Economic Development, Community Involvement, and Planning for the Future in Hamilton County, Florida

Final Report
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The goals of this two-year project were to: 1) provide a baseline socioeconomic assessment of Hamilton County and its communities; 2) assess citizen and local government perceptions toward socioeconomic issues and economic development, 3) conduct an economic impact analysis that can be used to analyze the impact of new businesses or industries 4) develop a land use and environmental indicators atlas and (5) develop land use scenarios for the region and concept development plans for the three towns in the county.

The project was conducted by the School of Natural Resources and Environment (SNRE) at the University of Florida (UF). This included working with Hamilton County citizens, Hamilton County and city governmental entities and other groups to achieve their short and long-term goals. The project was coordinated through the Hamilton County Extension Office. The project team is listed at the end of this report.

The project was presented to the Hamilton County Commission which adopted Resolution 2007-26 on September 18, 2007 in support of the project. Actual work on the project began in January, 2008 and was completed in October, 2009. While the actual project is completed, implementation of the recommendations is ongoing, primarily through the work of local citizens and the Jasper Downtown Redevelopment Committee. The project was funded though a $180K commitment from a private donor.

The project was advised by a 15-member county-wide Advisory Committee. Committee membership consisted of representatives from county government, the three towns in the county, state and federal agencies, businesses and citizens. Four meetings of the advisory committee were held along with numerous meetings and presentations to county and city governments, citizens and other groups with interest in the project. Numerous citizens of Hamilton County provided input into the project through survey participation, providing ongoing feedback to project results and responding to telephone calls and questions. Advisory committee members are listed at the end of this report.
Work Completed

Final reports available for the project and distributed in Hamilton County are listed below in the order in which they were addressed during the project. They are also available on the SNRE website at [http://snre.ufl.edu/pubsevents/hamilton.html](http://snre.ufl.edu/pubsevents/hamilton.html).


Brennan, M.A. April, 2009. Examining youth perceptions of support in Hamilton County, Florida: Final report on youth development research. Family, Youth and Community Sciences Department, University of Florida. 94 pages.


Guettler, Tyler Salvatore and Maria Tina Gurucharri. April, 2009. Ecotourism and the natural environment, Hamilton County, Florida. Department of Landscape Architecture, University of Florida. 120 pages.


Brief Summary of Tasks

Task 1: Socioeconomic indicators and trends-Laila Racevskis
GIS data for the atlas indicators were collected for Hamilton and surrounding Florida and Georgia counties and 26 indicators were mapped. Examples of indicators are housing density, land cover types and aquifer recharge areas. For each indicator where data were available, the atlas compared Hamilton County to the six counties that surround Hamilton County in Florida and Georgia. One problem for some indicators is that Florida and Georgia data sources are not comparable on the same scales. The atlas was distributed in printed copy.

Task 2: Citizen attitudes and skills and business retention program.
a.—Mark Brennan. A survey of citizen’s attitudes was completed. 602 citizens completed surveys (response rate 56%). In addition, 240 youth, ages 14-16, completed a youth survey. The top concerns of citizens are health care services (27% rated as top concern) and the quality of the education system (21% rated as top concern). Overall satisfaction with life in the county is high, but about 1/3 are neutral on satisfaction. There is some concern about the future of the community in the next five years. The results of answers to all the questions including whether people would relocate from Hamilton County if they could, their involvement in community activities and where residents purchase such services as groceries and health care are included in the printed version. Due to the concern about the educational system in Hamilton County, the results for youth were printed in a separate report.

b.—Hank Cothran. The original plan was to conduct a Business Retention and Expansion Program, which requires a cadre of business owner volunteers from the community to deliver and administer the surveys. There was not enough interest and thus not enough volunteers, so a mail survey of county businesses was conducted. Hamilton County did not have a list of the businesses in the county. A purchased commercial list of 407 businesses was reduced to 298 by eliminating churches, businesses known to no longer be in business, etc. This list was checked against the E911 office for a cross check on addresses. Despite this, 50 surveys were returned as undeliverable. Of those delivered, the response rate was 16%. All the surveys returned were from small businesses with 1 to 31 employees; no government agencies (despite being the largest employer in the county) completed and returned the survey. Thus, the results are only useful for small business owners. Full details are in the published report.

Task 3: Economic impact analysis-David Mulkey
The economic model for Hamilton County and the region which includes Columbia, Suwannee, and Madison Counties in Florida and Brooks, Lowndes and Echols Counties in Georgia was completed early in the project. The Implan modeling software and databases were used which allows detailed analyses at the county (and multi-county region) level of sources of income and employment by industry group. These models allow detailed comparisons between Hamilton County and surrounding counties and the region as a whole. The models also make it possible to provide economic impact estimates of proposed changes in the levels of output or employment in particular
industries. The principal economic sectors for the Hamilton County economy are agriculture, natural resources and related sectors (78%), government (5%), health care (3%) and education (2%). Most of the agricultural sector is phosphate mining and 14 other sectors provide the remaining 12% of the economic activity in the county. Hamilton County economic activity represents only 4% of the seven-county region’s economic activity. As confirmed in the survey of citizens, a substantial amount of the wages earned in the county are spent outside the county. For example, retail trade activity is twice as great as a percentage of all activity in the region as it is for Hamilton County. The model was presented to the Development Authority in addition to the printed report being available.

Task 4: Future land use scenarios--Peggy Carr
a. Four land use scenarios were developed using population projections to 2035. They included (1) conservation/protected agriculture, (2) compact communities, (3) compact communities + suburban development on reclaimed mining lands and (4) compact communities + rural low density residential opportunities. Comparison of the four scenarios reveals significant differences, and one obvious similarity. Land use change to accommodate an enlarging population will result in a loss of agricultural land. The major difference among the scenarios is the residential density each manifests. Complete details on each scenario including tables and maps are available in the printed report.

b. Design Concepts—Tina Gurucharri
The first design concept examined various alternatives to revitalize downtown Jasper and to create a greenway park system using an existing railroad right-of-way that bisects the town. The alternatives are linked to the land use scenarios and include strategies to spur economic development using principles based on historic preservation, city planning, urban design and landscape architecture. Two types of historic districts were considered for part of downtown Jasper: residential; commercial. Examples of infill to develop the core area were presented including various housing and transportation alternatives including a linear greenway park. Ways to modify Hatley Street to encourage more downtown use were recommended.

The second design concept builds off the ecotourism in White Springs and uses the natural environment and historic and cultural/heritage sites in the county to encourage nature-based tourism and its resulting economic development. A number of alternative bicycle trails throughout various parts of the county were suggested and a design plan for an eco-lodge to enhance the White Springs/Stephen Foster State Park was provided. The eco-lodge is designed to achieve low impact development and to serve as a model development guide for future sites in environmentally sensitive areas.

A historic structures report was prepared for two historic brick commercial buildings in downtown Jennings. The result of the work concludes that the structures (1900; 1910) suffer from neglect but are generally sound and could be reused if adapted to current needs. Two farmers market design options were also considered and presented for Jennings. One option is located at the Interstate Highway 75 exchange and the second is an in-town location.
To help stimulate local economies, a Visit Hamilton County website was designed to increase visibility of all rural tourism activities in the county. It was developed using a free website program that is easy to use and update.

Student Involvement in the Project

This project has substantially involved students in the conduct of the work. This includes a semester-long practicum in Environmental Design and Planning (spring 2008) and a design studio of students (summer 2008), both in the College of Design, Construction and Planning. In addition, a total of 11 undergraduate and graduate students have worked on the citizen survey, the community atlas, and the design concepts. Nine faculty members have been involved in various parts of the project.

A Model for Other Counties

In addition to providing economic development, community involvement and planning information, ideas and concepts to Hamilton County, this project is considered a pilot project in developing a “model” to assist other counties. The initial idea and discussions with university and statewide leaders on the idea of creating a University of Florida based land use program led to the funding of this pilot project. The materials developed and the experience gained will certainly benefit us in presenting the concept of land use programs to others.

Extension Training

The team also used this information to develop a set of on-line training videos for county, regional and state Extension faculty. The Accordent system available in IFAS was used to record presentations on each of the processes involved and the work in Hamilton County was used as an example of the kind of work that can be done at the county level. This system allows a video of the presenter to be recorded on one-half the screen and a power point presentation on the other half. This set of training presentations is available on-demand 24/7 to faculty via the SNRE website and also an Extension training website. Each of the presentations is from 15 to 30 minutes. All the recorded presentations are available on the SNRE website at [http://snre.ufl.edu/pubsevents/training.html](http://snre.ufl.edu/pubsevents/training.html). The training series contains the following set of videos:

- Introduction—Jim Cato
- Profile of Hamilton County—Allen Tyree
- Economic model—Alan Hodges
- Business survey—Hank Cothran
- Community survey—Mark Brennan
- Environmental atlas—Laila Racevskis
- Land use scenarios—Peggy Carr
- Downtown revitalization and ecotourism—Tina Gurucharri
Implementation to Date

Based on the recommendations made during the project, citizens in Hamilton County have been active in seeking to implement them. Most of the activity is occurring through the organized work of the Jasper Downtown Redevelopment Committee (Cindy Eatmon), an organization created by the Jasper City Council. The Committee was formed just prior to the start of the SNRE project and has stepped forward as the “champion” to implement the recommendations. Accomplishments to date include:

1. A commitment from the Florida Department of Transportation of $250K per year for 2013, 2014 to upgrade Hatley Street and begin implementing the Central Greenway/Park concept in Jasper.
2. A commitment of $30K from FDOT for trees to plant along the highway in Jennings and Jasper in 2010.
3. Several activities have been conceived by the local citizens based on the recommendation to create activities that bring tourists and revenues to the area. These initial events were organized by the Jasper Downtown Redevelopment Committee but will be organized through the Chamber of Commerce in the future.
   a. The first “Fall Festival” was organized and held October 31, 2009 in Jasper.
   b. A series of “Saturday Market Days” are planned four times each year. Vendors will be encouraged to participate.
   c. A “blackberry” festival is being organized for June 12, 2010. This is another way to encourage tourism and bring economic activity to the county. Workshops for growers will also be held at the Extension office.
4. The general concept of the Jasper revitalization and developing county-wide bike tourism routes has been adopted. The Hamilton County Chamber of Commerce has agreed to hold and manage funds generated by the Jasper Downtown Redevelopment Committee to implement activities recommended by the project team. The three recommended bike routes are being developed. The Tourist Development Council is developing and printing brochures, maps and ways to advertise the routes and a bike race is being planned for fall 2010 as part of the fall festival as a way to advertise the routes. The goal is to bring tourism and increased tourism revenues to the area.

Project Team Members:
Mark Brennan, Assistant Professor, Family, Youth and Community Sciences Department
Margaret H. Carr, Associate Professor, The GeoPlan Center, and Associate Dean for Undergraduate Programs, College of Design, Construction and Planning
James C. Cato, Senior Associate Dean and Director, School of Natural Resources and Environment.
Henry Cothran, Business Retention and Expansion Program, Food and Resource Economics Department
Maria Christian Gurucharri, Associate Professor, The GeoPlan Center, College of Design, Construction and Planning
Laila Racevskis, Assistant Professor, Food and Resource Economics Department
David Mulkey, Professor, Food and Resource Economics Department
Allen Tyree, Extension Agent III and County Extension Director, Hamilton County
Paul D. Zwick, Professor, The GeoPlan Center, and Associate Dean for Research and Graduate Programs, College of Design, Construction and Planning

Advisory Committee Members:
Willonefe Adams, small farmer and community activist, White Springs
Jeff McGuire, Interim City Manager, Jasper
Brad Ellis, representative, Florida Division of Forestry
John Cloyd, local farmer and developer
Jordan Green, Florida Department of Transportation
Joy Howell, Manager, First Federal Savings Bank of Florida
Ben Jaure, Manager, Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center State Park
Cindi Foreman, Executive Director, Development Authority
Ann Lessman, Mayor, Jasper
Charlie Houder, Representative, Suwannee River Water Management District
Danny Johnson, County Coordinator, Hamilton County
Lowell Klepper, City Council Member, Jennings
John McCormick, County Attorney
Mike Williams, City Council Member, White Springs
Billy Snipes, City Manager, Jennings
Robert Townsend, City Manager, Town of White Springs
Lewis Vaughn, County Commissioner