

A Unified Economic Development and Regional Job Growth Strategy

Policy Paper

Executive Summary

Daryl Parks has outlined a bold and intentional vision to transition Tallahassee from a traditional government and university town into a true Region of Innovation. Through a focused economic agenda, this strategy seeks to tie citywide and regional smart growth directly to the kitchen tables of local families by incentivizing the expansion of regional private-sector opportunities to help lower the overall cost of living and diversify the economy.

Operating under the core belief that the government sector does not create jobs but can create the appropriate environment for job creation, and that unity is a functional economic strategy, this plan aims to replace political infighting with structured, cross-governmental collaboration.

Unified Economic Development, Job Creation and Big Bend Regional Cooperation

The Challenge

Tallahassee/Leon County desperately needs out-of-the-box thinking to bring not only the city and county together, but more importantly, the Big Bend region. Many residents in neighboring counties work in the greater Tallahassee area, and we need to understand that job creation cannot be bound simply to the city limits and still expect to help everyone, it is a two-way street

The Solution:

Establish a centralized Economic Integration Task Force to align city, county, business chambers, and university development strategies with broader regional goals.

Use our natural strengths to attract logistics, industry, and manufacturing. Our inherent strengths are:

- Relatively inexpensive land and plenty of it
- Closest proximity to the rest of the southeastern US
- A well-educated workforce
- Strong network of interstate, federal, state, and local roadways
- Solid rail network for quick transport and logistics
- A diamond-in-the-rough international airport with a coming Free Trade Zone
- An energetic but still laid-back lifestyle that helps balance work and play

How to Implement:

- ★ **Consolidate oversight:** Launch a joint steering committee featuring leadership from City Hall, Leon County, FSU, FAMU, and TCC.
- ★ **Convene regional business leadership:** Embed area chambers of commerce and business organization groups directly into the planning process to ensure small and enterprise businesses have an equal voice in regional expansion.
- ★ **Build regional partnerships:** Convene an annual Big Bend Economic Summit in partnership with the local chambers to coordinate regional supply chains, workforce pipelines, and resource sharing with surrounding county commissions.
- ★ **Leverage our City-owned utilities and international airport:** both city-owned entities, which are unique to our region, must play an expanded role in helping to attract businesses to the Big Bend Region
- ★ **Proactively develop an industrial site with infrastructure:** to document that the Big Bend region is ready and able to attract companies in logistics, manufacturing, industry, research and development, and the supply chain of businesses that naturally follow
- ★ **Align regional metrics:** Track community-wide success through a shared dashboard monitoring private sector job creation, commercial vacancy rates, and regional commuter data.

Targeted Commercial Corridor Revitalization

The Challenge:

Historical corridors face severe infrastructure neglect and rising commercial vacancy rates, reducing economic opportunities for local residents.

The Solution

Direct infrastructure funding and targeted financial incentives to underrepresented business districts by leveraging chamber networks.

How to Implement:

- ★ **Fund localized grants:** Create dedicated commercial matching grants specifically for small businesses in economically challenging urban and rural areas in Tallahassee.
- ★ **Deploy joint outreach networks:** Partner chambers of commerce to market these grants directly to underserved entrepreneurs and provide technical assistance during the application process.
- ★ **Upgrade neighborhood infrastructure:** Prioritize city capital improvement budgets for modern lighting, streetscapes, and high-speed internet in vital corridors.

Affordable Housing Strategy for Economic Mobility

The Challenge:

Unsustainable housing costs drain family incomes, pricing out essential workers and shifting the residential burden onto adjacent Big Bend communities. Incoming companies cannot retain talent if the recruited workforce is priced out of buying homes locally.

The Solution

Increase affordable housing inventory through public-private partnerships and modern zoning to guarantee that the future workforce has the explicit ability to purchase homes while working for the companies recruited to the region.

How to Implement:

- ★ **Form developer partnerships:** Utilize underutilized city-owned land to construct mixed-income housing units through private developer tax incentives.
- ★ **Launch a local workforce housing fund:** Partner with local financial institutions to offer down-payment assistance to teachers, healthcare staff, first responders, and workers employed by newly recruited regional industries.
- ★ **Tie recruitment to homeownership pathways:** Collaborate with the Tallahassee Chamber to engage incoming corporations, establishing employer-assisted housing programs that provide corporate-matched down payment grants for employees purchasing homes within Tallahassee and Leon County.

Downtown Revitalization and Innovation Hubs

The Challenge

A lack of private-sector density limits Tallahassee's ability to retain top-tier university talent and act as a professional hub for the region.

The Solution

Build a live-work-play innovation core that bridges local universities with the business community.

How to Implement:

- ★ **Build incubator networks:** Partner with FAMU and FSU to build low-cost tech accelerators downtown for student entrepreneurs.
- ★ **Piggyback off of the TMH-FSU Health merger:** this is the most significant regional economic opportunity on the horizon that will bring comprehensive Trauma Care Level I services and other sophisticated medical procedures, retention and training for all medical professionals, innovative research, and eventually medical tourism.
- ★ **Maximize the MagLab being here:** with a unicorn in our backyard, incentivize the private sector to build a short-stay hotel or residential facility with a restaurant to facilitate the scientists from around the world who come here for 2-week stays 365 days a year (and everyone else at Innovation Park including the FAMU-FSU College of Engineering, etc.) and create an international magnetic competition that will draw scientists, contestants, press, families, and others to Tallahassee once a year to celebrate and stimulate STEM advances that puts the Big Bend Region on display.
- ★ **Enhance commercial collaboration with FSU, FAMU, and TSC:** we are blessed with three outstanding institutions of academic excellence (and other higher education institutions in the region), and yet we have not fully capitalized on the commercialization of research and development that each institution undertakes, and we must do it vigorously so that graduates will decide to stay in the region, grow their nascent business and family.