



2021 POLICY AGENDA

The Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama is a membership organization serving over 65,000 working men and women through more than 1,300 business enterprises, civic organizations, and educational institutions.

Our mission is to provide the leadership, vision and be a catalyst for the advancement of the economic prosperity, business climate, and quality of life for the entire community.

This document serves as a summary of priorities and public affairs & legislative initiatives of The Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama for 2021. Key priorities include:

Public Safety

Tuscaloosa National Airport

Criminal Justice Reform

Census Redistricting

Elevate Tuscaloosa

Civil Liabilities Legislation

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION



The Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama supports efforts to educate Alabama citizens and prepare them for the demands of 21st Century employment, ensuring that our citizens not only meet but exceed the needs of employers operating in Alabama.

THE CHAMBER SUPPORTS:

Federal

- Seeking waivers from the U.S. Department of Labor to allow in-school youth participating in registered or industry-recognized apprenticeships to receive an individual training account (ITA) for wrap-around services, such as career coaching and counseling.

State

- Continued enhancements and funding of the Apprenticeship West Alabama and Apprenticeship Alabama programs (based on the model used in South Carolina).
- Continued alignment of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and Regional Workforce Council strategies and boards to create a more seamless approach to workforce development which ensures state and federal funding is used to best advance the needs of industry in hiring and maintaining a trained and able workforce and to establish measurable outcomes for service providers.
- Expansion and funding of career coaches to advise students of various potential career paths based on ability and aptitude. Creating an accountability framework for career coaches that requires a minimum number of in-demand co-op placements for their students.
- Establishing a credentialing commission, composed of members of the Alabama Workforce Council, local workforce development boards and councils to determine lists of valuable credentials to be used to develop a stronger workforce for existing jobs in the State.
- Promoting the ongoing efforts of the regional and state Workforce Development Councils along with the work of the newly formed ACCCP (Alabama Committee on Credentialing and Career Pathways) to focus on in-demand occupations in the West Alabama Region.
- The state in developing an easy to navigate and comprehensive statewide education and training resource system to enable each supply point (including K-12, Alabama Community College System, Alabama Industrial Development Training (AIDT), Alabama Technology Network (ATN), Department of Labor, Career Centers, and private training companies) to excel at meeting business needs.
- Working with the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) and Alabama Community College System (ACCS), fully-develop career pathways in all 16 career clusters and map them to secondary and postsecondary career and technical education (CTE) courses of study. Developing competency-based models and career lattices for all career pathways. Encouraging the ALSDE and ACCS to align CTE program offerings to credentials of value.
- Encouraging State and local leaders to develop a statewide definition of college and career readiness and promoting innovative partnerships between ALSDE and ACCS to remediate students in basic skills before they graduate high school. Encouraging ALSDE and the ACCS to promote co-enrollment in WIOA Title II adult education programs, postsecondary CTE programs, and WIOA title I adult programs.
- Development of a comprehensive youth apprenticeship model for students under the age of 18 who are currently constrained by state workers' compensation and insurance regulations that limit access to on-site industrial training.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION

- Establishing an enhanced apprenticeship model, beginning in middle school with career exploration and discovery, and culminating with a high school student earning a diploma, stackable industry-recognized credentials, and an associate degree. This apprenticeship model should also build on career pathways available to adult learners and disconnected populations.
- Developing WIOA Title I strategies for opioid response, adding workforce representatives to the Alabama Opioid Response Task Force, and adding workforce strategies to the opioid state plan to make the state more competitive for federal grants.
- Efforts to provide full funding for voluntary pre-kindergarten (“Pre-K”) educational programs administered by certifiably trained staff and ensuring that the programs demonstrate student academic preparedness for kindergarten through required appropriate accountability measures as advocated for by the Business Education Alliance.
- Continued state Education Trust Fund funding and Corporation for Public Broadcasting funding for Alabama Public Television’s on-air, on-line and in-person high-quality Pre-K services, American Graduate activities to improve high school graduation rates, Adult GED services, public safety services and programs that promote Alabama.
- Adequate state funding for higher education.
- **Continued funding for the Blackbelt Workforce Center in Demopolis.**
- Efforts to prepare the previously incarcerated to rejoin the workforce.
- Rural transportation funding for workforce development efforts.
- Monitoring legislative discussions on legalizing marijuana and its impact on business.

Local

- Making a career technical curriculum accessible to all students in West Alabama.
- Continued implementation of the Tuscaloosa City School Board’s current strategic plan.
- Providing adequate funding for Tuscaloosa County School System, recognizing that system is among the lowest funded in the State of Alabama.
- Efforts to close the education slide with K-12 students resulting from Covid-19 school disruptions.

TAX AND FISCAL POLICY



The Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama supports the fair implementation of taxes provided there is no disproportionate burden on any individual segment of Alabama's economy. It encourages efforts to promote governmental accountability and the elimination of wasteful spending.

THE CHAMBER SUPPORTS:

State

- Streamlining and simplifying the sales/use tax system so that in-state and out-of-state retailers are on a level playing field.
- Legislation to increase SSUT tax rate to be consistent with the average rate collected by brick and mortar retailers.
- Implement a unified audit process to stop businesses from being audited by the Alabama Department of Revenue, and then by cities, counties, and private auditing firms for the same tax and same tax periods.
- **Legislation to revise the model used to distribute revenues from the Simplified Sellers Use Tax and Remittance (SSUT) program, to ensure revenues are distributed based on where purchasers are located.**
- Legislation to provide for a Research and Development ("R&D") tax credit parallel to the federal R&D credit, with an extra incentive if a qualified research institution performs the research.
- Reforming the state-county business license statutes to provide a simpler and more uniform process for businesses to apply for and receive a business license.
- Legislation that streamlines the process by which non-profit organizations that are exempt from paying sales and use taxes receive their certificate of exemption from the Alabama Department of Revenue and reduces the burdens imposed under new information return reporting requirements.
- Efforts to clarify the exemption from the Alabama business privilege tax for any limited liability company that is wholly owned by a tax-exempt organization.
- **Efforts to modernize and reform Alabama alcohol sales and regulation, including permanent regulatory changes to embrace new approaches to retail delivery, carryout, and sidewalk dining that have proved their merit during the COVID-19 pandemic.**
- Efforts to modernize Alabama tobacco regulations to maintain adequate control while accommodating new approaches to retail delivery.
- Legislation that provides local government the authority to eliminate the local sales tax placed on purchases of food.
- **Legislation that reauthorizes economic development incentives and tax credits that create jobs, expand industry, and reinvest in communities.**
- **Legislation that provides protections for business and others operating in Alabama from civil liability associated with COVID-19 and other potential pandemics in the future.**
- **Conforming Alabama's tax code to align with the federal tax relief provisions provided in the CARES Act, specifically those pertaining to individuals and struggling businesses.**

TAX AND FISCAL POLICY

Local

- Identify a stable funding source for PARA not dependent on annual budget allocations from Tuscaloosa County, the City of Tuscaloosa and the City of Northport similar to solutions benchmarked in other communities.
- Protect Elevate Tuscaloosa funding being used for general fund purposes. Encourage the implementation of priority projects identified by the Elevate Tuscaloosa Advisory Council. Strongly support paying back 2021 borrowed funds more rapidly than outlined if funding levels are higher than expected.
- Funding for water and sewer system upgrades that does not pull from the City's General Fund or Elevate budgets.

THE CHAMBER OPPOSES:

State

- Imposition of unreasonable and burdensome reporting requirements on tax-exempt organizations in Alabama regarding their purchases of goods using their tax-exempt status and encouraging the Alabama Legislature to repeal or substantially alter the reporting requirement set forth in Alabama Act 2015-534.
- Imposition by the Alabama Department of Revenue of burdensome annual renewal requirements on businesses for sales tax licenses, as well as rental tax, sellers use tax, lodgings tax, utility gross receipts tax, and simplified sellers use tax.
- Establishing unitary combined reporting in Alabama

Local

- Imposition of a rental tax in Tuscaloosa County without transparency regarding the use of the new tax revenue to be received and without the proper vetting of any proposed legislation by the business community.
- Any sales, rental or other tax increase that is not fully vetted with the businesses and individual citizens to which it will apply.

TRANSPORTATION



The Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama supports efforts to finance and build transportation infrastructure to sustain and promote economic growth and improve public safety.

THE CHAMBER SUPPORTS:

Federal/State

- Continued transparency in the operation of the Tuscaloosa County Road Improvement Commission (TCRIC) and efforts to improve working relations among local governments, state and federal legislators, state and federal Departments of Transportation, and the private sector in support of the identified priority transportation projects in the region.
- Continued advocacy by federal, state and local authorities to proceed on funding for and construction of the Tuscaloosa Eastern Bypass project.
- Establishing a North/South corridor from Mobile to Muscle Shoals.
- The pursuit of the reestablishment of TCL's suspended EAS grant.
- Maintain or increase funding for AIP, Supplementary Discretionary Grant Funds and the DOT's Small Community Air Service Development Program and increase FAA Non-Primary Airport Entitlement funding to greater than \$150,000.
- Legislation to expand air service to small communities, including conditional code sharing for small community airports and improved access to the National Air Transportation System.
- Increased ALDOT funding for infrastructure and air service to allow ALDOT to meet state match funding (5%) to every FAA grant awarded in the State of Alabama.
- Creation of an aviation economic development grant program in order to improve airport financial sustainability and allow for Alabama airports to compete with neighboring states on aviation projects.

Local

- Support for activities of the Tuscaloosa National Airport Advisory Committee, including:
 - Funding as a priority a line item in the City's operating budget for retained consulting services to recruit scheduled commercial air service
 - Exploration of the creation of an Airport Authority
 - Exploration of terminal upgrades
 - Efforts to make the airport solvent through special events fees, renegotiating ground leases at market rates and standardized forms, maintenance of multiple FBOs, exploration of new user fees from private aviation membership companies
 - Sponsorship of special events to promote airlines, charter companies, air taxis and others to increase enplanements at TCL.
- Efforts to pursue all federal match funding in support of Tuscaloosa National Airport as a key economic driver for our community.
- Protect allocated Elevate Tuscaloosa funding designated for airport improvements.
- Efforts by local elected officials to determine the feasibility and advisability of acquiring the Tuscaloosa Toll Bridge for public use.

TRANSPORTATION

- Efforts to improve the availability of downtown parking by increasing overall parking capacity and parking space turnover and improving accessibility and safety.

THE CHAMBER OPPOSES:

State

- Any efforts to reduce the funding that would otherwise be allocated to Tuscaloosa County for transportation projects because of the creation of The Tuscaloosa County Road Improvement Commission and the reallocation of certain local tax revenues to that entity for use in local transportation projects.
- **Efforts to reconstitute funding and/or the member structure of HB600 (TCRIC) including private sector representation and project priorities.**

LABOR/EMPLOYMENT



The Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama supports Alabama's status as a "right to work" state. It encourages the adoption of efforts to grow our economy, successfully recruit new industry and support the maintenance and growth of existing industry and Create quality jobs for Alabamians.

THE CHAMBER SUPPORTS:

Federal/State

- Legislation that sets clear and consistent guidelines for the classification of workers as employees or independent contractors.

THE CHAMBER OPPOSES:

Federal/State

- Any legislation that would infringe on employers' right to provide a safe workplace by restricting unauthorized firearm possession on company property and/or creating any new causes of action against employers because of such policies.
- The so-called "Employee Free Choice Act" and implementation of its provisions through regulations and the National Labor Relations Board, which would undermine long standing principles of workplace democracy and fairness, resulting in a lack of balance between management and labor in the workplace.
- Immigration laws that impose additional burdens on or otherwise penalize Alabama employers.
- Any legislation that attempts to limit employers' freedom to implement "employment at will" policies.

BUSINESS/ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT



The Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama supports legislation and regulatory efforts that are consistent with continued economic growth and diversification in West Alabama and that support and enhance our quality of life. It strongly encourages the adoption of legislation, rules, and regulations that support and do not harm small businesses, which are the providers of most jobs for Alabamians.

THE CHAMBER SUPPORTS:

Federal

- A comprehensive federal energy policy that increases the supply of energy in a manner that is safe and protective of the environment, promotes comprehensive energy conservation, and encourages research and development of clean and alternative energy sources.
- Ensuring that any legislative rule or policy changes to provide the funding to support regulatory programs are complemented by efforts to ensure consistency, minimize burdens on the private sector, and reduce duplication to support economic development.

State/Local

- A comprehensive, community-wide strategic plan specifically focused on diversifying the local economy including the recruitment of knowledge-based industry.
- Efforts to identify and resolve challenges that threaten the economic vitality of small businesses, including, but not limited to, crime, and the perception thereof.
- Efforts to foster the economic vitality of small businesses, including, but not limited to, legislation reducing administrative costs or increasing tax credits such as Retirement Enhancement and Savings programs and other tax incentives.
- Given the significant revitalization that is occurring in downtown Tuscaloosa and Northport, examining the feasibility of establishing a downtown & riverfront development association similar to River City Co. in Chattanooga.
- The full adoption of the City of Tuscaloosa's Frame/Work comprehensive plan, including Chamber involvement in subsequent zoning and planning revisions.
- Promoting start-up businesses by exploring the feasibility of an Alabama angel investment tax credit similar to the Kentucky Angel Investment Act Program.
- Promote Opportunity Zones as an economic development program fostering private-sector investments in low-income rural and urban areas.
- Funding for construction of the experience venue/convention center, which will be a significant economic development asset, as outlined in Elevate contingent upon the feasibility study being conducted.
- The promotion of Amendment #772 (Commercial Development Incentives) by working with local governments to identify opportunities that exist.
- Funding for incentives and partnership programs to encourage fuel stations to invest in alternative fuel infrastructure (i.e. electricity, hydrogen, etc.).

BUSINESS/ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

THE CHAMBER OPPOSES:

- Legislation or regulations that have an unnecessary detrimental effect on existing industry or businesses and that may have a negative effect on economic development and industrial recruitment.
- Restrictions on permitted uses within zoning regulations that are overly restrictive and not widely applicable to all properties with the same zoning.
- Any tariffs that place an undue burden on any sector of our local economy.

PUBLIC SAFETY



The Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama supports efforts to improve Public Safety for the citizens of West Alabama.

THE CHAMBER SUPPORTS:

- Funding for the Public Safety Capital Fund in Elevate Tuscaloosa.
- The Mayor's Project Unity initiative focused on enhancing educational, economic, housing, and recreational opportunities while striving to reduce the impairments to our communities.
- Legislation to reform the State of Alabama prison system in order to forestall Federal takeover of that system.

GENERAL



The Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama supports efforts to improve the overall health, vitality, and quality of life of the citizens of West Alabama in various aspects of everyday life.

THE CHAMBER SUPPORTS:

Federal

- **Development of a strategy to engage representation in the federal redistricting that will follow the 2020 census with a goal of maximizing the influence of West Alabama in federal and state offices.**
- Measures at the federal and state level that would encourage competition in the healthcare insurance marketplace, including: 1) support of federal legislation that would allow insurance to be sold across state lines if such legislation is deemed to reduce costs for businesses in Alabama; and 2) establishing a standardized period during which employees and families could concurrently evaluate multiple health coverage options that might be available to their family through either spouse's employer.
- Creating a community priority list for federal funding opportunities including federal land along the riverfront.

State

- Passage of legislation which provides the citizens of Tuscaloosa County with the right to vote on identified issues of significant public concern and achieve home rule.
- Efforts to continue to reform Alabama's Medicaid program to control costs through innovation and reduction of fraud/abuse and ensure long-term sustainability through the renewal of existing provider assessments, delivery efficiency, innovation and quality health care for Alabama's citizens.
- Efforts to remove the requirement for supermajority approval on certain matters before Zoning Boards of Adjustment (ZBA), requiring only a simple majority on all matters before the board.
- Efforts to allow ZBA decisions to be appealed to City Council, rather than requiring appeals to be lodged with Circuit Court.

Local

- Ongoing efforts to capture best practices during benchmarking trips to other communities and systematically incorporate some of those best practices locally.
- The promotion of public art to enhance quality of life.
- Encouraging local governments to consolidate services to eliminate duplication and waste in operating multiple versions of the same services across the county (e.g., waste collection, water and sewer, law enforcement, etc.).
- Pursuing the land swap opportunity between the Army Corp of Engineers and the City of Tuscaloosa along the riverfront.

GENERAL

THE CHAMBER OPPOSES:

Federal/State

- Any effort to establish monopolies in any area of gaming that may be approved by a vote of Alabama citizens.
- Mandating employer-provided health care benefits or any legislation, resolution, or regulation that would increase health plan costs.

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