



2022 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 2022. Key priorities include:

Public Safety

Tuscaloosa National Airport

Criminal Justice Reform

Elevate Tuscaloosa

Vaccination Mandates

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 through the Alabama Office of Apprenticeship.
- 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.
- 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.
- Support 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.

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.

- **Continue to develop and expand programs like Modern Manufacturing as a model for educating and preparing the workforce needed across the State of Alabama**
- Establishing an enhanced apprenticeship model and career pathways, beginning in middle school with career exploration and discovery (WOW), 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.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION

- 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.
- Adequate state funding for higher education.
- Continued funding for the Blackbelt Workforce Center in Demopolis and rural programs to impact our rural counties.
- 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 and industry.
- Support the “Ten Points on K-12 Education” created by the Alabama Workforce Council to impact Alabama’s educational shortfalls:
 - Disseminate a best practice guide to local education agencies for using federal ESSER II and III funds to establish high-quality CTE programs aligned to the ACCCP’s list of in-demand jobs.
 - Develop annual targets for reaching a 100 percent FAFSA completion rate by 2025.
 - Develop biennial targets for reaching the national average in fourth and eighth grade reading and mathematics on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) by 2026.
 - Establish a policy requiring career coaches and CTE directors to attend regional workforce council meetings no later than September 30, 2021, and establish a policy requiring career coaches to collaborate with the Alabama Office of Apprenticeship to establish in-school youth apprenticeships.
 - Pass an administrative rule code change to ensure students earn at least one college and career readiness indicator by the time of their graduation.
 - Adopt an administrative rule code change that requires Career Readiness Indicators to be registered to the Alabama Credential Registry and aligned to the ACCCP’s Compendium of Valuable Credentials.
 - Establish an incentive program, by policy, rule, or Act of the Legislature, for schools to reduce the rate of student and teacher absenteeism to no more than ten days per academic year.
 - Conduct a gap analysis and resource audit of all CTE programs to determine the level of alignment of CTE programs of study offered at each local education agency to the ACCCP’s regional and statewide list of in-demand jobs.
 - Establish baselines for grade-level reading proficiency based on the Alabama Comprehensive Assessment System and set annual targets for increasing the number of students entering the fourth grade as proficient readers to 100 percent by 2025.
 - Ensure that Alabama Terminal on Linking and Analyzing Statistics (ATLAS) is built using national best practices and governed by an authorized & effective P-20W

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION

Council with full engagement of necessary state agency partners.

Local

- Making a career technical curriculum accessible to all students in West Alabama.
- Continued implementation of programs like World of Work, WOW 2.0, and Virtual Reality Exploration to engage and expose students to career opportunities in our region.
- 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.

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.
- Legislation that provides local government the authority to eliminate the local sales tax placed on purchases of food.

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 from 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 do not pull from the City's General Fund or Elevate budgets.

TAX AND FISCAL POLICY

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.
- Development of 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.
- Support and leverage opportunities provided by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act annually for FY22 through FY26:
 - Advocate and compete amongst the "FAA Facilities and Equipment" program for consideration of renovation/replacement of the Tuscaloosa's air traffic control tower
 - Advocate and compete for available funding under the "Airport Terminal Program"
 - Utilize available funding through the "Airport Infrastructure Grants" program to address capital improvements needed at the Tuscaloosa National Airport
- Support of the proposed "Alabama Airport Economic and Infrastructure Program":
 - \$25M of ALDOT funding to meet infrastructure and economic demands for airports throughout the state (\$15M for commercial service airports / \$10M for general aviation airports)
 - Alternative language "Increased ALDOT funding for Aeronautics Bureau to meet infrastructure and economic demands for airports throughout the State"
- Support of Tax Exemption for sales of parts, components, and systems for maintaining aircraft in Alabama:
 - Supports aircraft maintenance operations and the recruitment of maintenance, repair, and overhaul companies (MRO) and Part 145 stations

TRANSPORTATION

- Current §40-23-4(a)(48), Code of Ala should provide exemption for all aircraft including aircraft registered in Alabama

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
- Efforts to make the airport financially sustainable while promoting growth
- 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.**
- Support for the Tuscaloosa National Airport Master Plan, including the recommended capital improvement projects needed to maintain and grow the airport as an economic asset
- Efforts by local elected officials to determine the feasibility and advisability of acquiring the Tuscaloosa Toll Bridge for public use.
- Efforts to improve the availability of downtown parking by increasing overall parking capacity and parking space turnover and improving accessibility and safety.
- Reevaluation of the Elevate public transportation plan to ensure adequate routes to key employers and timing to align with shift differentials. To protect allocated funding designation for additional workforce routes.

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.
- **Any further vaccine mandate legislation from the Alabama Legislature putting businesses at risk of lawsuits when determining how to proceed with conflicting federal and state law.**

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.
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives in all areas of government to best reflect its community.
- Funding solutions and resources that encourage diverse business ownership with economic growth opportunities.
- 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 implementation of the City of Tuscaloosa's Frame/Work comprehensive plan through 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:

Federal/State

- Any tariffs that place an undue burden on any sector of our local economy.
- 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.

Local

- Restrictions on permitted uses within zoning regulations that are overly restrictive and not widely applicable to all properties with the same zoning.

PUBLIC SAFETY



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

THE CHAMBER SUPPORTS:

State

- Legislation to reform the State of Alabama prison system in order to forestall Federal takeover of that system.

Local

- 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.

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

- 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

- 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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