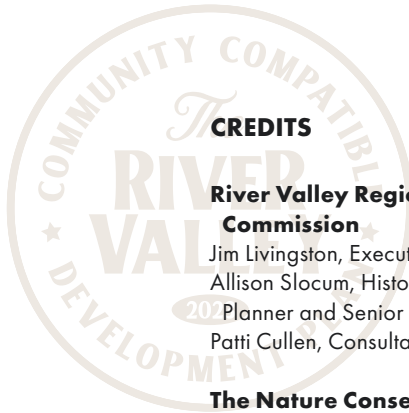




# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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A VISION FOR COMPATIBLE USE SUPPORTING THE COMMUNITIES  
AROUND FORT MOORE, GEORGIA



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The River Valley Community Compatible Development Plan reflects a strategy to promote economic development and prosperity in the River Valley region of Georgia and Alabama while preserving the landscape and land uses that align with Fort Moore’s military mission and protect the region’s natural resources. A key goal of this project is to maintain the region’s rural character and support a good quality of life for area residents. This plan is the culmination of a two-year effort involving a team from the University of Georgia’s Carl Vinson Institute of Government, the River Valley Regional Commission, Fort Moore and its Army Compatible Use Buffer partners, and six rural counties around Fort Moore: Marion, Chattahoochee, Stewart, Taylor, Talbot, and Russell. This document summarizes that effort. The full plan is available at [www.rivervalleyccd.com](http://www.rivervalleyccd.com).

The River Valley Region includes the second-largest city in Georgia, one of the nation’s premier military installations, and some of the poorest and smallest rural counties in the Southeast. Located along what is known in

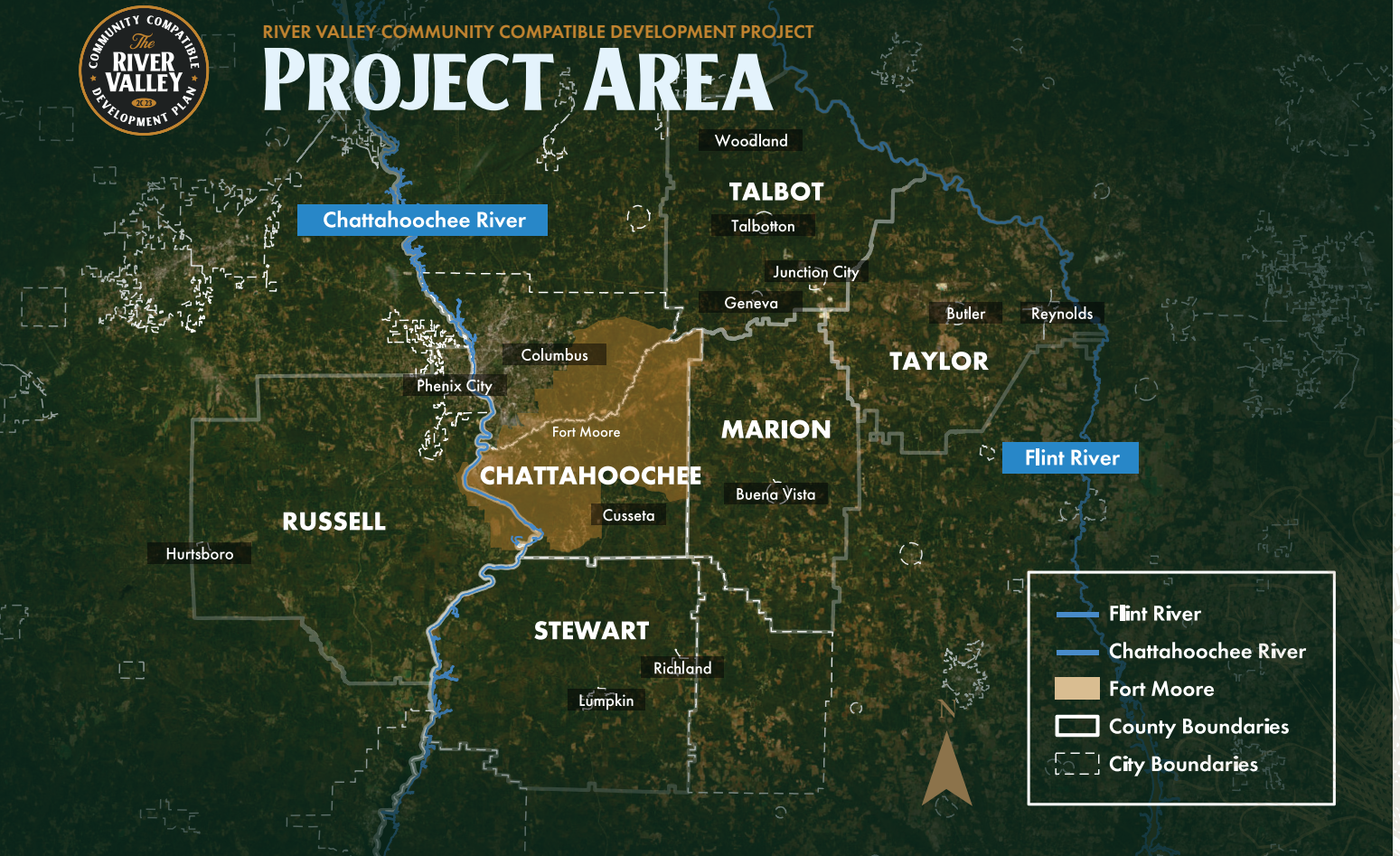
Georgia as “the Fall Line,” the communities in the project area are shaped by a unique and special landscape threaded with rivers, streams, and wetlands and inhabited by a number of rare species. Many of these areas have been protected through voluntary land conservation efforts led by Fort Moore, the state of Georgia, private landowners, and nonprofit partners. Through this current planning effort, the Department of Defense and the installation have recognized compatible use issues and encroachment threats, its role in driving them, and the challenges they place on rural communities in this region. This project identifies new solutions to reduce these threats in ways that also promote strong and vibrant communities and economic prosperity in the region.



Photo Credit: University of Georgia Public Service and Outreach



# PROJECT AREA



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Promoting compatible use in the region must be driven by local residents embracing compatible development practices because it makes economic and quality of life sense for them to do so.** Conservation “buffer” areas, zoning, and other land use regulations are ways to further “compatible use,” a term related to whether land uses outside of an installation support military operations and training. With the right incentives and with assistance, the project communities are much more likely to develop in ways that promote compatible use and aid in sustaining Fort Moore’s mission and its positive economic impact for the region.
- **Protecting areas surrounding Fort Moore through land conservation programs maintains the region’s rural character, something residents strongly value and want to preserve.** The planning and engagement process for this project identified the following key areas where the communities’ goals and desires connect with the compatible use needs of the Army and Fort Moore:
  - » Vibrant downtowns promote compatible use and preserve rural character.
  - » Infrastructure investments are needed to promote compatible growth.
  - » Compatible development can align with rural economic development.
  - » A regional approach leverages opportunities for drawing visitors to the landscape.
- **Survey respondents perceived the greatest strengths of the region to be Fort Moore’s presence (74%) and the region’s natural features, including natural resources (63%) and outdoor recreation (68%).** Efforts to leverage conservation areas as economic assets through outdoor tourism and recreation is a win-win approach that meets community goals in a way that aligns with Fort Moore’s compatible use goals.
- **UGA research for this project indicates that the rural counties surrounding Columbus have the strong potential to tap into a vibrant regional tourism economy by showcasing their natural and cultural resources.** This plan focuses on ways these communities can develop and thrive in a “conservation and outdoor recreation economy” by embracing their natural resource assets and thus allowing for strategic economic development that reflects compatible use. A regional approach that leverages opportunities to draw visitors to the region from Columbus, the state of Georgia, the Southeast, and even the US should be considered.

- **The rural communities in the region receive many benefits from their proximity to Fort Moore and from the nearby conservation efforts. At the same time, potential challenges also exist for surrounding local governments and school systems as property tax revenues may be decreased when properties are acquired or placed under conservation easements, with Marion and Talbot counties facing the greatest potential impact.** For rural communities with high levels of poverty and tight local government budgets, every dollar counts. Rural communities also must be mindful that farmland, timberland, and conservation lands require far fewer community services and less infrastructure than residential and commercial developments. The natural resource assets in their communities therefore are highly valuable for not only how they contribute to quality of life but also for the money they save. These lands can and should be understood as fundamental building blocks for economic development in areas such as tourism and outdoor recreation.
- **Addressing systemic poverty, promoting long-term economic prosperity, and enhancing local capacity for planning and infrastructure investments will be critical to ensuring that the rural communities in this region thrive in ways compatible with the nation's national security mission.** Like many rural areas, the communities surrounding Fort Moore must tackle aging infrastructure and systemic poverty with limited resources, an aging population, and small and stretched numbers of staff. The conservation and outdoor recreation economy that is possible will thrive only if the area can provide clean water, safe roads, reliable broadband, and a healthy workforce. Outside investment in development and capacity building will be much needed in order for these communities to follow up on this plan or any other initiative to promote conservation and compatible use.
- **A robust accounting of the economic benefits the conservation buffer areas surrounding the installation have provided and will increasingly provide is an important next step in helping these communities recognize the full value of these lands and expand on those benefits for their long-term prosperity.** A growing number of conservation personnel live and/or work in the area and assist with land management. More broadly, many of these protected areas have been turned into state-run wildlife management areas (WMA), which a 2013 statewide study found provide significant economic benefits to host communities. That study found that WMAs generate \$60 million in tax revenue across the state, with an average of 28% of WMA-related spending occurring in the county where the WMA is located. A strong need exists to conduct similar studies on the economic benefits that public and privately managed lands have on the local economy in this study area. Such an analysis would help the greater community better understand the value of these lands, while creating a baseline for evaluating the long-term impact of outdoor recreation and tourism in the area. Data from such a study would help local leaders devise ways to increase the economic impacts of conservation lands to yield even more benefits.

# Takeaways



# Activities

**A novel aspect of this plan that sets it apart from other joint land use studies is the technical assistance provided to the communities by the project team during the planning process. The chart to the right lists some of these activities.**



## Technical Assistance Activities

Provided training and assistance to reconstitute the Marion County Development Authority, an important step forward in revitalizing the city of Buena Vista, the county's central business district.

Assisted the city of Buena Vista and downtown property owners with crafting designs to inform the use of \$2 million from the recent voter-approved T-SPLOST package in downtown infrastructure.

Assisted Stewart County and the city of Lumpkin in developing downtown designs, which are going to be implemented with \$2 million of funding through the Governor's Office program, *Improving Neighborhood Outcomes in Disproportionately Impacted Communities*. The grant was awarded in May 2023.

Developed connections between communities and rising seniors at UGA's College of Engineering to offer technical assistance through its Capstone Design Program. Through the program, senior engineering students complete directed design work and develop cost estimates to address community needs.

Organized three graduate-level planning and design classes from the UGA College of Environment and Design to support the design and development of recreational opportunities in the region.

Initiated discussions between UGA and Auburn University to form a collaborative partnership for ongoing planning, engineering, and design support for local community projects throughout this region.

Submitted a grant application to the US Economic Development Administration in partnership with the Lee-Russell Council of Governments, multiple local governments, and Uptown Columbus to support trail planning and design and regional marketing.

Prioritized specific external funding sources to support community infrastructure repairs and strategic upgrades. Potential funding sources are included in the full plan.

Developed a list of priority infrastructure projects related to sustaining the military mission that are suitable for submission to the Office of Local Defense Community Cooperation's Defense Community Infrastructure Pilot Program.

Built relationships with UGA's Defense Community Resilience Program to provide ongoing planning support and proposals for external funding.

Supported electric vehicle infrastructure deployment by facilitating contacts between communities, Flint EMC, Georgia Power, and others investing in EV infrastructure expansion.

Arranged for students in the Historic Preservation Program at the College of Environment and Design at UGA to begin work in summer 2023 on developing a tourism trail to highlight General Lafayette's visit to America, and within Marion County, from 1825. Flint EMC has pledged funds to print a brochure.

Included Marion County in the 2024 cohort of the Institute of Government's PROPEL program, a two-year economic development program funded by the University of Georgia Foundation and the US Department of Agriculture.

Arranged for UGA's State Botanical Garden of Georgia to design and implement a *Connect to Protect* garden in downtown Buena Vista at the site of a new mural. The garden will feature native pollinator plants, and all materials and labor will be provided by the State Botanical Garden of Georgia.



The long-term viability of these efforts will also require the investment of time and resources to ensure that these communities have the capacity to maintain the rural and conservation character of this region and avoid incompatible development. These lasting investments include helping these cities and counties upgrade their basic infrastructure systems, like water and sewer, as well as maintaining the capacity of their human capital. Examples of the kind of long-term systemic investments that are needed follow.

### Proposed Next Steps for Long-Term Systemic Investment

Develop infrastructure project proposals suitable for funding through the Defense Community Infrastructure Pilot (DCIP) Program and other infrastructure funding opportunities, focusing on water and sewer upgrades.

Conduct an analysis in conjunction with Russell County on potential land use changes that could impact the Fryar Drop Zone, particularly any development requiring sewer line extensions in the area.

Conduct a feasibility analysis of sewer line extensions to Chattahoochee County and a study of related land use controls necessary to prevent incompatible development.

Undertake analysis and planning to ensure the transportation network can support community and military needs, including EV charging needs as the installation transitions its nontactical fleet to electric vehicles.

Build capacity among residents for community leadership and entrepreneurship through state and university leadership and capacity-building programs.

Develop regional partnerships to foster effective planning, asset management, code enforcement, and zoning administration.

Formulate more robust estimates of the economic and environmental service values provided by the conservation and recreation lands in the region.

Support dark sky efforts to prevent excess light pollution.

Connect river and stream corridor planning to larger conservation efforts.

Support arts, culture, and other community programs to build upon existing cultural assets and interest.

Improve communication between Fort Moore and the rural communities in part by initiating regular community briefings where installation staff brief community leaders on Army issues and needs, and community leaders brief installation leadership on community needs.

The Defense Community Infrastructure Pilot Program (DCIP) provides grant funding to assist state and local governments, and not-for-profit, member-owned utilities in addressing deficiencies in infrastructure in communities supportive of a military installation. Proposals are typically due in late spring. Given the infrastructure needs in the region, DCIP funding is a prime opportunity for these communities. **DCIP projects must be “construction-ready” and endorsed by the installation commander. Thus, a primary recommendation is that communities with infrastructure needs identify projects this summer (2023) so that the project team can assist with finding resources to demonstrate that the projects are “construction ready.”**

The implementation steps outlined here are not a complete list. The full plan also offers a series of conceptual designs for future development based on the needs and desires expressed by the residents and leaders in the partnering communities. While some of the short-term actions are clear, and many are already underway, the details of how the ideas and opportunities presented in the full plan are implemented must arise from local leaders. In addition, the assets and ideas identified in this plan should be incorporated into a shared community vision for the region. Long before the delivery of this final plan, community members and local leaders had embraced the idea that their communities are positioned to leverage their rural character, natural surroundings, and quality of life to revitalize the area. Work has already begun, underscoring just how much community leaders want to see the region thrive.



# Next Steps

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**PROJECT SPONSORS**



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More information about the project and an interactive asset map may be found at [www.rivervalleyccd.com](http://www.rivervalleyccd.com). The plan was released in spring of 2023.