



# THE NEXT LEVEL SUMMIT

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

## The Process

More than 100 community leaders from the public, private, nonprofit and education sectors convened at the Renaissance Ross Bridge Resort April 13-15 for The Next Level Summit. This three-day event allowed for candid, in-depth discussions on a variety of pressing community issues. Multiple breakout sessions were held on each of the highlighted topics and the discussions were moderated by the same local leaders who led panel discussions during The Next Level Series, several issue-focused educational forums that preceded the Summit.

These discussions resulted in the creation of proactive action items to address many of the challenges and opportunities identified through both the Series and Summit. Various local stakeholder groups will take on the responsibility of these action items, including the Chamber through its upcoming five-year strategic plan.

Numerous public policy-related items were also thoroughly considered during the Summit, and the subsequent positions will become priorities of the Chamber's Public Policy Agenda immediately. The Chamber's Public Affairs Council will serve as a primary venue for ongoing updates from all newly formed committees, task forces, and working groups, and will also coordinate stakeholder advocacy on the identified public policy priorities.

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## Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

- Continue to populate and promote the Diverse Business Council's online Marketplace, housed on the Chamber's website
- Establish mentoring programs for diverse and disadvantaged businesses
- Expand participation in Chamber programming for diverse and disadvantaged businesses
- Promote diversity in speakers and outreach efforts within schools and community groups
- Continue Chamber-led DEI luncheon discussions with leaders from the minority business community, to include Hispanic representation

## Economic Diversification

- Create an inclusive and collaborative economic development plan that aligns with The University of Alabama's expertise in four key areas: Mobility, Power, and Transportation; Water Research; Point-of-Need Manufacturing; and Life Science and Health
- Establish the Tuscaloosa Innovation District, with the Alabama Mobility and Power ("AMP") Center as the cornerstone of this effort
- Build a cohesive economic development targeting strategy that considers community values and desires; the existing industry base; regional resources and assets; area economic trends; and forecasted industry trends
- Explore the development of additional small business incubators and business accelerators

- Develop a local Angel Investors Network and/or Venture Capital Network
- Promote the development of office space with the amenities business owners will find attractive (Class A office space, wet lab space, nearby coffee shops, restaurants, hotels, etc.)
- Develop a comprehensive strategic plan for the retention of college graduates
- Advocate for state and local incentives that support the needs of knowledge-based companies
- Advocate for state legislation that would make Tax Increment Financing (TIF) more viable for local government

### Healthcare

- Encourage the DCH Board and community leaders to explore all options for a new healthcare delivery model, including, but not limited to, a potential merger or affiliation of DCH with a larger healthcare system
- Encourage transparency and regular communication by DCH leadership with community stakeholders

### Infrastructure

- Create multijurisdictional working groups to lead infrastructure planning discussions and leverage investment opportunities whenever possible
- Advocate for flexibility in planning and zoning for surface transportation projects
- Advocate for legislation to allow concrete or asphalt mix to reduce the cost of road projects
- Extend infrastructure into undeveloped areas prior to the development
- Research solutions to eliminate traffic on the roadways, including bus-only lanes, bike lanes, pedestrian walkways, high-density mixed-use developments
- Explore expansion of intercity public transportation
- Continue to aggressively pursue commercial service at the Tuscaloosa National Airport
- Advocate for changes in state legislation as needed regarding the use of public money to partner with private company for the expansion of broadband

### Public Education

- Re-establish the Chamber's Education Policy Council to convene leaders from the education, public, private, and non-profit sectors on education issues
- Tap into under-represented volunteer groups to support education initiatives
- Develop alliance between public schools and Business Network International (BNI) groups and other business networking groups to assist with and broker resources
- Review and enhance the expectations of the Adopt-A-School program
- Advocate for increasing millage tax in Tuscaloosa County
- Advocated for adding parent liaisons to schools to facilitate needs to the community



- Support public investment in first class athletic facilities at local schools
- Support and promote participation in the Neighborhood Bridges program
- Support increased engagement in and expansion of the Reading Allies program

### Public Safety

- Create a public safety committee, comprised of public, private, and non-profit sector leaders, to convene on all related public safety issues
- Advocate for more mental health beds in our community and support the development of the new Mental Health Crisis Center in Tuscaloosa County
- Support early intervention programs in schools and advocate for changes in juvenile sentencing policies
- Promote the expansion of Safeguard Tuscaloosa, a business security cameras campaign, throughout Tuscaloosa County
- Support the City of Tuscaloosa's Police and Fire Pension Fund conversion to the Retirement Systems of Alabama
- Support a comprehensive review of the funding model for the Tuscaloosa County District Attorney's office

### Quality of Life: Cultural Arts

- Advocate for the expansion of Live at the Plaza and combining it with First Friday
- Advocate for the installation of string lights on the Art Walk Trail throughout downtown Tuscaloosa
- Reactivate the downtown business merchant association, under the leadership of Tuscaloosa Tourism and Sports, the Chamber, and other key stakeholders
- Advocate for the renovation of the Bama Theatre and expanded bus parking
- Create a task force to explore development of an arts incubator and arts district (like Lowe Mill Arts and Entertainment Districts in Huntsville)
- Promote private ventures for performance venues
- Pursue local government policies of at least 1% of capital budgets dedicated to public art
- Create a QR code to promote the Arts Council event and program calendar
- Create a dedicated fund for the promotion of the cultural arts

### Quality of Life: Recreation

- Encourage the Tuscaloosa County Park and Recreation Authority (PARA) Governing Board to redefine its mission and develop a master plan, which includes the consolidation of PARA the into three primary areas of focus: Summer Camp/Child Care, Youth Sports, and Programming for Seniors and Fitness
- Advocate for the prevention of duplicated services and events in local jurisdictions



- Promote the community calendar housed on the Tuscaloosa Tourism and Sports website
- Advocate for expanded recreational use of the Black Warrior River and for expanded promotion of the area as a fishing community

### **Workforce Barriers: Childcare**

- Create a task force of public, private, education and non-profit leaders to guide childcare expansion efforts
- Work with the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA) to develop a program to assist the creation of new “in-home” childcare centers throughout West Alabama
- Work with early childhood development programs at Shelton State Community College, Stillman College, and The University of Alabama to develop a toolkit, resource guide, and mentoring programs to support existing childcare centers
- Develop a strong connection between local non-profits and in-home centers to support working families

### **Workforce Barriers: Housing**

- Create a task force consisting of developers, government officials, and industry leaders to explore non-jurisdictional projects, incentives, industry partnerships, utility costs, and development costs
- Encourage City of Tuscaloosa officials to ensure its Framework plan has the appropriate zoning for “missing middle” housing
- Encourage the use of tiered housing developments, a mix of affordable, workforce, and higher-end housing
- Promote housing partnerships between industry, the public sector, and private developers
- Explore a feeder school project to develop a workforce community, similar to recent workforce housing efforts in Baldwin County

### **Workforce Barriers: Transportation**

- Create a multijurisdictional task force to explore all public transportation expansion options
- Create a true Tuscaloosa County Transit Authority with funding added from Tuscaloosa County and Northport, to allow for more routes to business and industry throughout the county
- Review the creation of a West Alabama Transit Authority with the West Alabama Regional Commission utilizing Job Access and Reverse Commute (JARC) Program funding for workforce transportation
- Revisit the City of Tuscaloosa’s Elevate Transportation Plan to focus on routes and times that better align with workforce shifts in the manufacturing community
- Develop a metro and regional business plan for workforce transportation, in partnership with local government and The University of Alabama

## Participants

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