built upon to address this issue? Some of the senior centers have buses; Circle of Care has a caravan for expectant mothers and children to appointments, and another program for students lacking transportation to GED classes or job interviews. (WIOA – workforce development) But nothing overarching to connect those different fibers – currently addressing most critical needs

-passing drug test and being willing to work hard enough to retain a job are two biggest challenges,

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provide education to rural students

when businesses bring in new demographics, and leave soon after, challenge/missed opportunity bc not enough to cater to them – chicken and egg situation

one asset is the sports plex, in terms of physical activity opportunities – fantastic facility; when faced with threat of losing it, community rallied around – EAMC (?) came in and helped

hospital is getting ready to do a drug rehab facility, helps with affordable, accessible care re: substance abuse

another idea that goes towards new demographics/new families moving in – having recreational facilities beyond sports plex – more casual, good walkability – can really have a big impact on substance abuse, create more people interacting (goes towards soft skills, sense of community). One old idea with housing projects was to keep folks in need separate from others and together – now thinking moves towards mixing demographics and socioeconomic status

river, lakes etc. have great potential for this kind of recreation, so much to do but can't see it/folks don't know or use it – crumbling mill in front of the water, neighborhood blocking it – old concerns about water being clean although it is now;

“I don't think we tell our story” – even down to reading local news. Concern that the public does not know the wonderful things already being done – we're missing out on sharing our story in Chambers County; between the lake and riverview, there are some wonderful places and opportunities; publicize better so that new folks moving in know what's around

What's the proper platform to share this? Ex. Someone under 25 not reading newspaper daily, someone over 65 not on Facebook; where do you go to get message out? No TV station; local news outlets do a great job but not everyone gets it. Fractured sources of info.

“What is Chambers County?” maybe goal should not be to be another Lee County, but to be who we are – torn between advancement and wanting it to keep what we

according to many, in workforce development – soft skills, essentially

Classification of “rural” – Chambers County not in that category; wonderful because industries are coming into the area, but also raises the bar in terms of other programs that would really be useful for day to day life [like transportation] – “caught in the middle” with funding for resources, but still unmet needs

Creating jobs means people are commuting in more, even if they don't live here – a net plus but not the boom hoped for...challenge is perceptions of “you're giving away the farm, abating taxes, etc. but still we want jobs, etc.” we have to be competitive, companies won't come otherwise; we're the professionals and our elected officials have to determine this, but still get harassed. Can guarantee there has been a return on these investments, (ex. Solar farm created only 5 jobs but thousands of dollars a year for the next ~30 years for school system) – WalMart buys energy from this solar farm, lines up with their green initiative/goes towards their credits. There's a common misconception that the WalMart is powered by the solar farm.

- Battery saving technology as opposed to solar power going to the grid – expensive but emerging technology

Biggest hospital challenge: recruiting physicians, nurses, families – Chambers County is sometimes a hard sell. Perception that Auburn or LaGrange is better to live and work in, but trying to find physicians who will live and work in Chambers County – less likely to hire folks who don't live in Chambers County because they probably won't stay. One idea – housing within walking distance of the hospital. A lot of programs can't happen without more doctors. “If we can get someone to live here I think they'll love it, just getting people here”

→one challenge re: communicating across platforms – with mission of convincing folks to buy local, stay here and get your goods and services here...Our location is great because everything is available 20 minutes away in any direction, but we also hurt ourselves in the long

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value

any grants available for PR? So easy to get bogged down in daily programming work, but idea to fund some good pr

Last year's branding campaign with Alabama Power- gave them the marketing plans, new websites and nobody uses it – county will be the first big step with vehicles with signage “chambers strong”

Who are we selling to? Re folks moving out to urban areas – does our community need to be what it is (what we like about it), or does it need to be different to keep that additional percentage right here? Question is – do urban areas have hometown feel? Look at Auburn as an example – folks unhappy with new high rises, etc. Find the target audience who want to be here, whether that is fringe of urban areas, other rural areas, etc. what incentives could we possibly offer? Larger trend of folks who can work from home thanks to new technology trends, millennials, etc. who may really value hometown feel. Determine target audience who wants to be here

Outward looking way → getting word out, PR, etc. folks not using it

Inward → for folks who love Chambers County and live here, want to stay but know there are some challenges – ideas? What would you want to see in Chambers County to live here rest of your life?

--idea re: recreation – amphitheater for entertainment near/in sports plex...might be a good draw for the community and also folks outside community, and a good money generator

--sometimes slow pace of life can be a drawback...more businesses and community events, “more to do”

--more retail – there's no place to go buy a pair of sneakers here! If you want to go shopping, have to leave the area – just family dollar and similar. Entertainment – a local movie theater would bring community together

--figure out how to market Charter/spectrum

run by availing ourselves of goods and services not in Chambers County

another challenge that goes into that – for everyone to have enough knowledge and pride to support local businesses...can't complain about systemic problems if we're not good ambassadors for the county in daily life/informal settings too. Leaders in the community set the example

Our businesses don't share their story enough either...story of local pharmacy taking 3 weeks to make sure customer got needed medication at an affordable price.

Think about who you go to for a fundraiser

→ to have businesses come in for recreation, shopping, entertainment...one challenge is having enough people in the community to attract those retailers

--if folks wanted to have these businesses themselves, are there enough? Enough resources and interest? Probably, but not enough infrastructure for high tech. Others say that's a misconception, ex. Charter/Spectrum has 10 gig capability for this city, which is something Chambers County was not aware of until recently.

--“Longhorns is not coming to Chambers County” no matter how hard you work to promote county and have good pr, without enough numbers or statistics that big businesses want, hard to catch up the 10-15 years CC is behind since the mills left, devastating the area...maybe the way forward is to figure out what Chambers County really is good at. It's going to take 3-5 years to see substantial growth – work to unite each other, build on existing assets (Circle of Care, hospital, Extension)

-help educate for soft skills

-help chamber support business, shop local at the end of the day, do we want to be an Auburn? They are a bedroom community

Chambers County has simple things that may eventually counteract chaos of busier areas

Re: branding – balance of a cohesive message and also acknowledging funders (internal and external tension)

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--We know Longhorns is not coming to Chambers County, so how do we help someone open up a restaurant here?

--Maybe new farmers market would be a good place to test drive new entrepreneurship, ideas, slowly building new businesses without the brick-and-mortar thing...24/7 lifestyle is ultimately not healthy, takes some adjustment, but there's a big draw to the idea of having a professional job and a hobby farm. 10gig capability goes a long way, too. Even in cities, people go out of their way to avoid chain restaurants – Chambers County, with good packaging and marketing, could really market some good quality of life. Hard to picture living somewhere the rest of their life, but families might be in a good place to answer that question/have a vision there.

--Farming is a huge asset in this county – if we can dial in something like ecotourism, folks would drive through, make stops, spend money; would also mean local opportunities for millennials. “are we going to be a manufacturing center for excellence, or a destination, or both?”

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