

POLICY AGENDA

2024



THE
CHAMBER
OF COMMERCE OF WEST ALABAMA

westalabamachamber.com

TABLE OF CONTENTS

2	WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT, EDUCATION, AND EMPLOYMENT
4	TAX AND FISCAL POLICY
6	TRANSPORTATION
8	BUSINESS / ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
10	PUBLIC SAFETY
11	GENERAL



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 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 2024.

KEY PRIORITIES INCLUDE:

- Public Safety / Criminal Justice Reform
- Workforce Development
- Economic Development

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT, EDUCATION, AND EMPLOYMENT

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

- 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 employers in hiring and maintaining a trained and available workforce.
- Increasing appropriated funding in the WIOA, career and technical education (CTE), and adult education state grants.
- Seeking waivers from the U.S. Department of Labor to allow in-school youth participating in registered or industry-recognized apprenticeships to receive funding for wrap-around services through federally funded programs.
- Empowering businesses to upskill and reskill existing workers by creating a new title under WIOA establishing a federal incumbent worker training fund.
- Expanding Pell Grant and other federal student financial aid programs to include high-quality, short-term training programs that lead to in-demand jobs.
- Modernization of education and training policies to better align with high-wage, high-demand jobs by aggressively and effectively investing in skills training that industries demand and workers need.
- Legislation that sets clear and consistent guidelines for the classification of workers as employees or independent contractors.
- Legislation that creates uniform standard for Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) policies across collegiate athletics.

STATE

- Expansion and funding of career coaches to advise students of various potential career paths based on ability and aptitude and creating an accountability framework for career coaches.
- Development and expansion of programs like the Modern Manufacturing Program as a model for educating and preparing the needed workforce across the state of Alabama.
- Establishing adequate state funding for higher education which includes two- and four-year institutions.
- Continued funding for the Blackbelt Workforce Center in Demopolis which delivers workforce programs to rural counties throughout the Blackbelt of Alabama.

- Creation of a comprehensive, industry-recognized, youth apprenticeship model for students under the age of 18 who are currently constrained by state workers' compensation and insurance regulations which may limit access to on-site industrial training.
- Increasing efforts to provide full funding for universal 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.
- Increasing funding, training, and employment opportunities for justice-impacted individuals (individuals with criminal backgrounds) through the Building Hope West Alabama program created in partnership with the City of Tuscaloosa, Tuscaloosa County, and Just Trust. Building Hope West Alabama should serve as a model for an effective state-wide "second chance" program for diversion.
- Advocating for state agencies to maximize state and federal dollars to address key workforce issues such as expansion of quality childcare and workforce transportation.
- Advocating for the Alabama Department of Transportation to allocate dollars to address the increasing challenges of workforce transportation in rural counties in the state.
- Streamlining the process the Department of Human Resources uses to determine where and how federal funds are deployed across the state into the childcare industry.
- The "Ten Points on K-12 Education" created by the Alabama Workforce Council to impact Alabama's educational shortfalls.
- State funding of the Saban Discovery Center to enhance science, technology, engineering, the arts, and mathematics (STEAM) learning opportunities.
- An increase in Education Trust Fund (ETF) funding for The University of Alabama.

LOCAL

- Making career technical curriculum accessible to all students in West Alabama.
- Continued implementation of programs like Worlds of Work, WOW 2.0, and Virtual Reality Exploration to engage and expose students to career opportunities in our region.
- Continued and enhanced funding for the I.G.N.I.T.E Student Employment Program to promote career and social development, while reducing poverty.
- Providing adequate funding for PreK – 12 school systems in West Alabama, recognizing some are among the lowest funded in the state of Alabama.
- Expansion of Shelton State's Community Childcare Cultivator: Connecting Commerce to Care (aka 3 By 3) training program for home-based childcare businesses to help address the significant shortage of quality, affordable childcare in the state.

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

- Adoption of the Streamlined Sales Tax model that has been adopted by 23 other states - Arkansas, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.
- Legislation to revise the Simplified Sellers Use Tax (SSUT) rate to be consistent with the average rate collected by brick-and-mortar retailers and revise the model used to distribute revenues from the SSUT program to ensure revenues are distributed based on where purchasers are located.
- Implementation of a unified audit process to prevent businesses from being audited by multiple agencies (e.g., Alabama Department of Revenue, cities, counties, and private auditing firms) for the same tax and same tax periods.
- 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 business licenses.
- 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.

LOCAL

- Protecting Elevate Tuscaloosa funding from being used for General Fund purposes, encouraging the implementation of priority projects identified by the Elevate Tuscaloosa Advisory Council.
- Identifying a stable funding source for the Tuscaloosa County Parks & Recreation Authority (PARA) that is 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.
- Funding for water and sewer system upgrades in the City of Tuscaloosa that do not pull from the General Fund or Elevate Tuscaloosa budgets.
- Utilizing local, state, and federal assistance to fund improvements to rural water & sewer projects for underserved areas of the region.

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

- The use of Elevate Tuscaloosa funds on any project without undergoing thorough review by the Elevate Tuscaloosa Advisory Council.
- 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 - LOCAL

- Reevaluation of the Elevate Tuscaloosa public transportation plan to ensure adequate routes to key employers and timing to align with shift differentials and the protection of allocated funding designated for additional workforce routes.
- Continued transparency in the operation of the Tuscaloosa County Road Improvement Commission (TCRIC) and efforts to improve working relationships 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 local, state, and federal 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.
- 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, parking space turnover, and improvement of accessibility and safety.
- **Tuscaloosa National Airport (TCL) through:**
 - ◇ Protection of allocated Elevate Tuscaloosa funding designated for airport improvements and advocacy of those funds' use to renovate or replace the existing terminal.
 - ◇ Modeling and exploring the development of a regional airport authority.
 - ◇ The pursuit of new Congressionally directed spending and already enacted Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) funding at federal and state levels for terminal replacement/renovation and replacement of the federally-owned air control tower (including enhanced radar/satellite technology to improve safety) as well as advocacy for sufficient funding levels for airports of similar size and class.
 - ◇ The addition of customs and border protection services as well as a bonded warehouse/ intermodal facility to enhance TCL's capability to support local industry.
 - ◇ The development of flight training programs at TCL.
 - ◇ Increased ALDOT funding to match 5% of awarded federal grants for eligible projects in Alabama.

- ◇ Support as appropriate legislation and policies proposed by the Aviation Council of Alabama to strengthen Alabama's airports provided that sufficient funding is included for General Aviation (GA) airports like TCL.
- ◇ Efforts to make the airport financially sustainable 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, and incentivization of strategic capital projects identified in the TCL Master Plan.
- ◇ **The pursuit of:**
 1. Funding for the re-establishment of commercial air service through the Essential Air Service (EAS) program, Small Community Air Service Development Program (SCASDP), and other federal programs as well as advocacy for flexibility within those grant programs .
 2. Advocacy of sufficient funding levels for these and other Air Service Development (ASD) programs.
 3. Local funding for air service development consultants.
 4. Federal policies favorable to air service for smaller communities (e.g., conditional code, interlining, etc.).

THE CHAMBER OPPOSES:

STATE

- Efforts to reconstitute funding and/or the member structure of HB600 (TCRIC) including private sector representation and project priorities.
- 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.

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.
- Protecting Elevate Tuscaloosa funding for future construction of an Event Center, which will be a significant economic development asset.
- 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.
- Exploration of the feasibility of establishing a downtown & riverfront development association like River City Co. in Chattanooga, Tennessee that will take advantage of and help promote the revitalized downtowns of Tuscaloosa and Northport.
- Efforts that direct additional funding towards destination/community promotion and tourism to help fuel the engine for economic development as well as research to further understand the desires of young talent for retention and attraction purposes across West Alabama.
- The implementation of the City of Tuscaloosa's Framework 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 incentives and partnership programs to encourage fuel stations to invest in alternative fuel infrastructure (i.e., electricity, hydrogen, etc.) including projects involving the Alabama Mobility and Power (AMP) Center.
- Funding for innovative research in the automotive sector at The University of Alabama.
- Increase in funding for The University of Alabama's water research enterprise.

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.
- 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 provisions of the so-called "Employee Free Choice Act" which will inhibit economic growth, are anti-worker and anti-employer, and 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.

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 to forestall federal takeover of that system.
- Legislation amending SB12 'Permitless Carry' bill to improve public safety concerns of Alabama Law Enforcement.

LOCAL

- Funding for the Public Safety Capital Fund in Elevate Tuscaloosa.
- Project Unity initiative focused on enhancing educational, economic, housing, and recreational opportunities while striving to reduce the impairments to our communities.
- Safeguard Tuscaloosa program allowing police to access live security camera feeds from local businesses in real-time, increasing their ability to track suspects immediately after crimes are committed.
- Re-entry and diversion programs in partnership with local law enforcement agencies and West Alabama Works.
- Efforts by the City of Tuscaloosa, The University of Alabama, and the Tuscaloosa Hospitality Association to improve safety on and around the area commonly known as "The Strip" on University Boulevard.
- Efforts to eliminate competition for talent between the police and fire departments of the City of Tuscaloosa, the City of Northport, Tuscaloosa County, and The University of Alabama.

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.
 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.

STATE

- Efforts to close the coverage gap to control healthcare costs through innovation and reduction of fraud/abuse and ensuring long-term sustainability through the renewal of existing provider assessments, delivery efficiency, innovation, and quality healthcare 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 Chamber 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.

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 healthcare benefits or any legislation, resolution, or regulation that would increase health plan costs.

POINTS OF CONTACT

DONNY JONES, CCE, IOM, AACE

EVP & Chief Workforce Officer, Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama
Executive Director, West AlabamaWorks!
205.391.0552

BARKLEY P. GARRETT, CEcD

Vice President of Economic & Community Development
Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama
205.391.0329

