



**FORWARD**

— Opelika —



**2022-2026**  
**Strategic Economic**  
**Growth Initiative**

# MEET THE LEADERSHIP TEAM

## OPELIKA CHAMBER FOUNDATION



**Carlton Hunley**

Board Chair  
Lambert Moving Systems



**Chuck Beams**

East Alabama Health



**Allen Bridges**

Dixie Electrical Plumbing  
& Air



**Robyn Bridges**

Auburn Opelika Tourism



**Mike Buckalew**

Piedmont Fertilizer Company



**Betty Burns**

Walton Law Firm



**Eric Canada**

South State Bank



**DeDe Jackson**

Four Seasons Federal  
Credit Union



**Shey Knight**

AutoSport Bodyworks



**Nathan Murphy**

Golden State Foods



**Al McCambry**

Point Broadband of Opelika



**Nathan Mitchell**

Smith Kastner Wealth  
Management



**Malcolm Marshall**

McDonalds



**Nakeda Woods**

Max Credit Union



**Joel Alvarado**

Director of Workforce  
Opelika Chamber



**Ali Rauch**

President & CEO  
Opelika Chamber

“ The strength of our public / private partnerships is crucial to our continued growth. **Forward Opelika** and I have a shared mission – to ensure a successful future for our City. With this dynamic effort, we will expand opportunities and increase economic prosperity for those who have chosen to make Opelika home for themselves, their families, and their businesses.

– *Rep. Jeremy Gray*







# *A Letter* FROM THE CAMPAIGN CO-CHAIRS

Opelika is one of the fastest growing communities in Alabama and has been recognized as a **Best Small City for Business** by the US Chamber of Commerce and one of the **South's Best Cities** by Southern Living. Opelika earned its moniker as the first **“Smart City”** in the State of Alabama with a state-of-the-art 425-mile fiber optic system providing high-speed internet to every home and business in Opelika. The Opelika Chamber has played a critical role in raising the profile of our community to achieve these milestones.

Although Opelika has much of which to be proud, challenges persist. Competition for jobs and talent has never been tougher. While offering networking / event opportunities to members is an important part of its role, **the Opelika Chamber must now take a stepped-up approach to proactively drive business and overall economic growth in Opelika and the region.**

The **Forward Opelika Economic Growth Initiative** is a comprehensive five-year \$3.865 million strategic community and economic development plan designed to:

Goal 1 - **Attract and Align Talent (TALENT)**

Goal 2 - **Grow Business and Quality Jobs (JOBS)**

Goal 3 - **Create a Business Hub (BUILDING)**

The Forward Opelika Initiative addresses our biggest economic challenges and opportunities with well-conceived strategies and clear metrics. **This is the right moment for this bold initiative, and the Opelika Chamber of Commerce is the right organization to lead this endeavor in collaboration with essential private and public sector partners.**

We can only be successful if all businesses and stakeholders with an interest in Opelika's economic strength and resiliency step up, engage—and exercise financial leadership by investing in this plan and the future. Join us, by helping ensure that **Opelika is the place where people and businesses come to grow, thrive, and succeed!**



**Race Cannon**  
Samford-Cannon Foundation



**Amory Scott**  
Scott Bridge Company

# Opelika Chamber of Commerce

Founded in 1941 to be a champion for the business community, the Opelika Chamber of Commerce (“the Chamber”) works to bring economic vitality and an enhanced quality of life to Opelika through strong business advocacy, collaborative leadership, and a variety of programs focused on professional development, networking, and other needs of area businesses.

## Advocacy

The Chamber advocates for the needs of business owners through the Keep Alabama Open initiative and had recent success fighting the proposed Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) change that would impact middle markets across the country. We recently published a joint Public Policy Agenda with the East Alabama Chamber for the 2023 Legislative Cycle.

## Leadership Development and Engagement.

The Chamber hosts “Lee County Young Leaders” for high school juniors, “20 Under 40” for young professionals, and supports Leadership Lee County for established leaders in our community. Many of the graduates of these programs have advanced to elected office and top leadership positions at area businesses and nonprofits.



## 1 of 3

Alabama Chambers to earn 5-Star Accreditation with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce placing the Opelika Chamber in the **top 3% of chambers nationwide.**



## 20%+ increase

in membership over the last year, bringing total membership to more than **1,000 members.**

## 250+ events

are hosted by the Chamber each year including Business After Hours, Business Over Breakfast, All Things Marketing Summit, She Mean’s Business Council, Small Business Workshops, Minority Business Council and many more.

The Opelika Chamber of Commerce is proud to receive national recognition as the 2024 Chamber of the Year as recognized by the Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives.



ASSOCIATION OF CHAMBER OF COMMERCE EXECUTIVES

**2024 CHAMBER OF THE YEAR**





# Greetings From



Our **VISION** is to be the Leading Catalyst **FOR A BETTER OPELIKA.**

Our **MISSION:** The Opelika Chamber Strengthens our Community as the Champion of Business.

### CORE VALUES:

- Practice Positivity
- Earnestly Build Bridges
- Aspire to Excellence
- Earn Trust
- Seek Continuous Growth
- Execute Servant Leadership

### KEY PILLARS:



Build Bridges



Elevate Business



Cultivate Community



Achieve Excellence







# Our Community's Key Needs and Opportunities

## 1 Talent / Workforce Challenges

Access to talent / a skilled local workforce is often the single most important factor for companies in selecting a location.

**Local competition for talent:** According to the Lee-Russell Council of Government's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy, there is substantial internal competition for workers within the region.

**Talent quantity and alignment challenges:** Data suggests there are talent quantity / availability and talent alignment issues.

**Low unemployment / not enough workers:** The unemployment rate is only 3.5%, compared to 4.1% nationally.

**Low educational attainment:** The level of educational attainment for Opelika is lower than Auburn and other cities in Lee and Russell Counties. Opelika has the largest portion of the population with only a high school diploma.

**Underemployment / inefficient talent allocation:** More than 20% of the workforce in the Opelika area is considered "underemployed."

**Low wages:** Although there is a demand for workers, wages in the region are lower than the state and national average, and the region's cost of living is higher than the state and national average.

**High cost of living / downward pressure on worker availability:** The median cost of a home in Opelika is \$168,000 – 30% higher than the state's average home value of \$129,000. Further, Lee County families spend a disproportionate amount of their income on childcare (26%, on average, for those with two children).



## 2 Competition for New Businesses and Quality Jobs.

Opelika needs more quality, higher paying jobs.

**Relatively low pay:** Average wages for Lee County residents have only increased by 2.5% (\$972) over the last 20 years, while average wages in Alabama have increased 6.6% (\$3,205) over the same period

**Competitive reality:** Opelika faces the competitive reality that other communities are developing their economic and community development infrastructure and improving their competitive posture

## 3 Lack of Dedicated Space and Resources for Small Businesses in Opelika

Physical Space and Resources for Small Businesses and Other Groups

**Lack of a Dedicated Small Business Resource Center:** The Chamber is unable to provide small business support services due to a lack of physical meeting space to meet demand.

**Lack of Business Incubator Space and Support:** The City of Opelika does not have a space that provides training, mentorship, networking, and other support for new and growing businesses.

**Inadequate Meeting Space for Businesses and Community Groups:** In Opelika, there is a lack mid-size group meeting spaces, especially for small businesses and community organizations.

**Insufficient Office Space** for Opelika Chamber and AO Tourism Staff.

**Chamber Event / Meeting Space Constraints:** Chamber events and meetings are limited to small gatherings of 20 or fewer attendees that can be hosted at the current facility.

**Lack of an Opelika Visitors Center:** The lack of a visitor's center limits the ability of Opelika to draw visitors to downtown Opelika and its businesses.



# Forward Opelika: 2022 – 2026 Strategic Growth Initiative

In response to Opelika’s key challenges, the Chamber has developed a strategic initiative with supporting strategies, tactics, and measurable outcomes based on the recommendations of subject matter experts, business and community leaders, existing plans / reports, and input from the Chamber’s Board of Directors:

## GOAL 1 Talent



### Attract and Align Talent

ROLE: Leader, Convener, Catalyst

## GOAL 2 Jobs



### Grow Business and Quality Jobs

ROLE: Leader, Convener, Catalyst

## GOAL 3 Building



### Create a Business Hub

ROLE: Leader, Convener

“As Past Chair of the Opelika Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors, I am proud to support this Initiative, which will take the Chamber’s program and impact - and our entire community - **to the next level.**”

*- Sheriff Jay Jones*

Past Chairman, Opelika Chamber of Commerce



# Primary Outcomes



**Employers can find the talent** they need



**Economic Ripple Effect**  
new consumer expenditures,  
new tax revenue, etc.



**Collaborative and supportive resources** for the business community

## In Implementing the initiative, the Chamber will:

### **Engage and collaborate with partners across Opelika and Lee County (PARTNERS)**

When we collaborate in our community and on economic development activities, we are stronger and more competitive in growing and attracting jobs and talent

### **Focus on improving equality of access and opportunity (ACCESS & OPPORTUNITY)**

The Chamber views equality of access and opportunity as an economic issue, and is committed to connecting all population segments to capital, “opening doors,” and facilitating access to other opportunities

### **Pursue objective measures and ensure transparency (RESULTS)**

“What gets measured, gets managed” – The Chamber has identified activity and outcome metrics, and will track and report progress in a transparent fashion







## GOAL 1

# Attract and Align Talent

ROLE: Leader / Convener / Catalyst



The Chamber will implement a variety of strategies to ensure Opelika area employers have the quantity and quality of workers needed. These tactics will focus on matching workers with employers, the reduction of barriers that exist for underemployed and unemployed individuals in the local area, and the recruitment of skilled workers to relocate to Opelika.

## Our Plan

### 1.1 Develop a Comprehensive Regional Talent Plan (NEW!)

- » **Opelika Workforce Council:** In partnership with the City of Opelika, engage public / private workforce council to lead the strategic direction of our talent development plans.
- » **Future Input:** Create a process for regular business input on current / future talent needs and strategy

### 1.2 Execute a Talent Attraction and Retention Campaign (NEW!)

- » **Market Opelika:** Brand / position Opelika as a magnet for workforce talent; launch a talent attraction campaign to recruit talent, including younger workers, to the area
- » **Support:** Offer workforce support that complements the City's Office of Economic Development's and other local partners' efforts to engage and assist primary employers' growth
- » **Young Professionals:** Develop and execute an Opelika Young Professionals program, driving community and connection of professionals under the age of 45.



### 1.3 Grow the Talent Pipeline (NEW!)

- » **Business-Education Partnerships:** Increase awareness of and grow business-education partnerships including work-based learning opportunities and other programs at the K-12 and post-secondary levels, such as:
  - **K-12 Programs:** Partner with the LRCOG and school systems to shape K-12 education programs that enable Opelika employers to meet their workforce needs
  - **Educate Teachers:** Create and implement a “Teach the Teachers” program to provide educators with an in-depth understanding of their students’ future job options
  - **Parent Education:** Coordinate a quarterly parent education initiative to increase awareness, amongst parents and students, of opportunities with employers / careers in Opelika
  - **Post-Secondary:** Partner with post-secondary opportunities to support and market programs such as Southern Union’s FAME and ASCEND (advanced manufacturing training programs)
  
- » **Workforce Repository:** Develop a comprehensive repository of all workforce and talent related services and programs available to area employers, and raise awareness of this resource among employers and nonprofits who may serve the unemployed and underemployed
  
- » **Talent Portal:** Create and market an online talent portal for employers and prospective employees to connect via job postings and searchable prospective employee profiles
  
- » **Welcome Wagon:** Serve as a “welcome wagon” to Opelika for new residents via email and mail to facilitate a better transition into the workforce and community

### 1.4 Address Workforce Barriers

- » **Address Barriers:** Catalyze and convene local workforce partners and employers to address workforce barriers and challenges like the need for affordable childcare and housing, transportation challenges, and legal work status

“ **The Forward Opelika** plan takes a much-needed, comprehensive approach to attracting a strong, sustainable workforce to Opelika. We plan to partner with the Chamber of Commerce to implement newly developed tactics and build on existing workforce programs at Southern Union.”

- *Todd Shackett*

President, Southern Union State Community College



GOAL 1  
**Results**



**Workforce talent in Opelika meets the needs of current and future area employers**



## GOAL 2

# Grow Businesses and Quality Jobs

ROLE: Leader / Convener / Catalyst



The Chamber will work collaboratively with partner organizations to grow businesses in Opelika by proactively marketing Opelika's advantages as an attractive location for starting a business. The Chamber will take the lead in accelerating small businesses and entrepreneurs by offering training opportunities, services, resources, and support that will take them to the next level.

## Our Plan

### 2.1 Drive Entrepreneurship / Creation of New Businesses

- » **Training Programs:** Host comprehensive training program for local entrepreneurs, including events for successful small business leaders to share experiences with prospective entrepreneurs
- » **Mentorship:** Launch a mentorship program for existing and prospective entrepreneurs and small businesses, including connecting entrepreneurs with a small business advocate to help them navigate the process of opening a business
- » **Guidance:** Develop and disseminate written guidance about how to start a business in Opelika, particularly regarding local permitting and related processes
- » **Culture:** Create a culture of entrepreneurship and celebrate entrepreneurial "wins"

“**Entrepreneurs and small businesses in Opelika** need guidance and support, especially in the start-up phase. The Chamber's proposed small business incubator will generate more business success, which in turn will create more revenue for our community.

- *Raven Harvis*

H&S Industrial and Commercial Supplies and Services





## 2.2 Support Small Business Growth

- » **Advisory Board:** Create a small business advisory board to help small business owners develop the knowledge and skills they need to be successful
- » **Owner Peer Groups:** Host business owner peer groups to provide an opportunity for education, sharing of best practices, and discussion of challenges and opportunities
- » **Resource Center:** Create a “Small Business Resource Center” to be staffed in partnership with Auburn’s Small Business Development Center
- » **Training / Resources:** Provide written and programmatic training resources for small business owners on topics such as profit and loss, taxes, business planning, regulations and inspections, market research, grant resources, pre-launch advertising, etc.

## 2.3 Strengthen Existing Businesses

- » **Connect:** Convene regular meetings of specific business / industry roundtables to share best practice opportunities
- » **Training:** Work with Auburn University and other partners to provide leadership / supervisory and customer service training to employees of local businesses through a “Training Academy”
- » **Support:** Conduct regular existing industry visits and advocate for policy adjustments or shared initiatives, when necessary.



GOAL 2  
**Results**



**Establish Opelika as a premiere location  
to grow businesses and quality jobs**





## GOAL 3

# Create Business Hub

ROLE: Leader / Convener



The Chamber has reached an agreement with the City of Opelika to renovate the old library building to establish a business / civic “Hub” in the Opelika-Auburn area. The facility will serve as a business incubator, small business center, meeting / training space, a Visitor’s Center, small business resource space, and expanded offices for Chamber and AO Tourism staff.

## Our Plan

### 3.1 Creation of a Business Resource Center

- » **Office Space:** Provide space for local small business start-ups and incoming businesses to utilize as they get established in the community, if needed.
- » **Curriculum:** Develop curriculum for new and existing small businesses, such as accounting, human resource management, tax planning, website development, etc.
- » **Digital / Applications Access:** Shared use space will be available with access to professional design applications for logo, marketing collateral, and web development.



“**The renovation** of the former library building is critical. It will create innovative meeting space our entire community can leverage and provide a facility that allows the Chamber staff to maximize productivity and, thus, expand programming and impact in our community.”

- *Carlton Hunley, Jr.*

Past Chairman, Opelika Chamber of Commerce

### 3.2 New Modern Training Facility & Meeting Spaces

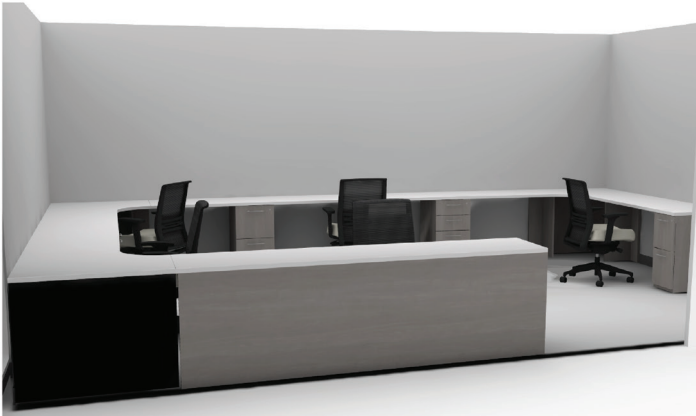
» **Meeting Spaces:** The addition of various meeting rental spaces to accommodate up to 200 guests for business, civic and philanthropic groups of all sizes

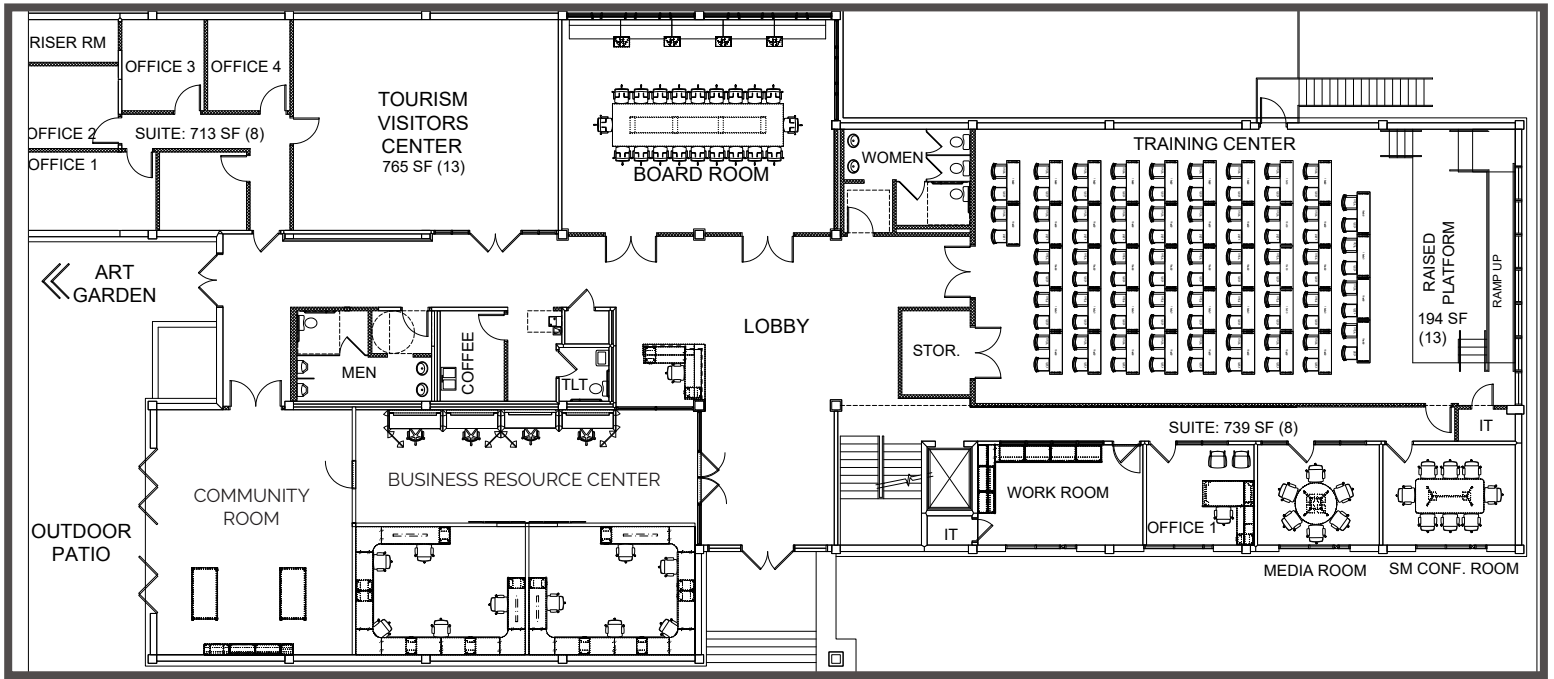
### 3.3 Auburn-Opelika Visitor Experience and AO Tourism Office

» **Offices and Visitor's Experience:** Provide space to house AO Tourism staff and become home to the first ever Visitor Experience in Opelika with interactive displays, information, and programming

### 3.4 A New Office for Chamber

» **Staff Offices and Physical Resources:** Accommodate growing Chamber staff and event space needs





## » Main Floor

- **Business Resource Center** (5-8 workspaces)
- 200 seat **Auditorium** (96 seats for ballroom/meal capacity, 128 seated classroom)
- **Conference room** (8-person capacity)
- **Board room** (30-person capacity)
- **Multimedia Room** (podcast, webinar & photography ready)
- **Lobby** with seating area
- **Coffee Nook** area
- **Three** public restrooms
- **Visitors Experience** (funded by AO Tourism)

## Other Areas

- **Five** AO Tourism staff offices
- **Work room**
- Chamber and AO Tourism **storage space**
- Outdoor **deck**
- Outdoor **patio** with access to a meeting room
- Serving **kitchen**
- **Six Chamber staff offices** (1-2 offices will provide additional small business workspaces until the Chamber hires additional staff who will occupy remaining offices)
- Storage
- **Food truck** parking zone (2 spots)

**AUBURN  
OPELIKA**  
t o u r i s m

**Serves as the Destination Management Organization (DMO) for Auburn, Opelika, and Lee County**

and will be long-term tenants of the new building with a multi-year lease

### Will Fund:

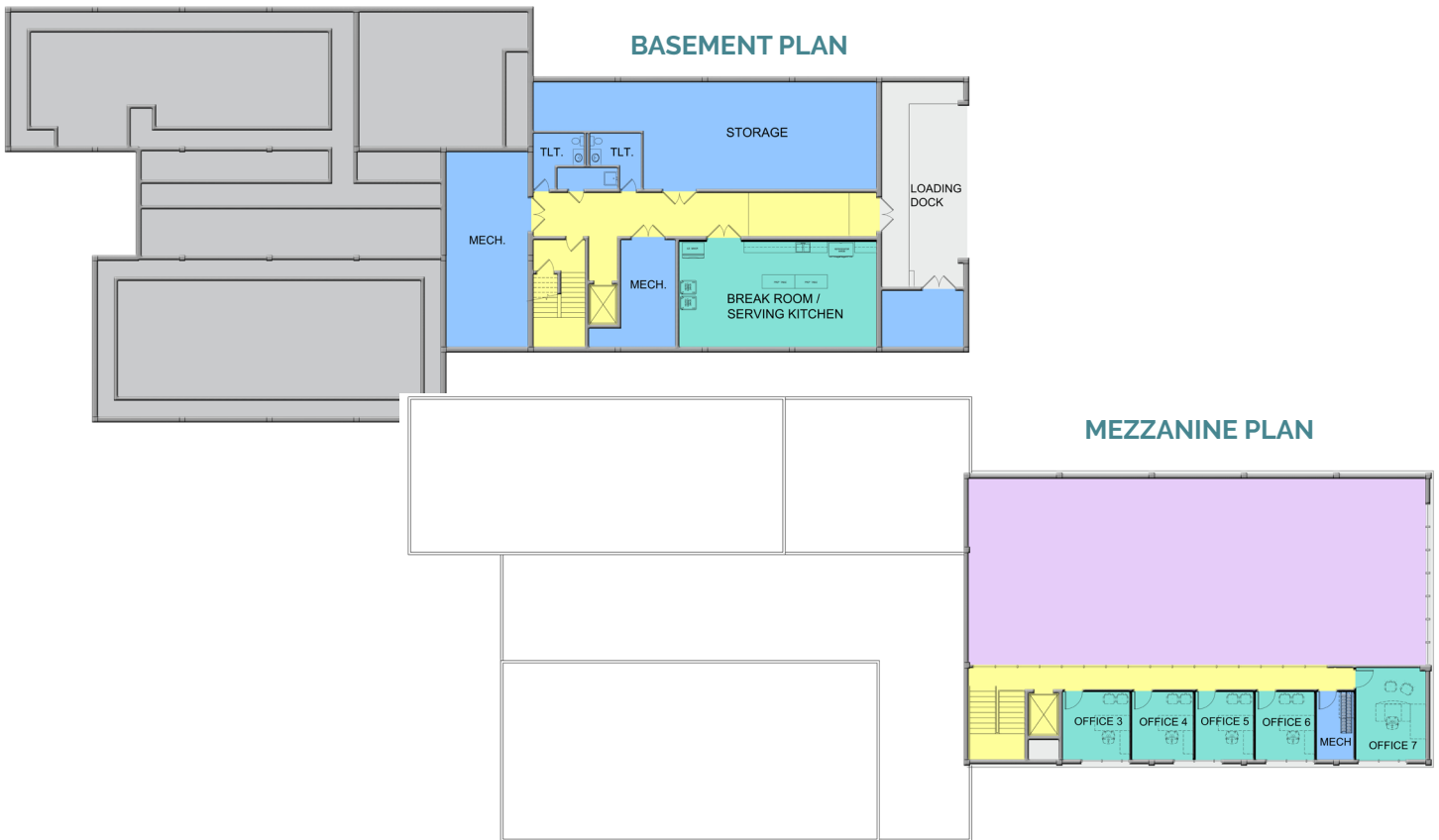
FF&E for their own offices, and the entire Visitor's Center portion of the building and a shared, with the Chamber, staff person for the Visitor's Center, who will serve as a receptionist for both

GOAL 3  
**Results**



**Collaborative and supportive resources and physical space for the business, civic, philanthropic and tourism community**





## Economic Impact Analysis

Georgia Tech’s Enterprise Innovation Institute, the nation’s largest and most comprehensive university-based program of business and industry assistance, technology commercialization, and economic development, analyzed the Forward Opelika Initiative and quantified the overall impact (both directly and indirectly) of the Opelika Chamber’s efforts.

There are currently over 1,000 open jobs at the top twenty Opelika industries. Investments in the Forward Opelika 2022-2026 initiative are expected to support the creation of 1,730 total filled and new jobs in Lee County, resulting in the following economic impact:

**1,000**  
jobs filled  
(direct)



**730**  
additional  
jobs  
(indirect & induced)



**\$72**  
million in total  
new payroll  
(direct, indirect,  
and induced)



**\$40**  
million in new  
personal consumer  
expenditures



**\$20**  
million in new  
bank (personal)  
deposits





## Resource Requirements / Initiative Budget

**ANNUAL  
BUDGET**

**5-YEAR  
BUDGET**

<b>GOAL 1 Talent</b>	<b>Attract and Align Talent</b>			
	Staff.....	<b>\$300,000</b>		
	Renovation	<b>\$48,520</b>		
	Fixtures, Furniture and Equipment	<b>\$91,480</b>		
		<b>\$88,000</b>	<b>\$440,000</b>	
<b>GOAL 2 Jobs</b>	<b>Grow Business and Jobs</b>			
	Renovation .....	<b>\$50,000</b>		
	Fixtures, Furniture and Equipment	<b>\$125,000</b>		
			<b>\$35,000</b>	<b>\$175,000</b>
<b>GOAL 3 Building</b>	<b>Build a Business Hub</b>			
	Renovation .....	<b>\$2,527,000</b>		
	Fixtures, Furniture and Equipment	<b>\$478,000</b>		
		<b>\$245,000</b>		
	Financing / Interest .....			
		<b>\$650,000</b>	<b>\$3,250,000</b>	
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>\$773,000</b>	<b>\$3,865,000</b>

“**Forward Opelika** will allow the Chamber to build and sell a cohesive brand story and capitalize on Opelika’s quality schools, healthy business environment, and growing and vibrant housing market. Ultimately, this Initiative will elevate the business community in Opelika and create a more prosperous City and region.

*-Eddie Smith*

Senior Vice President, AuburnBank



## Investor Engagement Opportunities

In addition to benefiting from the Strategic Outcomes (e.g., improved workforce, jobs, and business resources) associated with successful implementation of Forward Opelika, investors will enjoy opportunities related to:

- Networking with other leaders throughout the area
- Priority consideration for leadership - guiding and implementing Forward Opelika
- Timely information concerning Opelika's economic progress
- Marketing / brand recognition
- Naming opportunities in new facility
- Invitation to quarterly implementation meetings

## Accountability / Investor Relations

Investor confidence in the Initiative will only be maintained through the highest level of transparency, communications, and accountability. It will also require that the Opelika area's "first team" of business and elected leaders take an active role in keeping the Initiative on task, on time, and on budget.

Specific oversight of the Initiative will be vested in an Investor and Stakeholder Steering Committee, which will evolve more fully after funds have been committed. The Steering Committee will be comprised of individuals whose financial investment clearly identifies their commitment to the program's success and representatives of the Opelika Chamber Board charged with implementation.

**Let's move  
Opelika FORWARD** *Together.*







Let's move  
Opelika FORWARD  
*Together.*



334. 745. 4861  
601 Avenue A, Opelika, AL 36801  
info@opelikachamber.com

[opelikachamber.com](http://opelikachamber.com)

