

HARDEE COUNTY

**US 17
CORRIDOR**

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

MAY 2026

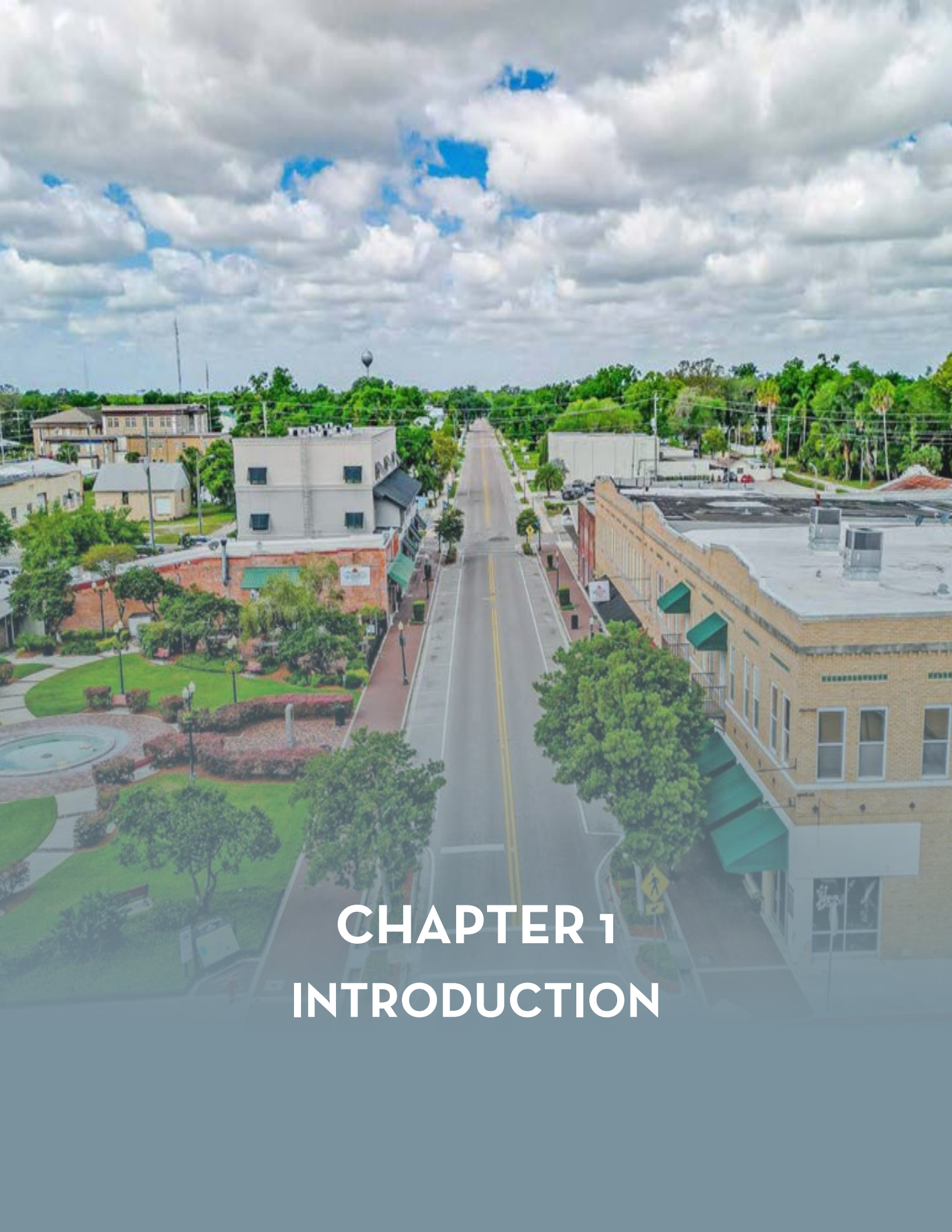
US 17 ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE REPORT

DRAFT



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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE?

The US 17 Corridor Economic Development Initiative provides an in-depth examination of the corridor’s role in the local and regional economy and its potential to support future growth. By offering a data-driven foundation, it equips local leaders and partners with the insights needed to guide decisions on land use, infrastructure, and investment. The goal is to identify opportunities that will strengthen existing businesses, attract new ones, and create a more connected, resilient corridor for years to come.

HOW WILL THE STUDY BE USED?

The study will guide Hardee County and its partners in making informed decisions about land use, infrastructure, workforce needs, and economic initiatives. It provides a shared foundation for public and private investment and helps ensure growth along US 17 happens in a coordinated manner. Key outcomes of this study include:

STRATEGY



A Framework for Coordinated Growth

Establishes a shared framework that aligns land use, transportation, infrastructure, and economic development decisions along the US 17 Corridor, enabling the County and its partners to act in a coordinated and consistent manner.



Market Driven Direction for the Future

Provides market-informed guidance on appropriate development types and uses, allowing decision-makers to evaluate future projects and ensure growth aligns with economic realities and community goals.



Sites for Investment and Redevelopment

Identifies priority opportunity areas and catalytic sites where targeted public actions and infrastructure investments can unlock redevelopment potential and attract private investment.



Investments that Support Economic Activity

Directs infrastructure and mobility investments to support economic activity, balance local access and regional movement, and ensure long-term functionality and resilience of the corridor.

IMPLEMENTATION



Support for Businesses and Employers

Outlines strategies to stabilize and strengthen existing businesses while positioning the corridor to attract new employers and reinforce US 17’s role as a key economic connector.



A Practical Path from Planning to Action

Delivers an implementation-focused roadmap that prioritizes actions, identifies responsible partners, and helps the County move efficiently from planning to execution.

PLANNING PROCESS

The US 17 Economic Development Study follows a three-phase process—Discover, Plan, and Communicate—to guide decision-making, shape actionable strategies, and build consensus among stakeholders to support implementation. This schedule provides a roadmap.

PHASE 1: DISCOVER

This initial phase focuses on understanding current conditions and establishing a shared vision. Activities include the Corridors Characteristics Report and a Visioning and Goals Report, supported by the first round of community engagement and advisory committee input. This phase sets the foundation for identifying opportunities and challenges along the corridor.

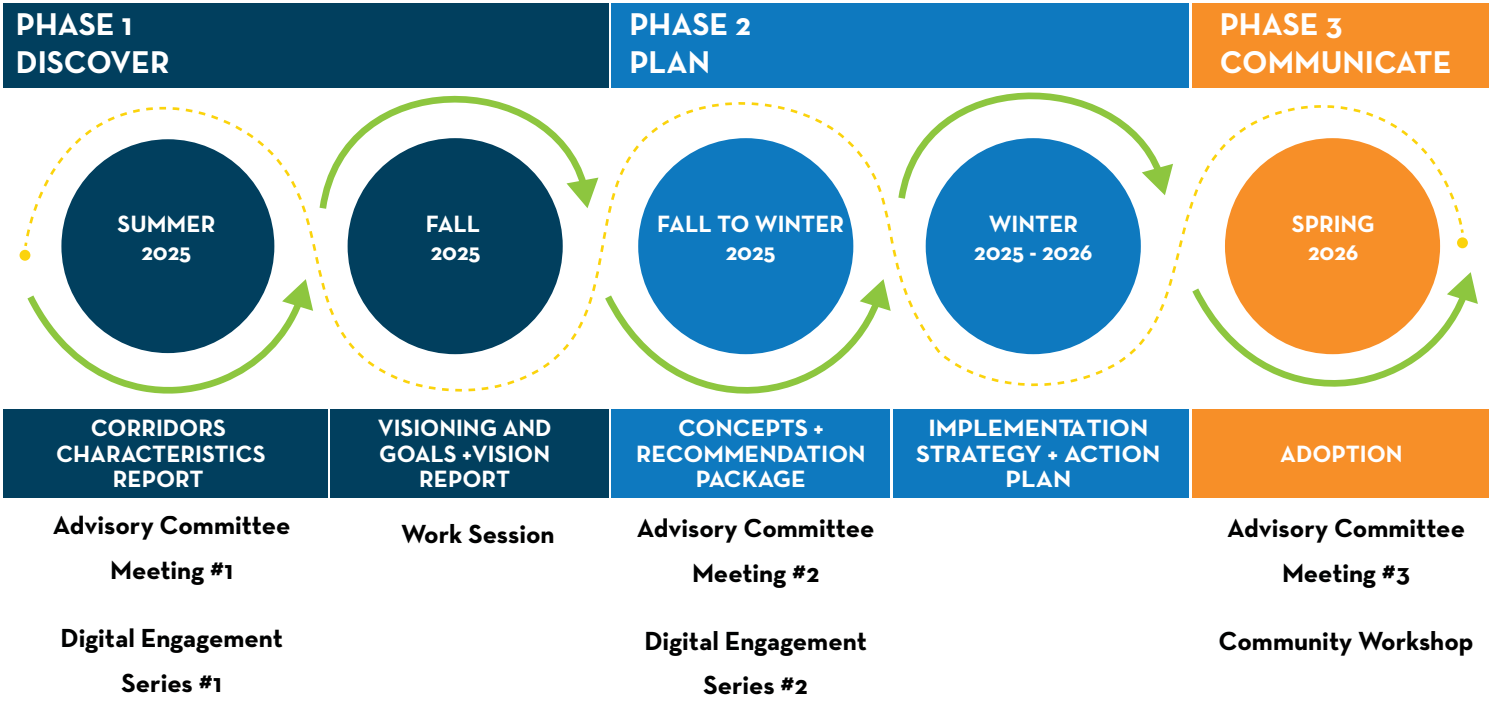
PHASE 2: PLAN

During this phase, the study will transition from ideas to concrete strategies. Deliverables include a Concepts and Recommendations Package and a detailed Implementation Strategy + Action Plan. Engagement continues with additional committee meetings, digital outreach, and a community workshop to ensure proposed strategies reflect local needs and priorities.

PHASE 3: COMMUNICATE

The final phase focuses on the Adoption of the plan. Findings and recommendations will be formally presented, shared with the public, and refined through final feedback. This phase marks the culmination of the study and paves the way for implementation.

Project Timeline and Engagement Activities



HISTORY AND ROLE OF US 17 CORRIDOR

US 17 was designated as part of the U.S. Highway System in 1926 and extends from Punta Gorda through the heart of the Florida peninsula before continuing north through Georgia and beyond, serving as a critical north–south transportation spine in the Southeastern United States.

Within Florida, US 17 connects a series of rural towns and emerging regional centers, providing a direct alternative to interstate travel and linking local economies, communities, and markets in areas not directly served by limited-access highways. Over time, the route has been widened and realigned to accommodate growing travel demand and improve safety, including significant upgrades through Charlotte, DeSoto, and Hardee counties.

In Hardee County, US 17 functions as the primary transportation corridor, threading north–south through the only three incorporated towns—Bowling Green, Zolfo Springs, and Wauchula—and serving as the backbone for local circulation, regional connections, and economic activity. Locals and visitors alike rely on this route for daily commute, freight movement tied to the county’s agricultural and ranching economy, access to services, and connections to markets beyond the county’s boundaries. Hardee County itself was established in 1921 and has long been rooted in agriculture and cattle ranching, with communities growing up around transportation links that allowed goods and people to move efficiently across the region. US 17’s presence reinforced this role by linking Hardee to neighboring counties and major regional destinations, fostering commerce and community continuity.

Today, US 17 remains central to Hardee County’s identity and function, supporting the movement of agricultural products, connecting residents to jobs and services, and anchoring future investment potential. By concentrating on a defined Study Area along US 17, the County can better understand how this corridor functions not only as a regional route, but as a series of local main streets that shape access, development patterns, and daily life in Bowling Green, Zolfo Springs, and Wauchula.

What is our Study Area?

The Study Area encompasses the municipalities of Bowling Green, Zolfo Springs, Wauchula and the unincorporated community of Gardner. The Study Area was created using parcel-level data to capture where growth and economic activity are most likely to occur along the US 17 corridor. Boundaries were refined with input from local stakeholders to ensure the area reflects the communities, businesses, and development priorities that matter most.

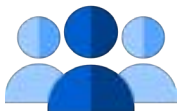
Fast Facts: Study Area (2025)



21 Mile
Segment through
Hardee County



+4,000
Jobs Along
the Corridor



8,600+
Total Residents
in Study Area



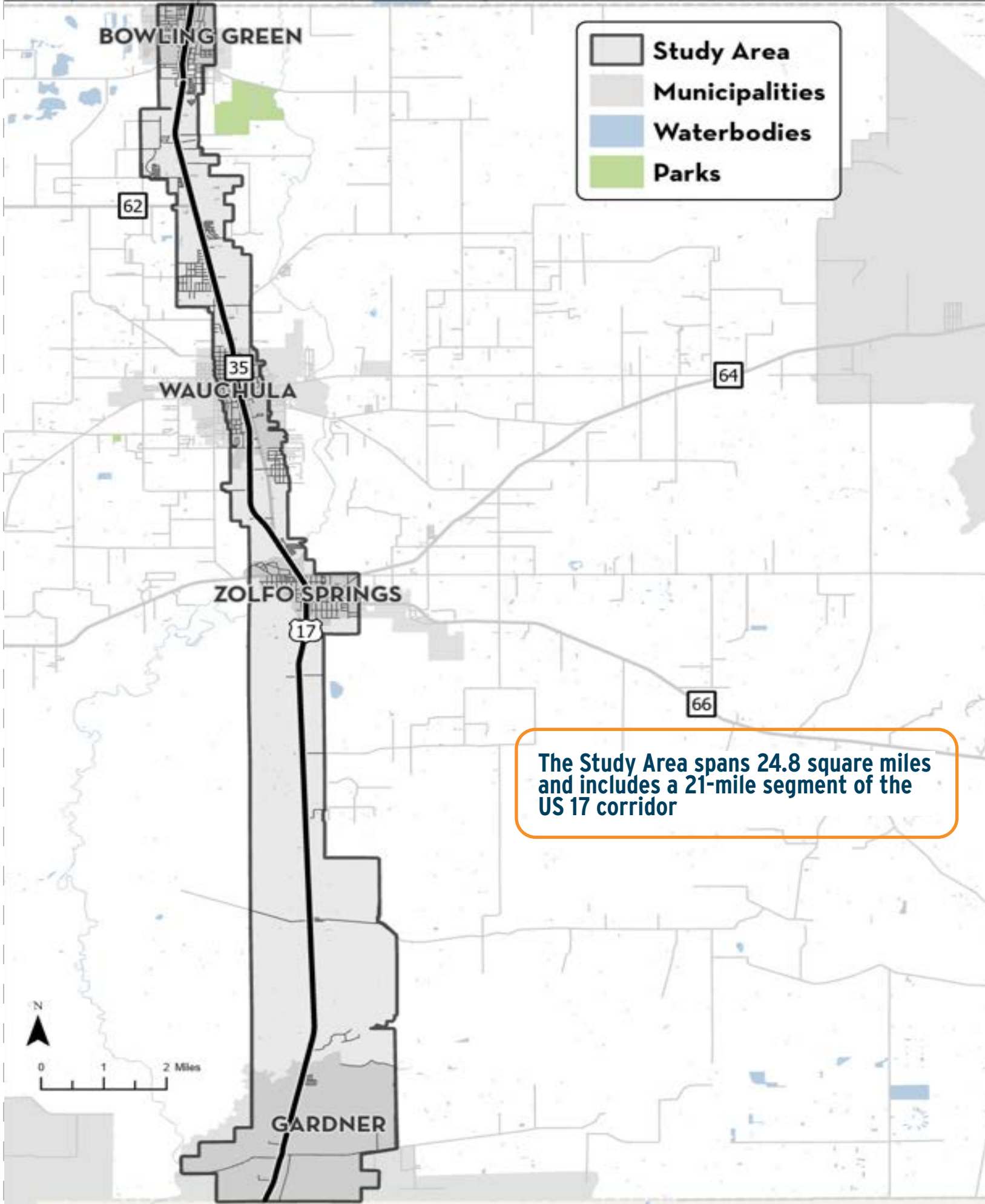
-11.6%
Population
Decline since
2010



+700 to +1,300
Residents
Projected by
2045



54%
Hispanic
Population



The Study Area spans 24.8 square miles and includes a 21-mile segment of the US 17 corridor

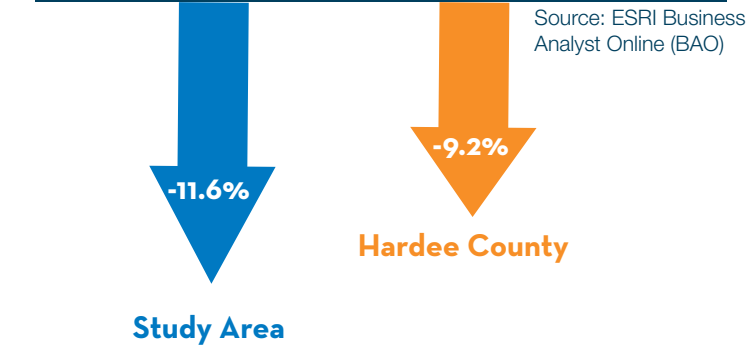
POPULATION

Demographic trends show the makeup of the current Study Area population and serve as an indicator for growth projections. This section analyzes existing demographic conditions within the study area, estimates future ones, and compares the Study Area to Hardee County.

Total Population (2025)



Population Growth/Decline (2010-2025)

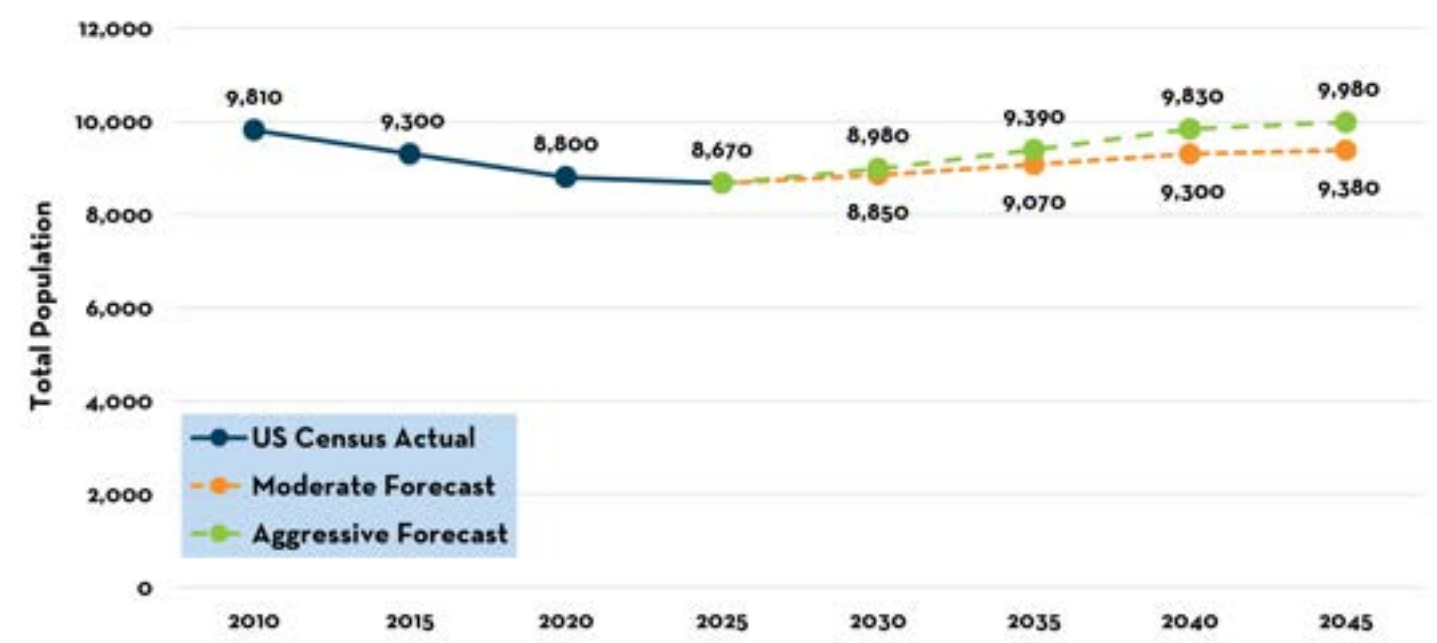


While the Study Area declined by approximately 1,140 residents between 2010 and 2025, Hardee County lost over twice as many residents, approximately 2,550, though the rate of decline was slightly lower due to its larger population base.

PROJECTED POPULATION GROWTH

Two future growth scenarios were considered for the Study Area: a moderate forecast, which assumes steady but slow growth and an aggressive forecast, which assumes stronger growth over time. By 2045, the Study Area’s population is projected to increase to reach between 9,380 and 9,980 people, depending on future development and market conditions.

Population Forecast (2025-2045)

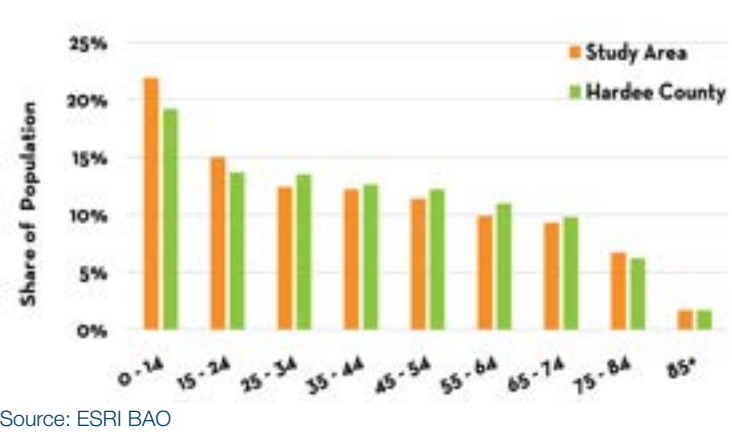


Source: Bureau of Economic and Business Research, ESRI BAO, Florida Office of Economic and Demographic Research, Shimberg Center, Woods & Poole, Kimley-Horn

AGE

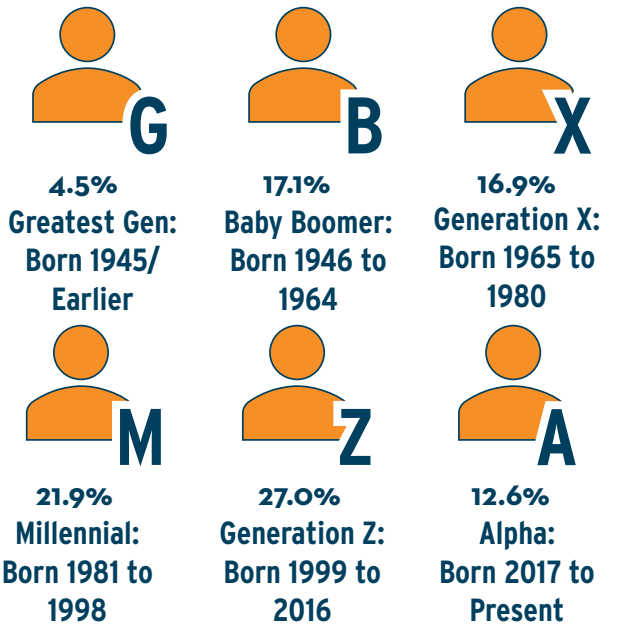
The age composition of the Study Area reflects a gradual aging trend, with a smaller share of children under 15 and a growing share of residents ages 55 and older compared to 2010. As of 2025 estimates, adults ages 18 to 64 make up the majority of the population (55.6%), followed by individuals under 18 (26.7%) and those 65 and older (17.6%). Generation Z accounts for the largest generational group, followed by Millennial, Generation X, and Baby Boomers. These patterns suggest a community with a broad mix of age groups and evolving needs across all stages of life.

Population Trends by Age Group (2010-2025)

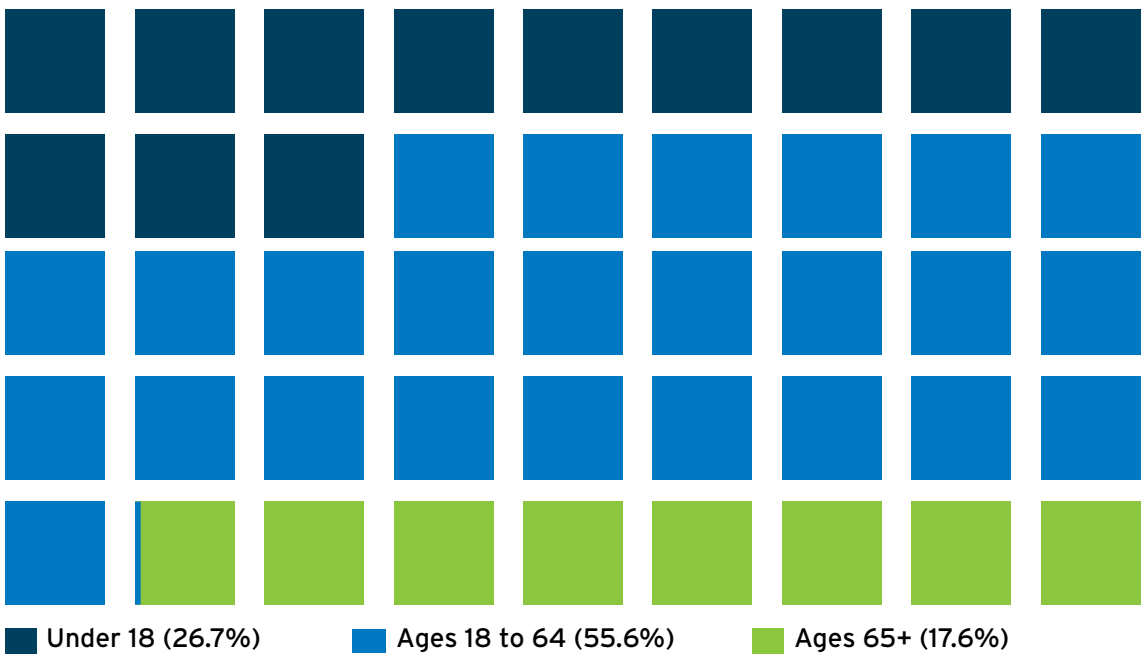


The population in the Study Area is gradually aging, with a smaller share of children and a growing share of adults over 55 compared to 2010.

Population by Generation (2025)



Population by Age (2025)



Source: ESRI BAO

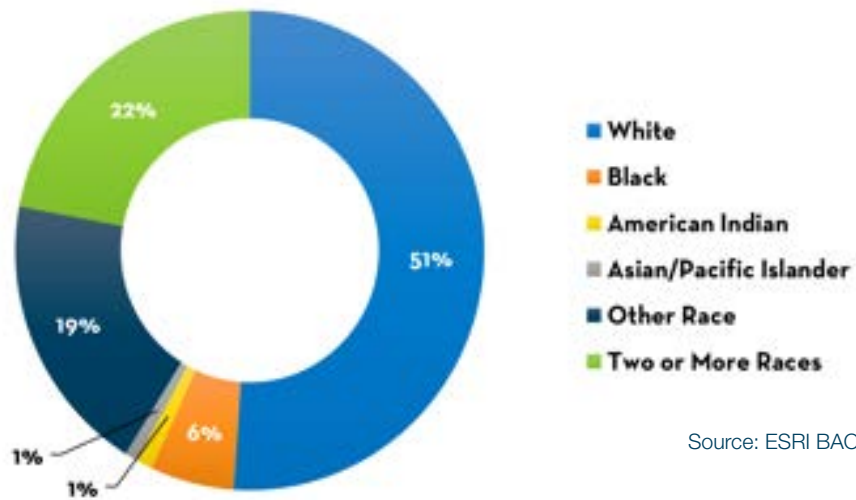
More than half the population in the Study Area is working-age, while over one in four are children and nearly one in five are retirement-age.

RACE

Approximately 51% of residents within the Study Area are White, while a large portion of the population consists of multi-racial residents (22%) or residents falling under the Other Race category (19%). The diversity index is high at 82.4, which indicates a very diverse community for the area.*

*ESRI's diversity index measures the racial and ethnic diversity of an area on a scale ranging from: 0 (no diversity) to 100 (complete diversity). As more race groups are evenly represented in an area's population, the diversity index increases.

Population by Race (2025)



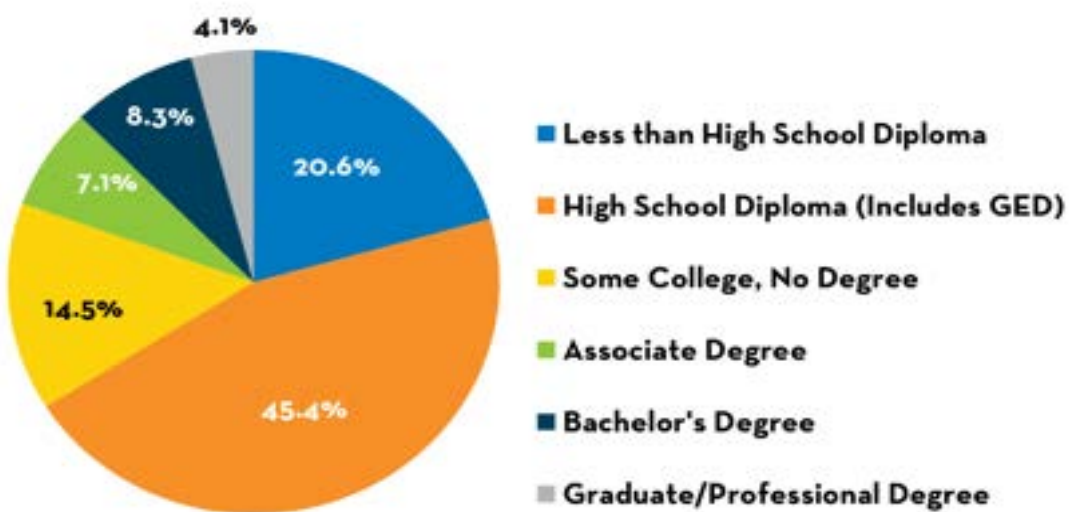
Source: ESRI BAO

54% of the Study Area's population identifies as Hispanic, nearly 11% higher than Hardee County. This is partly influenced by the region's agricultural workforce and H-2A housing, where employers under the H-2a temporary agricultural visa program are required to provide to foreign workers.

EDUCATION

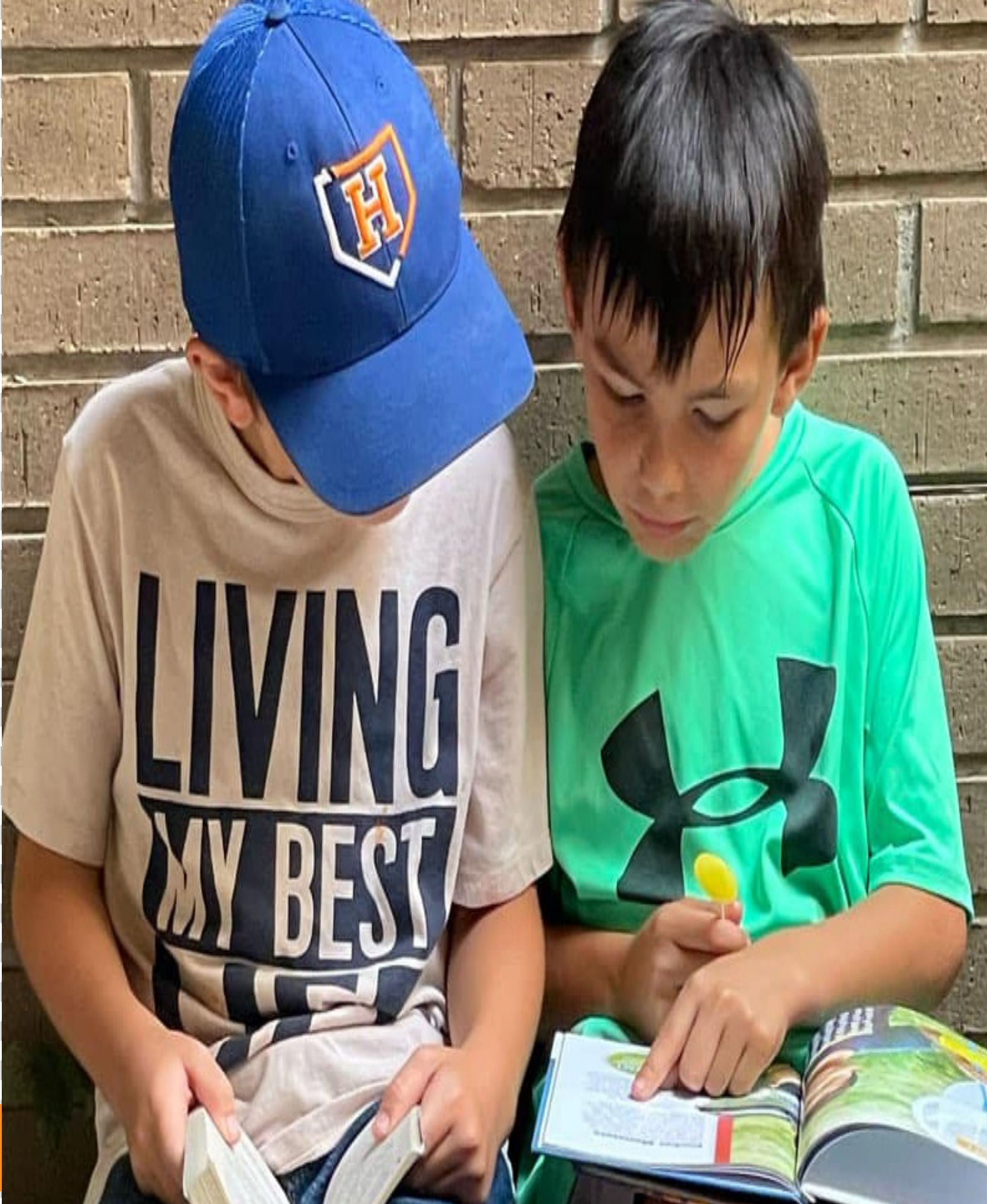
Nearly two-thirds of residents in the Study Area have a high school diploma or less, with 45.4% holding only a high school diploma (including GED) and 20.6% not having completed high school. An additional 14.5% have attended some college but did not earn a degree. Only 19.5% of the population holds an associate degree or higher.

Educational Attainment (2025)



Source: ESRI BAO

Nearly half of residents in the Study Area have a high school diploma as their highest level of education, while less than 15% hold a bachelor's or graduate degree.



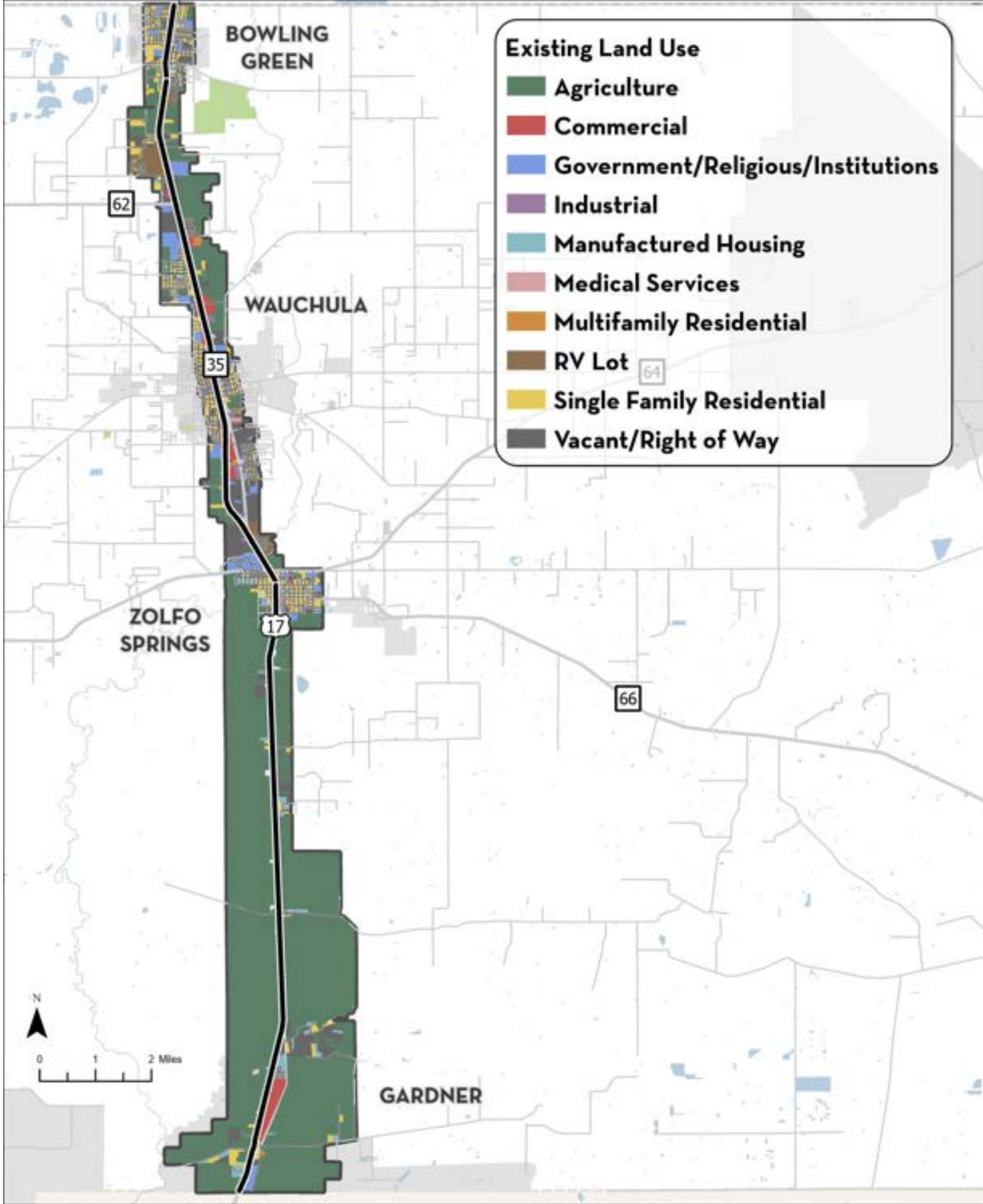
LAND USE

EXISTING LAND USE CLASSIFICATIONS

Existing land use paints a picture of the intended purposes of different areas in the Study Area. Understanding how land is currently being used gives an opportunity to evaluate how these uses support Hardee County's goals and identify gaps and trends that can be addressed through a revised land use revision and supportive policies.



Source: Hardee County; Kimley-Horn



FOUNDATIONAL PLANS



CFRPC Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) 2023

The CFRPC Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy, provides a regional framework for promoting economic resilience and long-term prosperity. The plan emphasizes diversifying the regional economy, strengthening workforce capacity, and improving infrastructure to support sustainable growth. Key regional needs identified in the plan include:

- Economic diversification for greater stability
- Development of a skilled workforce and higher average wages
- Long-term infrastructure planning and investment
- Enhanced support for rural communities with limited resources

Hardee County 2030 Comprehensive Plan

The Hardee County 2030 Comprehensive Plan establishes a policy framework to guide future growth and land use decisions while enhancing quality of life, protecting natural resources, and promoting fiscally responsible development. Key priorities from the plan include:

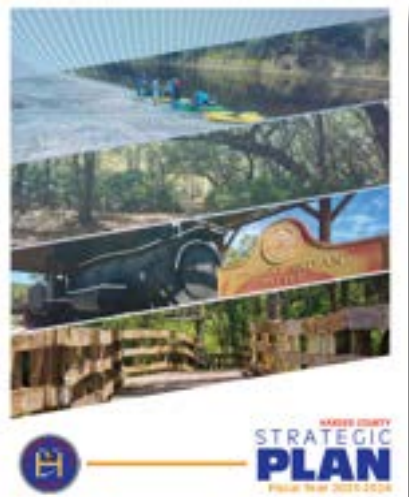
- Promoting mixed-use development and limiting urban sprawl
- Coordinating infrastructure investment with future service demands
- Supporting business retention and economic expansion
- Increasing housing affordability
- Strengthening collaboration with regional partners and adjacent jurisdictions



Hardee County Strategic Plan (2023)

The Hardee County Strategic Plan provides a framework to guide growth and investment across the County. Grounded in community priorities, the plan aligns policies, budgeting, and programs to support the future and enhance quality of life. Primary goals include:

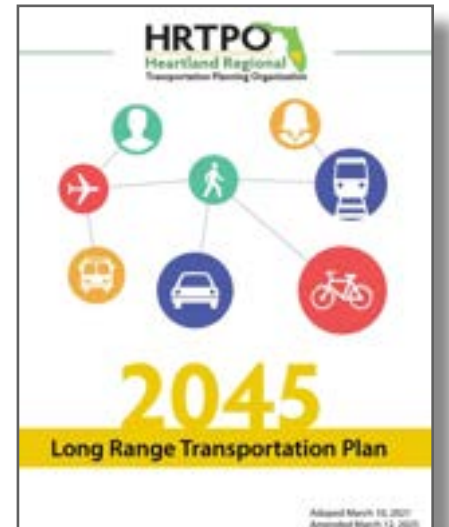
- Expanding housing options and infrastructure to meet diverse community needs
- Improving access to healthcare and public safety services
- Coordinating land use, transportation, and utility planning to support growth
- Strengthening workforce development and diversifying the local economy
- Preserving natural resources while expanding parks, open space, and recreational opportunities



HRTPO Long Range Transportation Plan 2045

The HRTPO 2045 Long Range Transportation Plan presents a strategic vision for advancing the Heartland region's transportation network to support future growth, enhance safety, and protect resources. The plan integrates transportation and land use planning to ensure mobility for residents and freight while emphasizing long-term resilience. Key strategies include:

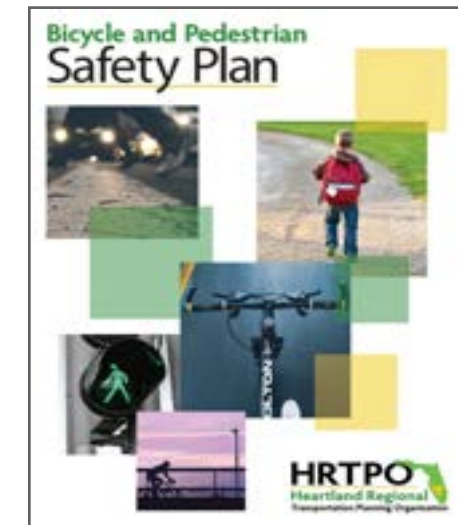
- Advancing Vision Zero and safety-focused design
- Prioritizing mobility for both people and freight
- Coordinating land use and transportation decisions
- Protecting environmental assets and natural resources
- Anticipating and mitigating future risks to transportation infrastructure



HRTPO Bicycle and Pedestrian Safety Plan 2020

The HRTPO Bicycle and Pedestrian Safety Plan provides a framework for reducing crashes and improving safety for non-motorized users across the region. The plan supports Florida's Vision Zero goal of eliminating non-motorized fatalities and serious injuries, using crash data and equity indicators to prioritize improvements. Key strategies include:

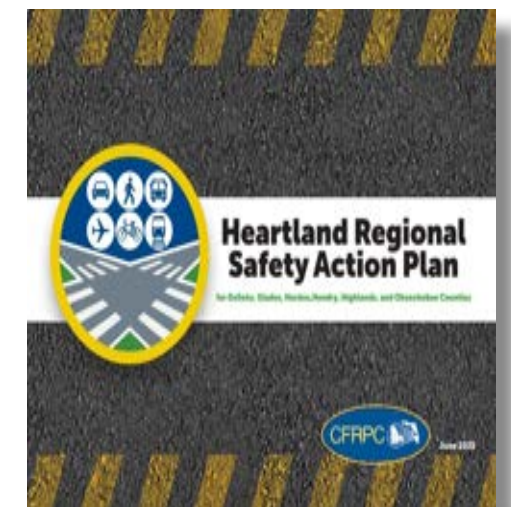
- Identifying high-crash corridors and intersections for targeted investment
- Closing gaps in the sidewalk and bicycle network to improve connectivity
- Prioritizing access to schools, activity centers, and under-served areas
- Guiding local agencies in seeking funding and coordinating project implementation



Heartland Regional Safety Action Plan 2025

The Heartland Regional Safety Action Plan establishes a region-wide framework to reduce and ultimately eliminate traffic-related fatalities and serious injuries. The plan is aligned with the State of Florida's Vision Zero goal and leverages federal, state, and local resources to implement data-driven safety improvements. Key focus areas include:

- Reducing impaired, distracted, and aggressive driving
- Addressing speed management and increasing seatbelt use
- Targeting high-crash locations and vulnerable road users
- Enhancing pedestrian and bicycle safety through infrastructure and education
- Coordinating safety countermeasures with partners



FOUNDATIONAL PLANS



Zolfo Springs Downtown Vision Plan

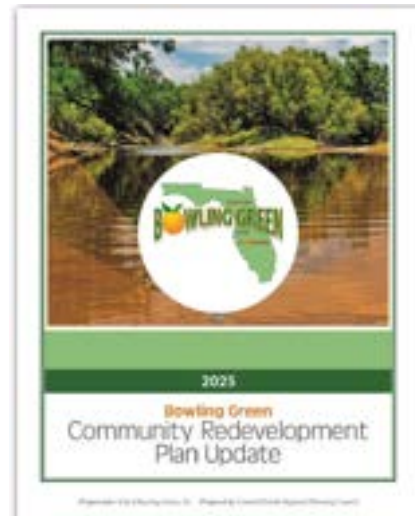
The Zolfo Springs Downtown Vision Plan was developed in response to the realignment of US 17, which redirected traffic away from the historic downtown. The plan outlines strategies to revitalize the area by enhancing local identity, walkability, and recreational amenities. Key goals include:

- Re-establishing a vibrant and connected downtown core
- Promoting walkable, community-oriented development
- Encouraging reinvestment along the realigned US 17 corridor
- Expanding recreational opportunities and mixed-use activity in the downtown area

Bowling Green CRA Plan Update (2025)

The Bowling Green Community Redevelopment Plan is grounded in a Finding of Necessity study and shaped by community input, the plan leverages tools such as tax increment financing and targeted programs to support reinvestment and long-term growth. Primary goals include:

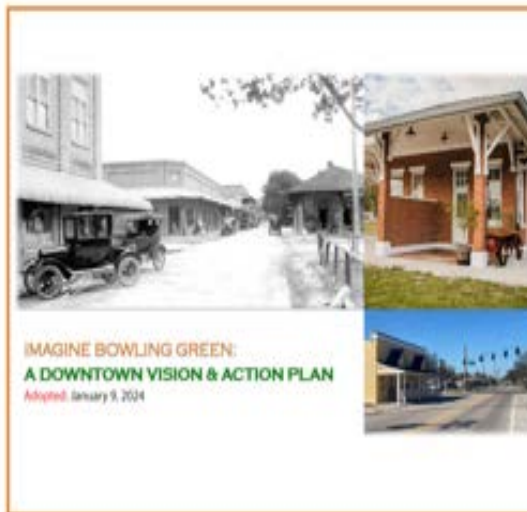
- Revitalizing underutilized and blighted properties through infill development, rehabilitation, and incentives for private investment
- Enhancing infrastructure and public safety facilities
- Supporting new housing opportunities and improving existing residential conditions
- Preserving historic assets and enhancing the city's identity through beautification, events, and marketing initiatives



Bowling Green Downtown Vision & Action Plan

The Bowling Green Downtown Vision and Action Plan outlines a community-driven strategy to revitalize the City's historic core. The plan prioritizes economic development, walkability, and placemaking to support a vibrant and resilient downtown. Key objectives include:

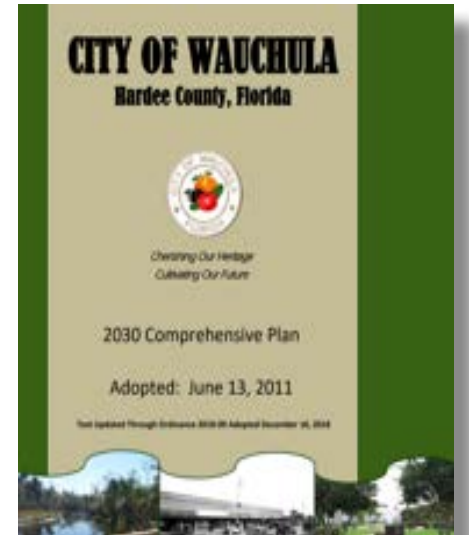
- Creating a walkable, livable environment that supports business growth
- Attracting development that increases foot traffic and enhances services
- Improving the visual character and sense of place in the downtown area



City of Wauchula 2030 Comprehensive Plan

The Wauchula 2030 Comprehensive Plan presents a vision for well-managed growth while preserving the City's resources and enhancing livability. The plan provides policy guidance to support infrastructure development, orderly land use, and regional coordination. Key goals include:

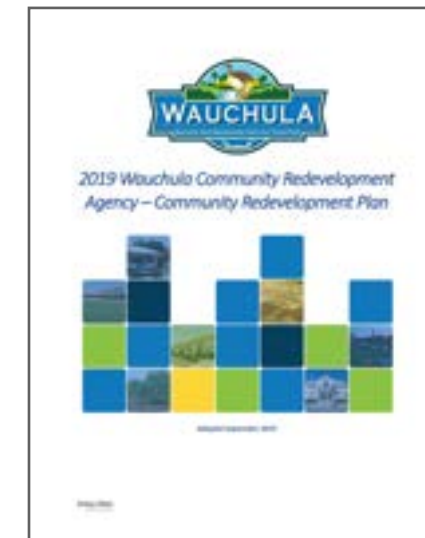
- Protecting natural resources and promoting environmental stewardship
- Encouraging compact, efficient development patterns
- Enhancing community well-being and quality of life
- Reducing greenhouse gas emissions through land use and transportation planning
- Coordinating with state and regional partners to support cohesive growth



Wauchula CRA Master Plan (2019)

The Wauchula CRA Master Plan builds upon the 2010 plan to address updated conditions and identify priorities for economic revitalization and community enhancement. The plan emphasizes targeted redevelopment, strategic investment, and policies to support a vibrant and inclusive district. Key strategies include:

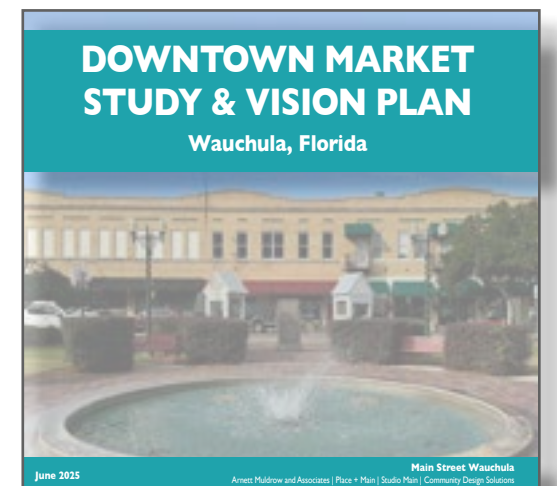
- Promoting adaptive reuse, infill housing, and historic preservation
- Offering grants and incentives to support business growth and job creation
- Enhancing walkability, accessibility, and a sense of place through public realm improvements



Downtown Wauchula Market Study (2025)

The Downtown Wauchula Market Study & Vision Plan outlines strategies to unlock the economic and placemaking potential of Downtown Wauchula. Through data analysis and community input, the plan identifies catalytic sites, market-supported development opportunities, and key public realm improvements. Primary goals include:

- Encouraging infill and redevelopment of underutilized sites
- Supporting a stronger mix of retail, dining, and housing
- Enhancing streetscape design and walkability
- Leveraging community identity to attract investment and increase vibrancy





CHAPTER 2

ENGAGEMENT

The engagement process in Hardee County provided opportunities for community members, stakeholders, and local leadership to inform the planning process. The Economic Development Initiative integrates this input with technical analysis to better understand the needs, priorities, and context of the US 17 Corridor. Engagement activities were conducted across multiple phases of the project—Discover, Plan, and Communicate—and included coordination with advisory groups, stakeholders, and the public. Feedback gathered through these efforts helped inform key themes, validate findings, and guide the development of strategies and recommendations.

PHASE 1 - DISCOVER

ENGAGEMENT FOCUS

Inform about the process of the plan
Educate about the purpose of the plan
Gather feedback to identify vision, needs, and goals

ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

Advisory Committee Meeting
Stakeholder Meetings (9)
Town and City Commission/IDA Board Presentation
Digital Engagement

STAKEHOLDER TOPICS

Public Safety
Utilities
Education
Business Owners
Agriculture
Logistics and Transportation
Healthcare

PHASE 2 - PLAN

ENGAGEMENT FOCUS

Confirm what was learned through the initial findings
Collect input on developed vision and goals to inform strategies and actions

ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

Advisory Committee Meeting
Community Group Presentations
Town and City Commission
Digital Engagement

COMMUNITY GROUPS

Lions Club
Kiwanis Club
Rotary Club

PHASE 3 - COMMUNICATE

ENGAGEMENT FOCUS

Confirm input on priorities for final reporting
Collect input on developed strategies and action plan
Present the draft plan and key elements

ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

Advisory Committee Meeting
Community Workshop
Elected and Appointed Officials Presentations

ELECTED AND APPOINTED OFFICIALS

Hardee County Commissioners
Industrial Development Authority Board
Wauchula City Commissioners
Bowling Green City Commissioners
Zolfo Springs Town Commissioners

ENGAGEMENT SPOTLIGHT

The Engagement Spotlight throughout the chapter features key outcomes from the digital engagement, advisory committee meetings, and community workshop during the planning process.

DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

Digital engagement activities provided an opportunity for participants to share input on the US 17 corridor through both an online survey and an interactive mapping exercise. The survey asked participants to reflect on what they value about the corridor, what they would like to see improved, and how the corridor has changed over time.

This input was complemented by a mapping activity, where participants identified specific locations they consider strong places, weak places, and areas of opportunity by placing markers directly on a map. These activities provided both qualitative feedback and location-based insight, helping to better understand community perspectives across the corridor.

What would you change about the US-17 Corridor?



What do you love about the US-17 Corridor?

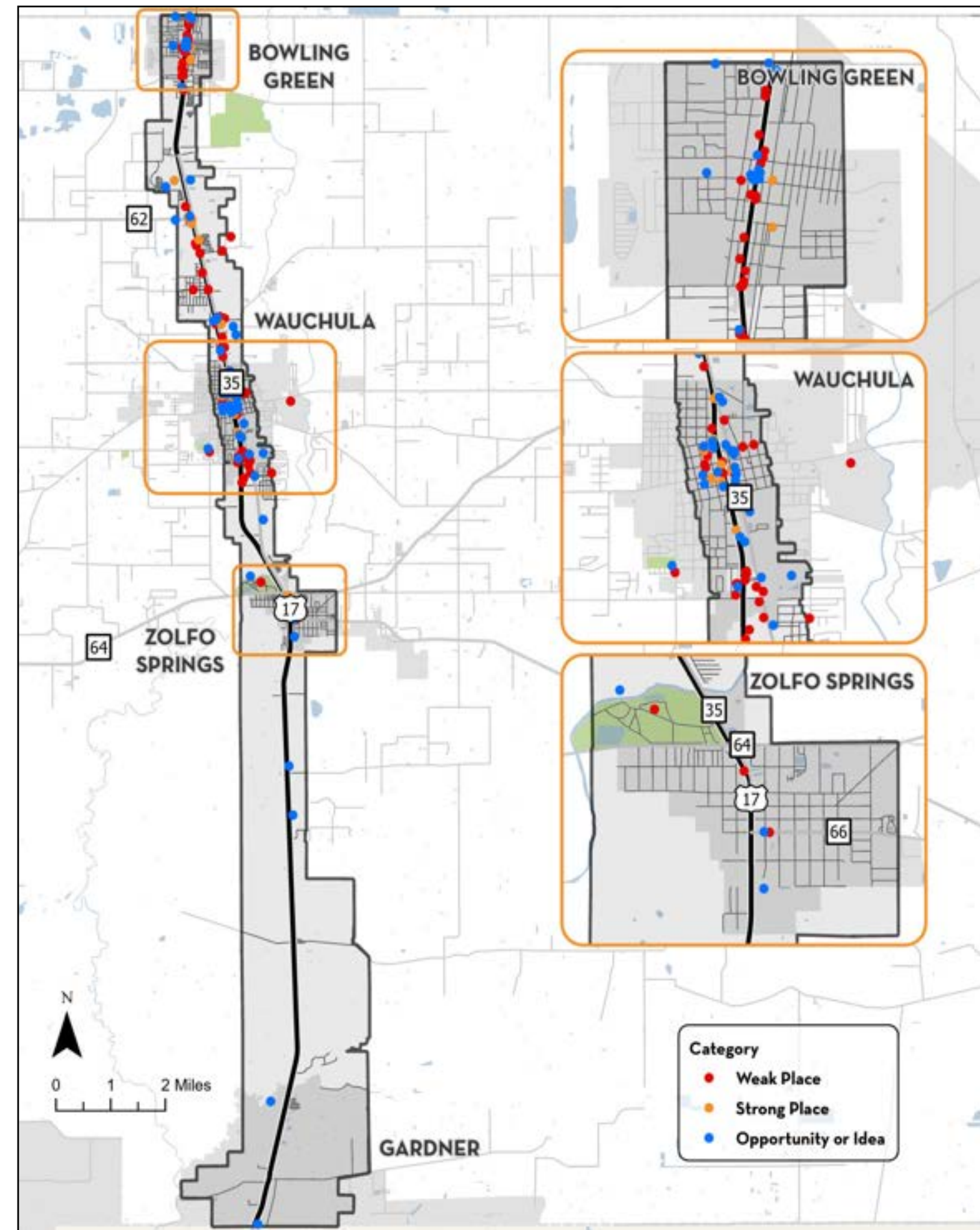
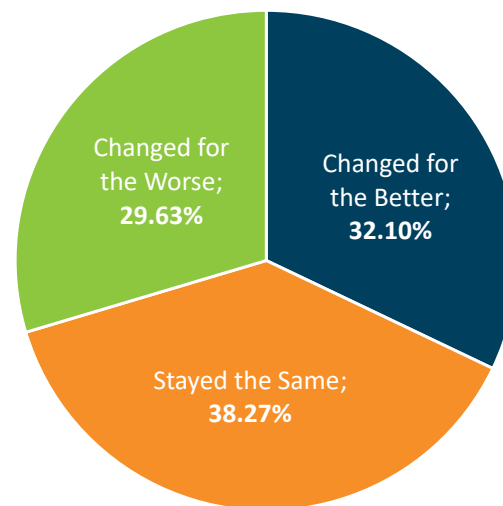


1,260+
Page Visits



260+
Contributions

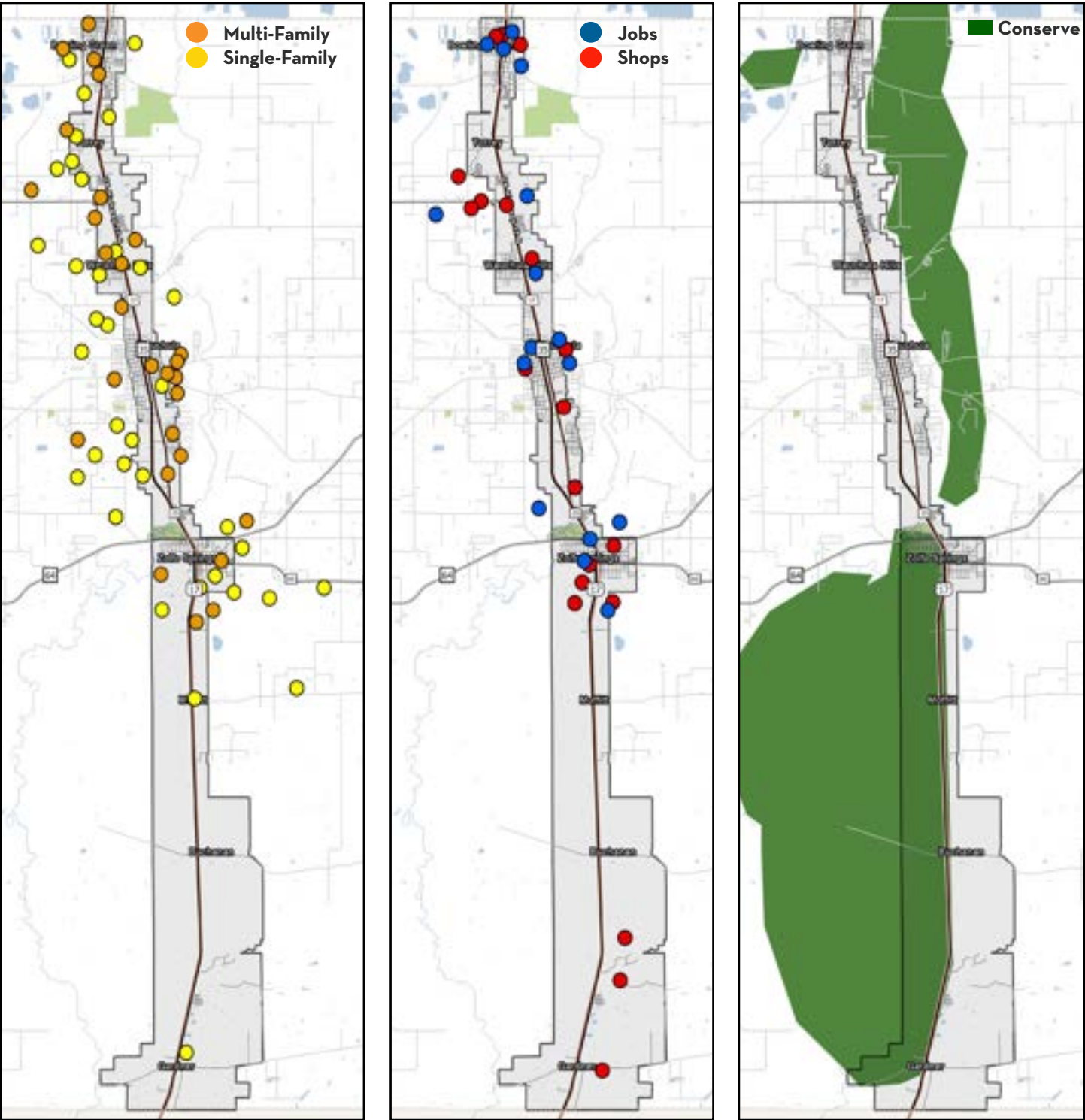
How has the corridor changed?



ENGAGEMENT SPOTLIGHT

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The Advisory Committee participated in an interactive mapping exercise to explore potential growth patterns along the corridor. Participants considered how different development scenarios could shape future land use. Through this exercise, committee members identified areas appropriate for new development, as well as locations where preservation of natural and open space should be prioritized. The results provide insight into preferred development patterns and help inform how growth can be balanced with community character and environmental considerations.



ENGAGEMENT SPOTLIGHT

COMMUNITY WORKSHOP

A community workshop was held at South Florida State College's Hardee Campus, providing an opportunity for residents and stakeholders to review and respond to draft implementation strategies for the US 17 corridor. Participants engaged directly with proposed recommendations, offering feedback on priorities, areas of focus, and how strategies could be refined to better reflect local needs and conditions. This hands-on setting allowed for meaningful discussion and helped validate key directions while identifying opportunities for adjustment prior to finalizing the plan.





CHAPTER 3 VISION AND GOALS

GUIDING THE CORRIDOR'S FUTURE

The US-17 Economic Development Initiative's vision and goals are grounded in insights gathered through community and stakeholder engagement. They reflect the community's priorities for the future of the corridor and build upon strengths and opportunities identified by those who live, work, and invest along US 17. The vision and goals establish guiding principles for decision-making and provide a roadmap for future growth and development within the corridor.

An Advisory Committee, comprised of corridor residents, business owners, organizational leaders, and other stakeholders, played an integral role in shaping this effort. The committee served as a link between the community and the project team, providing feedback throughout the planning process. Combined with community workshops and digital engagement, this input ensured the plan reflects the values and priorities of those who live, work, and play along the US 17 corridor.

VISION STATEMENT

The vision statement defines a shared direction for the US 17 corridor, capturing the community's priorities and aspirations. It serves as the foundation for all subsequent goals, strategies, and recommendations, guiding growth in a way that reinforces the corridor's character and supports long-term resilience.



Vision Statement

“The US 17 Corridor will be a vibrant corridor that reflects Hardee County's small-town charm, fosters safe and reliable travel, and supports business growth, diverse housing, workforce opportunities, and tourism.”

GOALS

The goals for the US 17 Economic Development Initiative were developed through a combination of existing conditions analysis and targeted stakeholder input. The findings from the Corridor Characteristics Report established a data-driven understanding of current demographic, economic, and land use conditions, which served as the foundation for identifying key opportunities and challenges along the corridor. Building on this analysis, feedback was gathered from the Advisory Committee and community stakeholders. This input helped to validate emerging themes, refine priorities, and ensure the goals reflect both the realities of the corridor today and the community's aspirations for its future.

Rather than representing isolated ideas, the goals are intentionally interconnected and designed to respond to the corridor's evolving needs. They address key focus areas, each of which plays a role in shaping a more resilient and competitive corridor. Five goals were established for a clear and cohesive framework to guide decision-making, inform future investments, and align public and private efforts. The recommendations outlined in this initiative are directly tied to these goals, ensuring a consistent and strategic approach to implementation over time.

To provide a clear and actionable framework, each goal is organized into its own chapter within this report. Each chapter expands on the goal by outlining key objectives and corresponding recommendations that respond to the corridor’s identified needs and opportunities. This structure allows the report to move from high-level direction to detailed strategies, ensuring alignment between the overall vision and the actions needed to achieve it.



Reinforce Community Identity
Encourage coordinated land-use decisions that strengthen downtowns and commercial centers, enhance visual quality along the corridor, and reflect Hardee County’s agricultural and small-town heritage.

Chapter 4



Advance Economic Growth and Workforce
Promote a strong local economy by supporting business retention and recruitment, encouraging redevelopment of underutilized sites, and aligning workforce skills with emerging employment opportunities.

Chapter 5



Improve Mobility and Safety
Transform US 17 into a safer, more efficient corridor that supports regional travel and the movement of freight, while also strengthening local access.

Chapter 6



Expand Housing and Stabilize Neighborhoods
Encourage a diversity of housing options that meet the needs of families, seniors, and workers while aligning new development with the corridor’s highest and best uses.

Chapter 7



Invest in Resilient Infrastructure and Environment
Modernize utilities, stormwater systems, and public facilities to support growth and improve resilience, ensuring long-term sustainability for the corridor and its communities.

Chapter 8

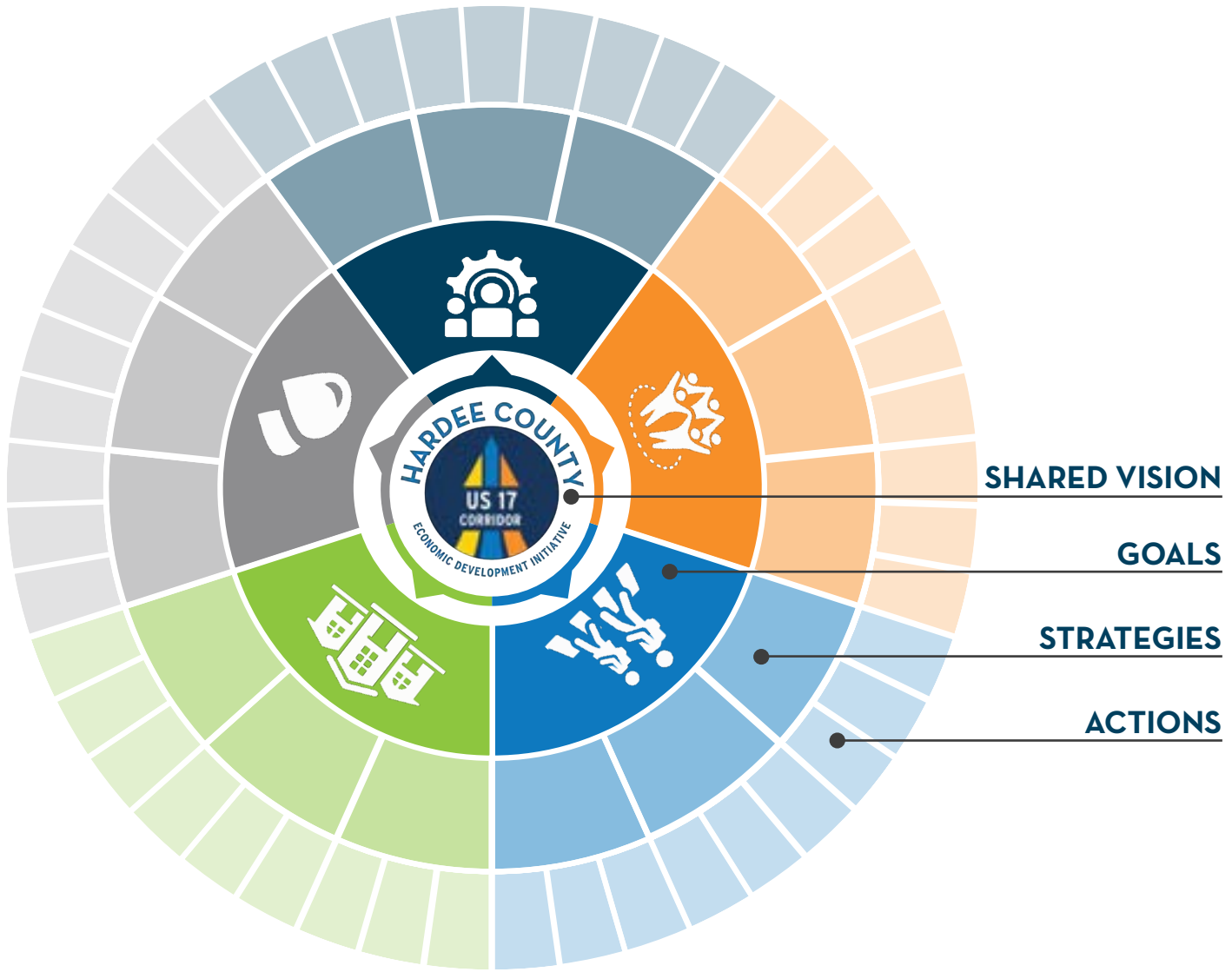
GOALS TO ACTION PLAN

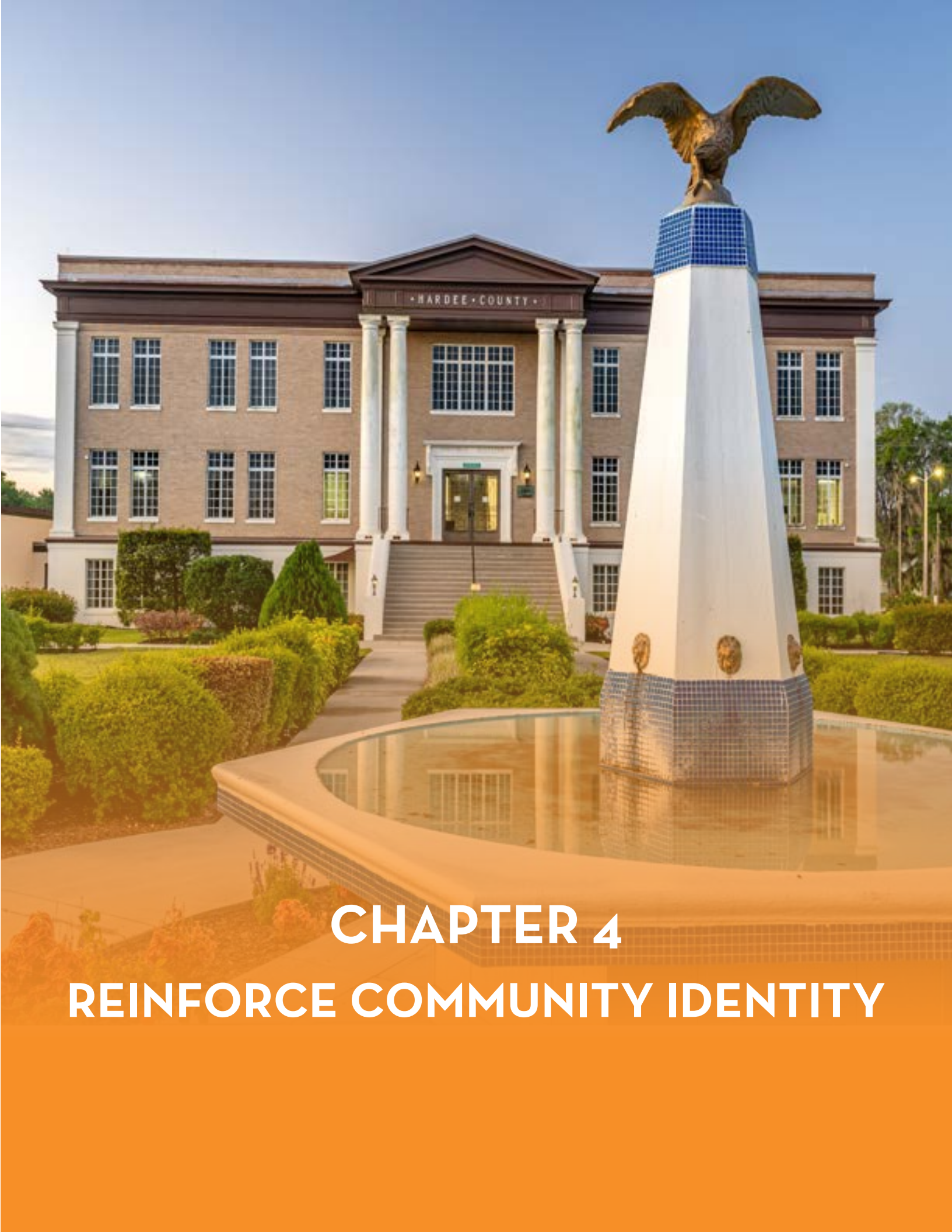
The five goals established for the plan serve as the organizational framework for the implementation strategies and action plans. Building on this vision, five goals were identified to define the primary focus areas needed to support a more connected, resilient, and economically competitive corridor. Each goal is advanced through a set of implementation strategies that translate high-level priorities into more targeted approaches. These strategies respond to the corridor’s existing conditions and stakeholder input, providing a structured framework for addressing key opportunities and challenges.

To support implementation, the plan is further supported by an action plan that outlines specific steps, responsibilities, and timing considerations. This approach ensures that the plan moves beyond vision and strategy to provide a clear and actionable path forward.



The highest priority actions are denoted with this target icon, chosen because they were the actions cited as priorities by the Advisory Committee and the public during the US 17 engagement process.





CHAPTER 4

REINFORCE COMMUNITY IDENTITY

WHY IDENTITY MATTERS

US 17 serves as a primary corridor in the Study Area, supporting the movement of goods and people while shaping first impressions, daily travel patterns, and future development. While the corridor plays a major role in regional mobility and economic activity, it also functions as a shared civic space, one that reflects the identity, values, and character of the communities it passes through. How US 17 looks, feels, and functions influences how residents experience their community and how visitors perceive it.

As growth and reinvestment continue along the corridor, there is an opportunity to be more intentional about how change occurs. Reinforcing community identity is not about imposing a single look or theme along US 17, it is about recognizing the distinct places that already exist, strengthening what makes them unique, and ensuring future development contributes positively to the corridor's overall character.

WHAT "COMMUNITY IDENTITY" MEANS IN THIS STUDY

In the context of the US 17 Economic Development Initiative, community identity refers to the physical, cultural, and visual elements that help people understand where they are and what makes each place along the corridor distinct. This includes recognizable activity centers, local businesses and institutions, natural features, development patterns, and the transitions between different areas. Along US 17, this identity is further shaped by the presence of Bowling Green, Wauchula, and Zolfo Springs, each contributing its own character, history, and sense of place. Recognizing and celebrating these differences is key to reinforcing the corridor as a collection of unique destinations rather than a single, uniform environment.

Community identity also shows up in more subtle ways, through the scale of buildings, the presence or absence of gathering spaces, the quality of the public realm, and how welcoming or legible the corridor feels to people traveling through it. When these elements are disconnected or inconsistent, the corridor can feel fragmented and placeless. When they are coordinated, US 17 can function as a series of identifiable places rather than a continuous strip of development.



WHY IDENTITY MATTERS FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

A clear and cohesive corridor identity supports economic development by creating places that are easier to navigate, more attractive for investment, and more memorable to residents and visitors alike. Communities with a strong sense of place are better positioned to attract businesses, support local entrepreneurship, and encourage reinvestment that aligns with community values.

Throughout the planning process, stakeholders emphasized the importance of protecting local character while accommodating future growth. Participants expressed pride in existing community assets and concern that new development could dilute or overlook what makes their communities unique. These perspectives help establish the need for an approach that balances flexibility with intentionality, guiding development in a way that reinforces, rather than erases, community identity.

WHAT WE LEARNED: COMMUNITY ASSETS

PUBLIC AND COMMUNITY FACILITIES

Public and community-serving facilities play a role in shaping identity, stability, and daily life along the US 17 corridor. Civic buildings, historic and cultural sites, public safety services, and healthcare facilities serve as visible anchors that reinforce a sense of place and signal community investment. These facilities influence how residents interact with the corridor, how comfortable people feel accessing services, and how the corridor is perceived by visitors and potential investors.

Across the Study Area, these assets are unevenly distributed and expressed. While Bowling Green, Wauchula, and Zolfo Springs each host important civic and community facilities, their visibility, accessibility, and integration into surrounding development vary. In some locations, public facilities help establish recognizable centers and activity nodes; in others, they function primarily as standalone destinations with limited connection to the corridor or adjacent neighborhoods.



Historic and Cultural Sites

Religious institutions, cemeteries, and historic structures are present throughout the corridor and were frequently cited as meaningful landmarks. These sites provide continuity over time and help distinguish communities from one another along US 17.

Despite their importance, many historic and cultural assets are understated within the corridor environment. Limited signage, buffering by auto-oriented development, and minimal public realm treatments make these places easy to overlook, reducing their potential role in reinforcing identity and place recognition.



Civic and Government Facilities

Civic and government facilities serve as everyday points of interaction between residents and local government. These facilities help anchor community life, particularly in Wauchula, where a higher concentration of government buildings and historic civic functions reinforces its role as the County seat.

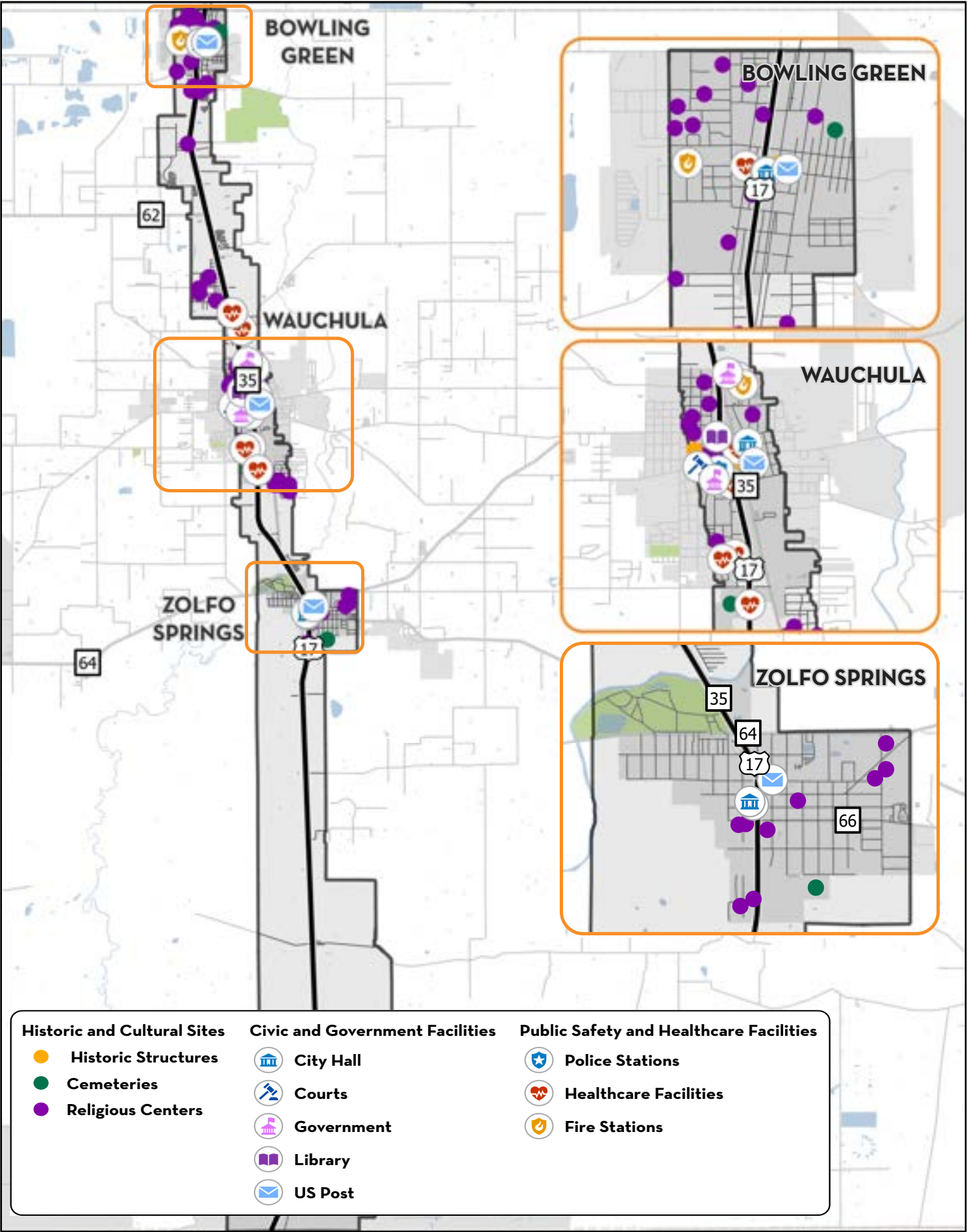
Where civic facilities are clustered and well connected, they contribute to a stronger sense of place and activity. In areas where they are more dispersed or visually disconnected from surrounding uses, their role as community anchors is less apparent, limiting their influence on corridor identity.



Public Safety and Healthcare Facilities

Law enforcement, fire and emergency services, and healthcare providers support both incorporated and unincorporated areas through a mix of municipal and County-operated facilities.

These facilities are primarily concentrated in Wauchula, serving as the hub for healthcare and County-level public safety functions. While this centralized pattern supports efficient service delivery, it also means that visibility and proximity to services vary across the Study Area. Coordinated planning and investment can help ensure that public safety and healthcare facilities continue to support both corridor functionality and community identity.



SCHOOLS

Public schools located near the corridor serve as focal points for generating consistent movement during morning, afternoon, and evening hours. In Wauchula and Zolfo Springs, schools are closely tied to surrounding residential areas and contribute to local identity and familiarity. The presence of schools reinforces perceptions of neighborhood stability and plays a role in shaping housing demand along portions of the corridor. However, proximity to US 17 does not always equate to strong connectivity. In several locations, schools are set back from the corridor or separated by roadway design, limiting their visibility and the extent to which they contribute to corridor character.

Capacity and Planning Context

Hardee County schools are currently operating below overall capacity, with district-wide utilization averaging approximately 70%. Wauchula Elementary and North Wauchula Elementary have capacity to accommodate additional students, and no new classroom construction is planned through 2029 according to the 2024–2025 Work Plan. The consolidation of Bowling Green Elementary with Hilltop Elementary is expected to further reduce excess capacity and optimize facility utilization across the district. These conditions suggest that future growth along the US 17 corridor is unlikely to be constrained by school capacity in the near term. Instead, access, safety, and integration with surrounding land uses are more likely to influence how schools function as community anchors over time.

Key Observations

- Schools along the corridor are closely associated with neighborhood identity and residential stability.
- Capacity exists to support additional growth without the need for new school facilities in the near term.
- Visibility, access, and surrounding land use patterns influence whether schools reinforce corridor identity or function as isolated sites.
- Planned consolidation presents opportunities to rethink how remaining school sites connect to nearby neighborhoods and the corridor.

School Enrollment Trends (2023-2029)

In Hardee County:


Elementary School

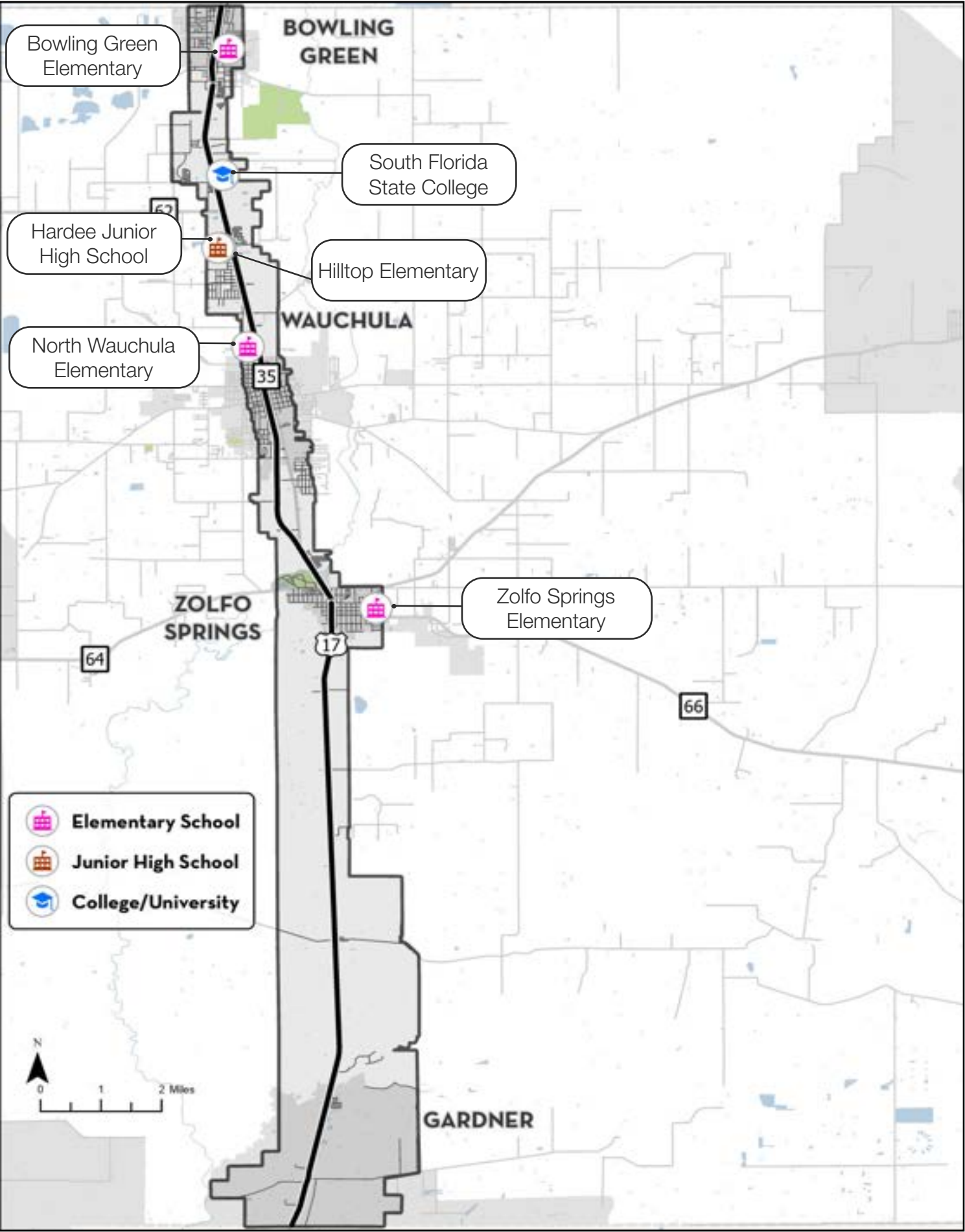

Junior High School


Senior High School

2023-2024 School Year Actual Enrollment	1,936	1,350	1,238
2028-2029 School Year Projected Enrollment	1,352	1,623	1,187
	-584	+273	-51

Source: Hardee County School District

Hardee County School District projections indicate stable to declining enrollment overall, with excess capacity remaining at the elementary and secondary levels. These trends support a focus on optimizing existing facilities and improving access rather than expanding school infrastructure.



PARKS AND RECREATION SPACES

Parks, recreation spaces, and community centers contribute to quality of life and social connection along the US 17 corridor. These spaces provide opportunities for recreation, informal gathering, community events, and access to outdoor amenities, reinforcing community identity beyond residential and commercial development. Their presence influences how neighborhoods function, how residents spend time locally, and how welcoming the corridor feels to people of all ages. Across the Study Area, these assets range from neighborhood parks and playgrounds to community centers and historic civic spaces.

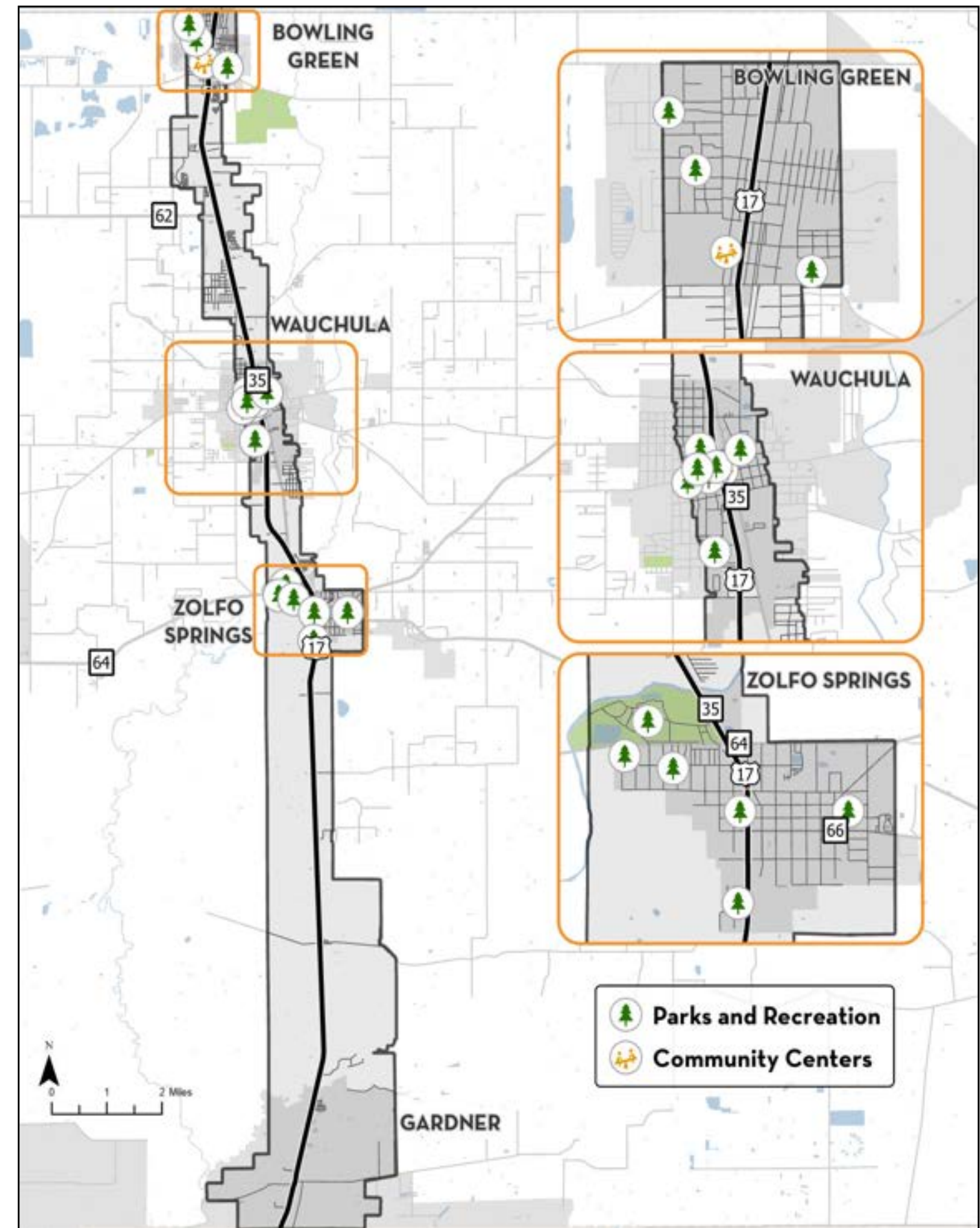
Role in Community Identity and Daily Life

Parks and community centers serve as shared spaces that bring residents together and support a sense of belonging. In Wauchula, the concentration of parks, historic civic spaces, and community facilities reflects its role as a population and activity hub. Bowling Green and Zolfo Springs also maintain a strong presence of neighborhood-scale parks that support local recreation and everyday use. These spaces play an important role in shaping how residents experience their community, particularly for families, older adults, and those without access to private recreational amenities. Community centers and civic gathering spaces further support social interaction, local programming, and neighborhood cohesion.

The Study Area includes a network of parks and recreation spaces that primarily serve neighborhood and community-scale needs. These facilities are generally well distributed within municipal boundaries and reflect the character of surrounding neighborhoods. Access to natural features and nearby destinations, including Paynes Creek State Historic Park, enhances recreational opportunities and complements local parks and open spaces. While regional-scale recreation facilities are limited within the Study Area, the existing system provides a foundation for supporting everyday recreation and community use along the corridor.

Key Observations

- Parks and community centers function as important neighborhood-scale anchors that support quality of life and social interaction.
- Most recreation assets serve local and community needs rather than regional destinations.
- Visibility and connectivity to US 17 vary, limiting the ability of these spaces to reinforce corridor identity.
- Improved access and integration with surrounding development could strengthen the role of parks and community centers as activity hubs.



EXISTING PLACEMAKING: STRENGTHS AND GAPS

While the US 17 corridor contains a variety of community assets, the way these assets are expressed within the public realm varies considerably. Placemaking along the corridor is shaped not only by the physical presence of schools, parks, civic facilities, and businesses, but by how these elements are connected, visible, and integrated into their surrounding context. Existing conditions reveal a mix of recognizable places and fragmented environments, highlighting both strengths to build upon and gaps that limit corridor identity.

Recognizable Centers and Activity Nodes

Strengths

Certain portions of the corridor function as identifiable centers where civic uses, commercial activity, and community facilities are clustered. In these areas, development patterns, street networks, and land uses reinforce a sense of arrival and local identity. These nodes are often associated with historic development patterns, traditional main streets, or concentrations of public-serving uses that generate daily activity.

Gaps

Outside of these areas, the corridor lacks clear cues that signal entry or transition between communities. Auto-oriented patterns, large setbacks, and discontinuous frontage make it difficult to distinguish one place from another. As a result, portions of US 17 function more as pass-through environments than as destinations.

Comfort, Activity, and Public Realm

Strengths

Where sidewalks, shade, street trees, and active frontages are present, the corridor feels more comfortable and human-scaled. These conditions are most often found in established centers and older development areas where buildings are closer to the street and activity is visible.

Gaps

Large portions of the corridor lack pedestrian-scale amenities, limiting opportunities for walking, gathering, or informal interaction. Long distances between destinations, wide curb cuts, and minimal public realm treatments reinforce auto-dependence and reduce opportunities for placemaking outside of specific nodes.

Visibility and Legibility Along the Corridor

Strengths

US 17 provides strong regional visibility, allowing major civic, institutional, and commercial uses to be accessed efficiently. In some locations, buildings and public spaces are oriented toward the corridor, reinforcing their role as landmarks and helping users intuitively understand where activity is concentrated.

Gaps

Many community assets, including parks, schools, and civic facilities, are visually disconnected from US 17 due to setbacks, buffering, or limited signage. This reduces their contribution to corridor identity and makes important destinations easy to overlook. Inconsistent wayfinding and limited gateway features further weaken the corridor's legibility.

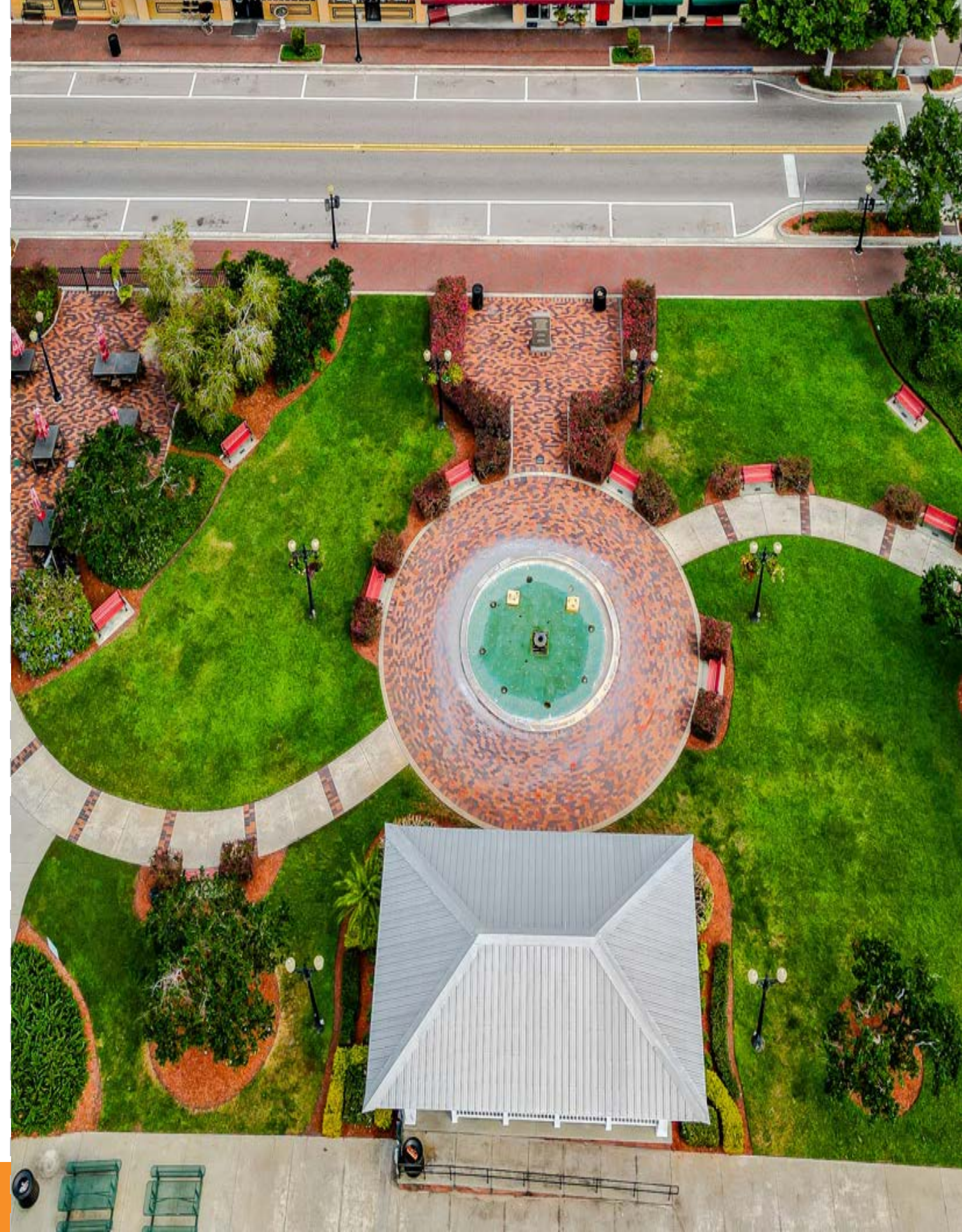
Transitions between Context

Strengths

Natural features, changes in land use intensity, and historic development patterns help signal transitions between rural, residential, and more urbanized areas along the corridor. In select locations, these transitions occur gradually and contribute to a clear sense of progression along US 17.

Gaps

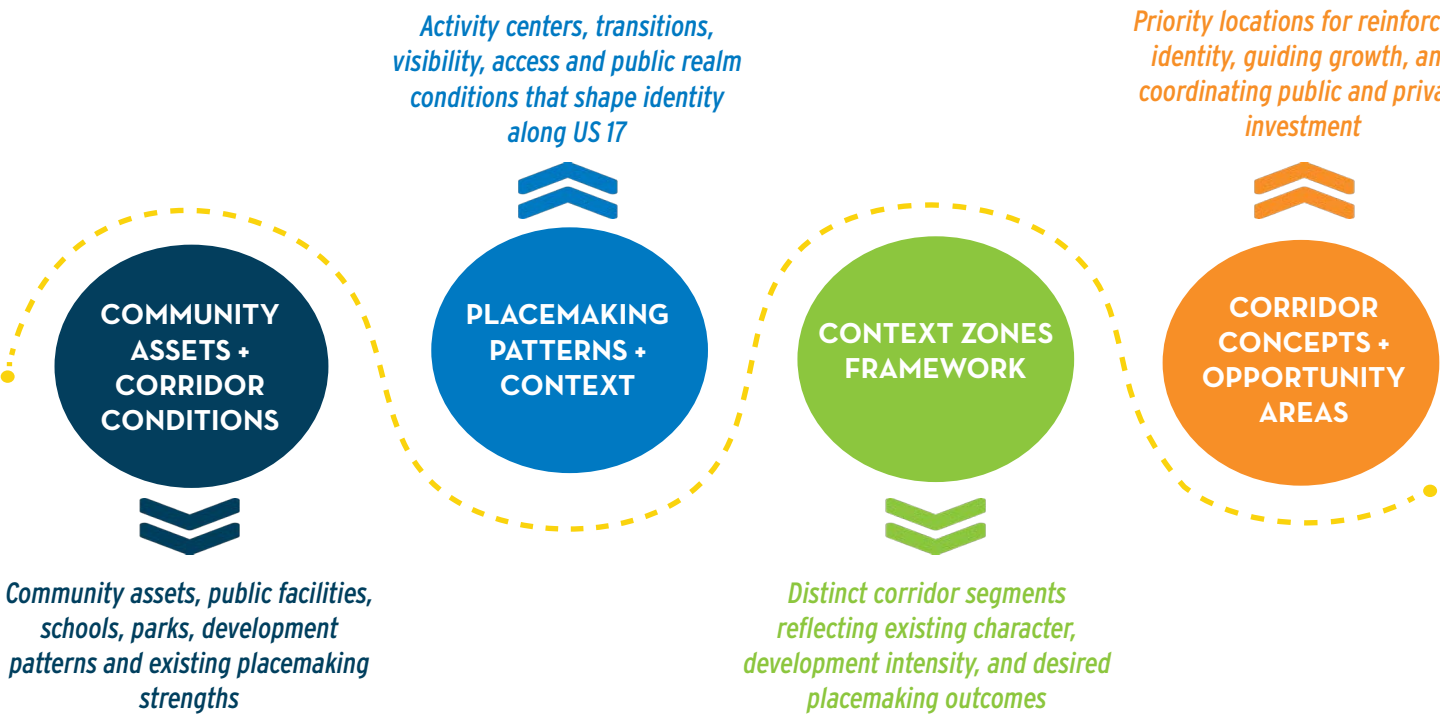
In many areas, transitions between different contexts are abrupt or unclear. Residential neighborhoods, commercial uses, and institutional sites often meet the corridor without buffering, orientation, or design cues that reflect changing character. These conditions contribute to a fragmented experience and reduce the corridor's ability to function as a sequence of distinct places.



CONTEXT ZONES

Context zones are used in this study as a descriptive and organizational tool to reflect the corridor’s varying character and function. Rather than prescribing specific land uses or regulatory standards, context zones illustrate how different portions of US 17 operate today and how they are intended to evolve over time in a way that reinforces community identity and corridor function.

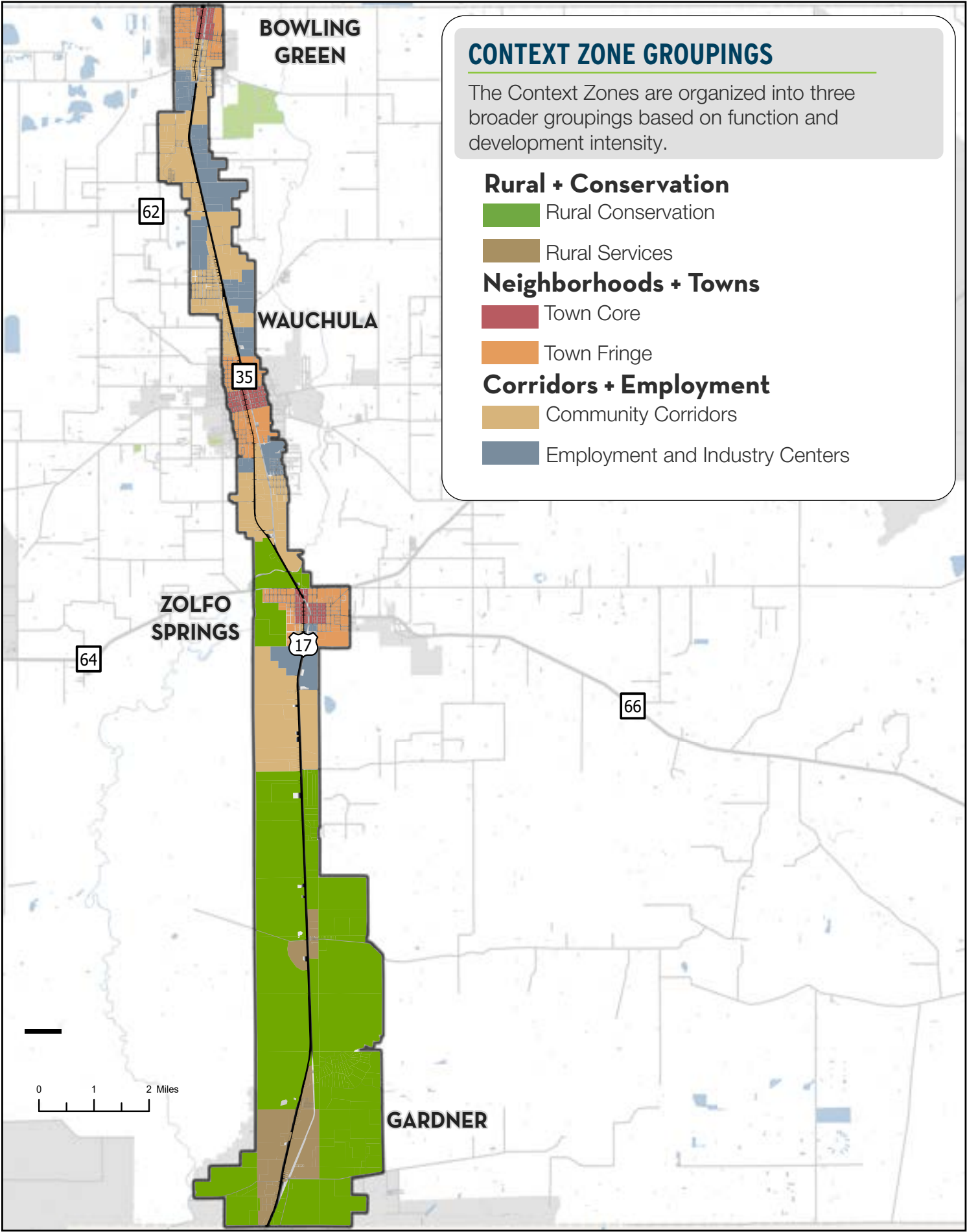
The context zones are not meant to replace local future land use visions or dictate local land policy. They are used to reflect localized future land visions, create a shared mental map of the corridor, reinforce market-supported development patterns, align actions and strategies to the right areas, and can help guide where certain investments make sense.



HOW TO READ THE CONTEXT ZONES

The US 17 corridor serves a wide range of functions that vary based on surrounding land uses, development patterns, and levels of activity. Recognizing these differences is important to ensuring that planning and investment decisions are appropriately tailored to each segment of the corridor. To respond to this variation, context zone scales have been established to define how different portions of the corridor are intended to evolve over time. The context zone scales are intended to communicate the following:

- » **Development Intensity:** How much scale is appropriate and desired
- » **Land Use Mix:** Degree of single-use vs integrated uses
- » **Mobility Emphasis:** Auto-oriented vs multimodal environments
- » **Residential Types:** Housing diversity and form
- » **Activity Level:** Expected level of economic and social activity
- » **Street Relationship:** Building placement and interaction with the street



RURAL + CONSERVATION

Rural and agricultural lands define much of the US 17 corridor in Hardee County. These areas establish the visual rhythm, open character, and working land that distinguish the corridor from more developed areas. While largely rural in nature, portions of the corridor include small service clusters that provide essential goods and gathering places for nearby residents. These areas balance conservation of open lands with limited rural-serving activity that supports daily life without altering the overall rural character.

RURAL CONSERVATION (RC)

Preserve agricultural and conservation lands as the dominant land use. Support low-impact rural homesteads, active farming operations, and natural resource areas. Balance the preservation of rural character with the need to accommodate regional freight movement, maintaining appropriate traffic volumes and roadway function along US 17.

Desired Characteristics

Development Intensity

Low Intensity ●————|———— High Intensity

Mobility Emphasis

Freight & Auto ●————|———— Multimodal & Walkable

Activity Level

Limited Activity ●————|———— High Activity

Land Use Mix

Single-Use ●————|———— Mixed-Use

Residential Types

Single-Family ●————|———— Multi-family

Street Relationship

Setback / Buffered ●————|———— Street-Oriented

RURAL SERVICES (RS)

Small clusters of commercial, civic, and residential uses that serve rural residents. Offers basic goods and services while maintaining a scale that compliments the surrounding rural uses but does not compete with the larger town centers.

Desired Characteristics

Development Intensity

Low Intensity ●————|———— High Intensity

Mobility Emphasis

Freight & Auto ●————|———— Multimodal & Walkable

Activity Level

Limited Activity ●————|———— High Activity

Land Use Mix

Single-Use ●————|———— Mixed-Use

Residential Types

Single-Family ●————|———— Multi-family

Street Relationship

Setback / Buffered ●————|———— Street-Oriented



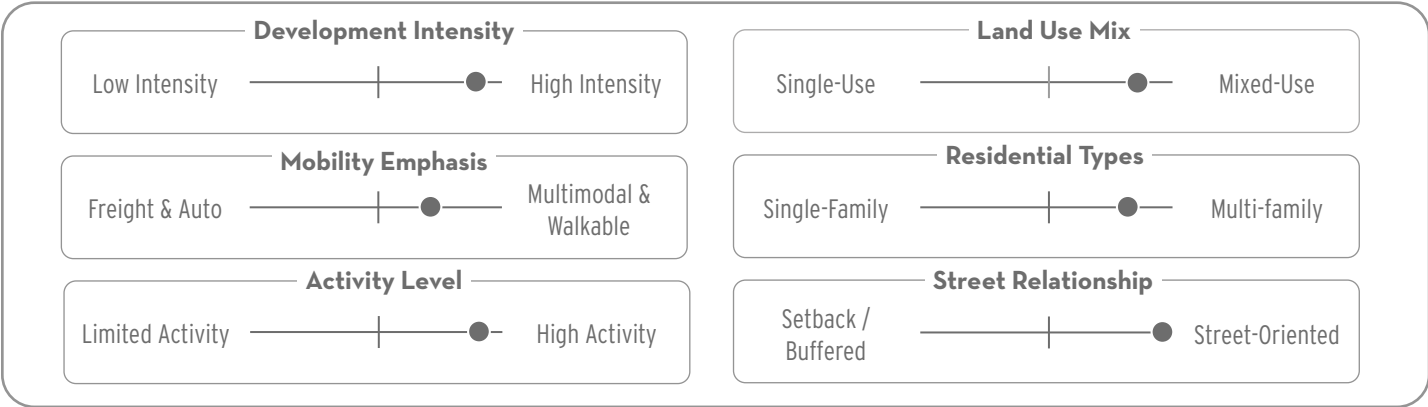
NEIGHBORHOODS + TOWNS

Downtown main streets and residential neighborhoods introduce more localized nodes of activity along the US 17 corridor. These segments include historic town centers, adjacent residential areas, and small-scale commercial uses that serve daily needs. In these areas, the corridor functions as both a connector and a destination, supporting local businesses and community life. This grouping works to balance mobility with safe access, walkability, and compatibility with the surrounding built environment.

TOWN CORE

Strengthen walkable centers in each municipality as the focal point for civic life, local businesses, and community gathering. Encourage infill development and adaptive reuse that reinforce the historic character and cultural identity of each town.

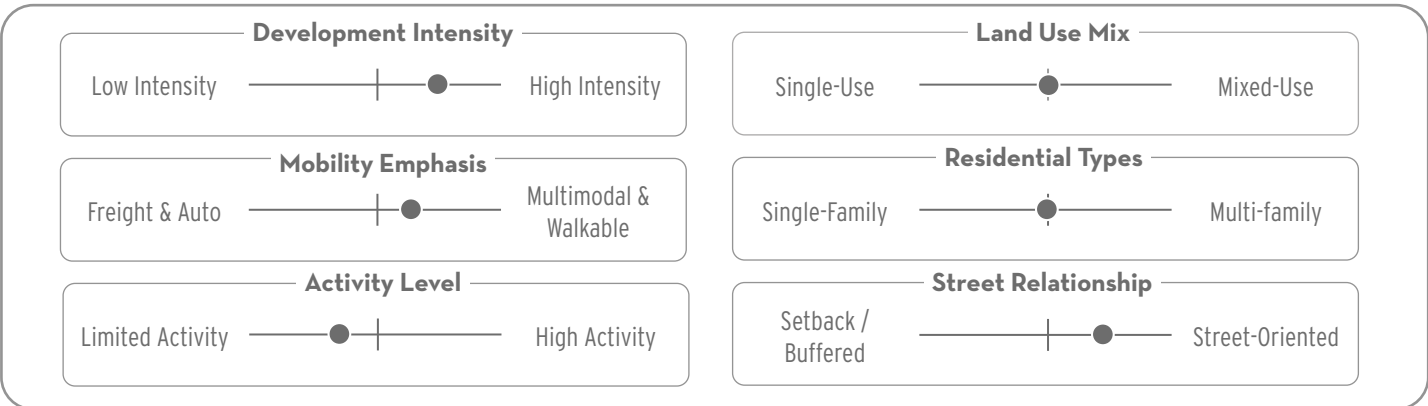
Desired Characteristics



TOWN FRINGE

Preserve the character of existing neighborhoods in Zolfo Springs, Wauchula, and Bowling Green, while supporting new housing that fits the block pattern and lot configuration. Encourage connectivity and safe access to schools, parks, and key corridors.

Desired Characteristics



CORRIDOR + EMPLOYMENT

Select segments of the US 17 accommodate clusters of commercial, industrial, and employment-oriented uses that support the local economy. These areas rely on visibility and access to the corridor. These segments reflect the corridor's role in supporting economic activity, while guiding future development toward coordinated access, efficient circulation, and well-organized site design.

COMMUNITY CORRIDOR

Improve US 17 into a safer, more connected corridor that supports local businesses, improves access management, and enhances multimodal comfort. Encourages reinvestment in underutilized parcels. Carefully balances US 17 as a corridor to move freight with its potential to connect people and place.

Desired Characteristics

Development Intensity

Low Intensity —●— High Intensity

Mobility Emphasis

Freight & Auto —●— Multimodal & Walkable

Activity Level

Limited Activity —●— High Activity

Land Use Mix

Single-Use —●— Mixed-Use

Residential Types

Single-Family —●— Multi-family

Street Relationship

Setback / Buffered —●— Street-Oriented

EMPLOYMENT AND INDUSTRY CENTERS

Support areas with existing and future industrial, warehousing, and commerce park activity. Maintain buffers between employment areas and neighborhoods. Enhance freight mobility and access to US 17.

Desired Characteristics

Development Intensity

Low Intensity —|—●— High Intensity

Mobility Emphasis

Freight & Auto ●—|— Multimodal & Walkable

Activity Level

Limited Activity —●—|— High Activity

Land Use Mix

Single-Use ●—|— Mixed-Use

Residential Types

Single-Family —|— Multi-family

Street Relationship

Setback / Buffered ●—|— Street-Oriented



CONTEXT ZONE SUMMARY

The context zones establish a shared understanding and guidance for the future of US 17. Rather than viewing the corridor as a single, uniform condition, this approach recognizes the distinct roles it plays across Hardee County, from preserving rural and agricultural landscapes, to supporting community-focused town centers, to accommodating commercial activity and employment-generating uses. Each segment of the corridor is shaped by its surrounding land use patterns, development intensity, and function within the broader network. By organizing these conditions into a clear set of context zones, this framework provides a foundation for more informed and intentional decision-making. It aligns land use, mobility, and site design expectations with the character of each area, helping to ensure that future development reinforces, rather than conflicts with its surroundings. This is particularly important along a corridor like US 17, which must balance regional mobility and freight movement with local access, economic development, and quality of place.

Importantly, the context zones are not solely reflective of existing conditions. They are intended to guide how the corridor evolves over time, providing a forward-looking structure that accommodates growth while maintaining compatibility across different segments. In some areas, this may mean preserving open space and limiting development intensity, while in others it may involve encouraging reinvestment, improving access management, or supporting new employment opportunities.

Context Zone	Acres (approximate)	Share	Abbreviated	Development Intensity		Mobility Emphasis	Activity Level	Land Use Mix	Residential Types	Street Relationship
Rural Conservation	15,783	58.0%	RC	Low Intensity		Freight & Auto-Focused	Limited Activity	Single-Use	Single-Family	Setback/Buffered
Rural Services	3,218	11.8%	RS	Leans Low Intensity		Leans Freight & Auto-Focused	Leans Limited Activity	Leans Single-Use	Leans Single-Family	Leans Setback/Buffered
Town Core	261	1.0%	TC	High Intensity		Leans Multimodal & Walkable	High Activity	Mixed-Use	Multifamily	Street-Oriented
Town Fringe	1,302	4.8%	TF	Leans High Intensity		Leans Multimodal & Walkable	Moderate Activity	Balanced	Mixed Housing	Leans Street-Oriented
Community Corridors	5,002	18.4%	CC	Leans Low Intensity		Freight & Auto-Focused	Leans Limited Activity	Leans Single-Use	Mixed Housing	Leans Setback/Buffered
Employment and Industry Centers	1,624	6.0%	EIC	Leans High Intensity		Freight & Auto-Focused	Moderate	Leans Single-Use		Leans Setback/Buffered

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY & ACTION PLAN

STRATEGY 11. CREATE A RECOGNIZABLE US 17 CORRIDOR IDENTITY THAT HIGHLIGHTS HARDEE COUNTY'S DOWNTOWN, AGRICULTURAL HERITAGE, AND NATURAL ASSETS

- **I1.1.** Develop a coordinated US 17 corridor branding and identity program
- **I1.2.** Build on and coordinate existing gateway initiatives to establish a cohesive, tiered system identifying County entry points, municipal boundaries, and downtown approaches
- **I1.3.** Implement corridor wayfinding connecting downtowns, parks, river access, and tourism destinations
- **I1.4.** Establish a US 17 corridor coordination group to guide implementation of corridor branding, gateway design, and wayfinding standards

STRATEGY 12. STRENGTHEN THE VISIBILITY AND ROLE OF DOWNTOWNS ALONG THE US 17 CORRIDOR

- **I2.1.** Launch 2-3 early placemaking projects along the corridor to establish visible identity
- **I2.2.** Identify corridor-visible public spaces and civic anchors near US 17
- **I2.3.** Encourage public art, murals, and façade improvements on corridor-facing buildings to strengthen the visual presence of downtowns along US-17
- **I2.4.** Implement small-scale gateway and streetscape improvements at downtown approaches to signal entry into Town Cores from US-17

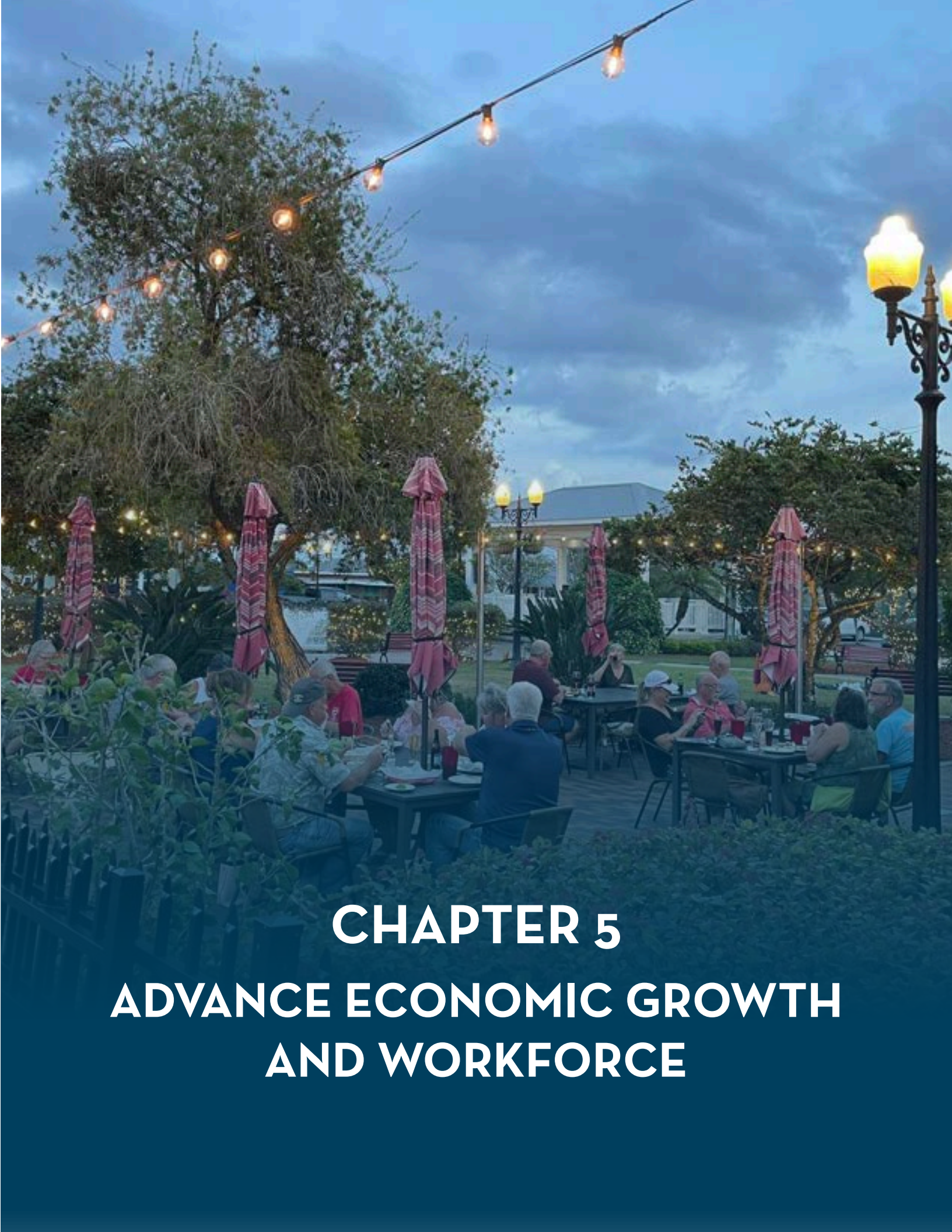
STRATEGY 13. CELEBRATE AGRICULTURAL HERITAGE AND NATURAL ASSETS ALONG THE CORRIDOR

- **I3.1.** Promote agritourism destinations, heritage sites, and rural businesses through corridor signage and marketing
- **I3.2.** Identify locations for seasonal markets, harvest events, and agritourism activities along US-17
- **I3.3.** Improve visibility, access, and awareness of major natural assets such as the Peace River, parks, and trails through wayfinding, marketing, and coordinated promotion

STRATEGY 14. STRENGTHEN PUBLIC SPACES AND CIVIC DESTINATIONS ALONG US 17

- **I4.1.** Prioritize public space improvements that support downtown activity and community events
- **I4.2.** Coordinate public space investments with redevelopment and small business initiatives





CHAPTER 5

ADVANCE ECONOMIC GROWTH AND WORKFORCE

Economic growth within the Study Area will depend on a combination of business retention, targeted recruitment, and strategic reinvestment in underutilized sites. While Downtown Wauchula serves as the primary center of economic activity, opportunities for growth exist throughout the corridor, particularly in areas with available land and redevelopment potential. At the same time, ensuring that residents are equipped with the skills needed to access emerging job opportunities will be critical to supporting a more competitive and resilient workforce. The following section examines key economic trends, employment patterns, and development opportunities, while also highlighting the role of workforce development in aligning local talent with future economic growth.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

In the Study Area and broader region, workforce training and education programs are provided through a combination of local institutions, regional partnerships, and state-supported initiatives. Programs focused on career readiness, technical training, and job placement help connect residents to employment opportunities in key industries such as trades work, construction, manufacturing, and public services.

Workforce development in Hardee County is supported through coordinated partnerships between local institutions, including Hardee County Schools, South Florida State College, CareerSource Heartland, and regional economic development organizations such as The Development Group. Strengthening coordination between local employers, educational institutions, and workforce development organizations can help better align training programs with industry needs. By expanding access to skills training and supporting pathways to higher-wage employment, the Study Area can build a more competitive workforce while also attracting new businesses and investment.

CareerSource Heartland

CareerSource Heartland serves as the regional workforce board for Hardee County providing a range of programs designed to connect job seekers with employers

- Provides employer support including recruitment, hiring, and workforce solutions
- Offers job training and funding through Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) programs
- Supports career advancement through skills training, certifications, and on-the-job training
- Aligns workforce skills with local industry needs to support economic growth

South Florida State College (SFSC)

SFSC offers a range of workforce training programs and technical certifications to prepare individuals for skilled jobs in fields such as welding, HVAC, automotive, electrical, surgery tech, and cosmetology

- Features high school dual enrollment often with free tuition and textbooks
- Programs such as industrial training or lineman training support the local industry, including post-hurricane recovery
- Focuses on fast-track training to move students into jobs within the Heartland region

Career & Technical Education Programs

Supported through partnerships between Hardee County Schools, SFSC, CareerSource Heartland, and The Development Group. Career Technical Education (CTE) programs provide hands-on training, certifications, and career pathway exposure for high school students

- Flexible training options include certifications, microcredentials, and employer-based training programs
- Supports both students and existing workers through
- Strengthens connections between education providers and employers to prepare local residents for in-demand jobs

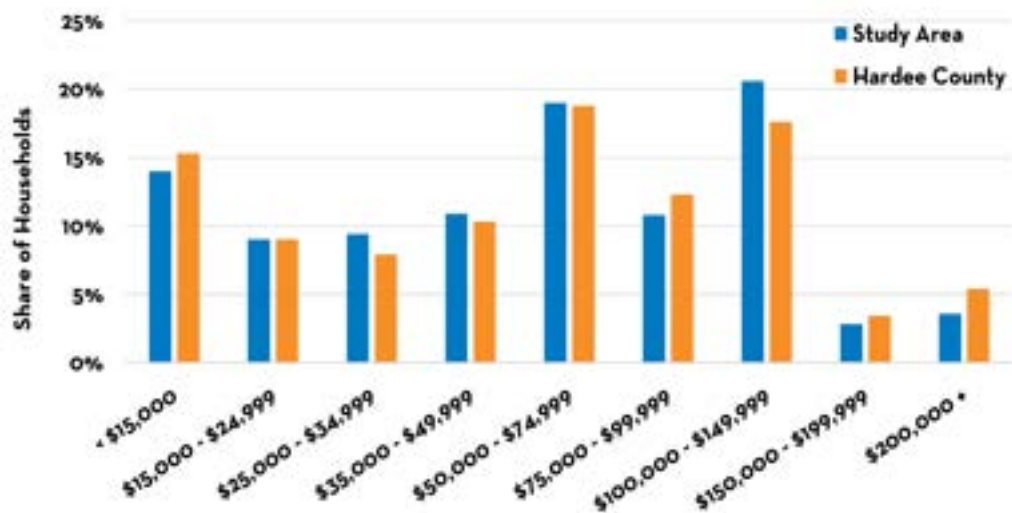
WHAT WE HEARD: LOCAL ECONOMY

The Study Area’s employment base is broadly distributed across several key sectors, including Retail Trade, Public Administration, Healthcare, Education, and Leisure and Hospitality, indicating a diverse and service-oriented economy. While job growth in the County has fluctuated in recent years, future employment trends will continue to depend on market conditions and development activity.

MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME

The median household income in the Study Area is slightly lower than that of Hardee County at over \$57,400 annually. The largest share of households in the Study Area fall within the \$100,000 - \$149,999 range, while in Hardee County the largest share of households fall within the \$50,000 - \$74,999 range. It is also worth noting that within the Study Area approximately 43% of households earn less than \$50,000 annually. On average, households in the Study Area spend about \$7,883 per year, or roughly \$657 per month, on basic housing-related loan payments like their mortgage and home equity payments. This number may seem low compared to typical mortgage payments, but it averages all households, including those with no mortgage, those in lower-cost homes, and those with small or subsidized loans.

Income by Households (2025)

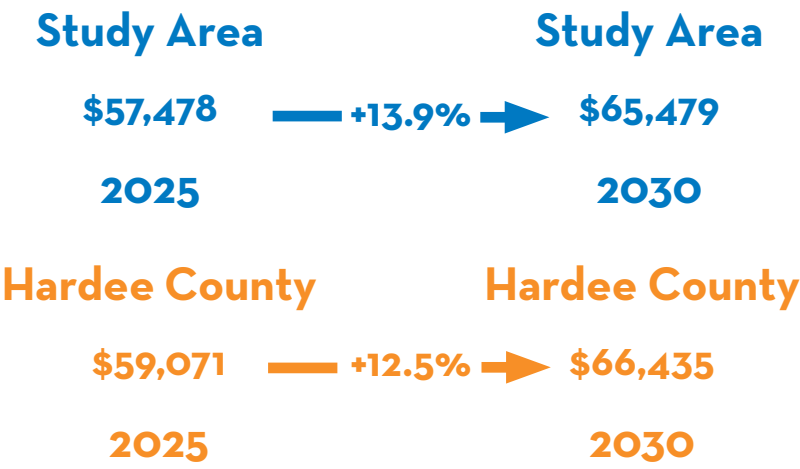


Source: ESRI BAO

43%
Households earning under \$50,000

\$7,883
Average spent on mortgage and basics per year

Projected Income Growth (2025-2030)



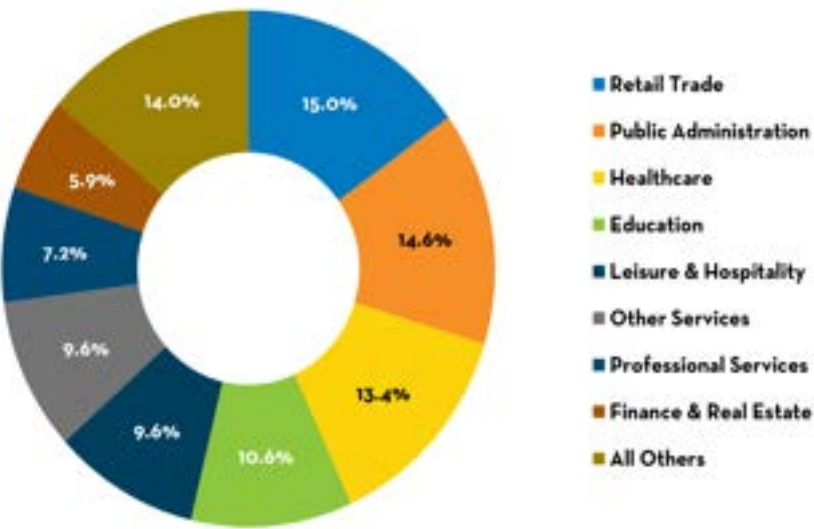
Source: ESRI BAO

The Study Area’s median household income is projected to increase by approximately \$8,000 in the next five years. While Hardee County’s median income is also expected to increase through 2030, the rate of growth is projected to be less, which will reduce the gap in income between the Study Area and the County.

EMPLOYMENT

The Study Area is home to approximately 4,000 jobs, with employment concentrated in service-oriented and public sector industries. Retail Trade is the largest employment sector in the Study Area, accounting for 15.0% of all jobs, followed closely by Public Administration (14.6%) and Healthcare (13.4%). Education represents another key employment category at 10.6%, along with notable shares in Leisure and Hospitality (9.6%) and Construction (9.6%). This employment profile reflects a workforce anchored in service-based industries and public sector roles, with a balance of institutional, healthcare, and retail employment supporting the region’s economy.

Employment by Sector (2025)

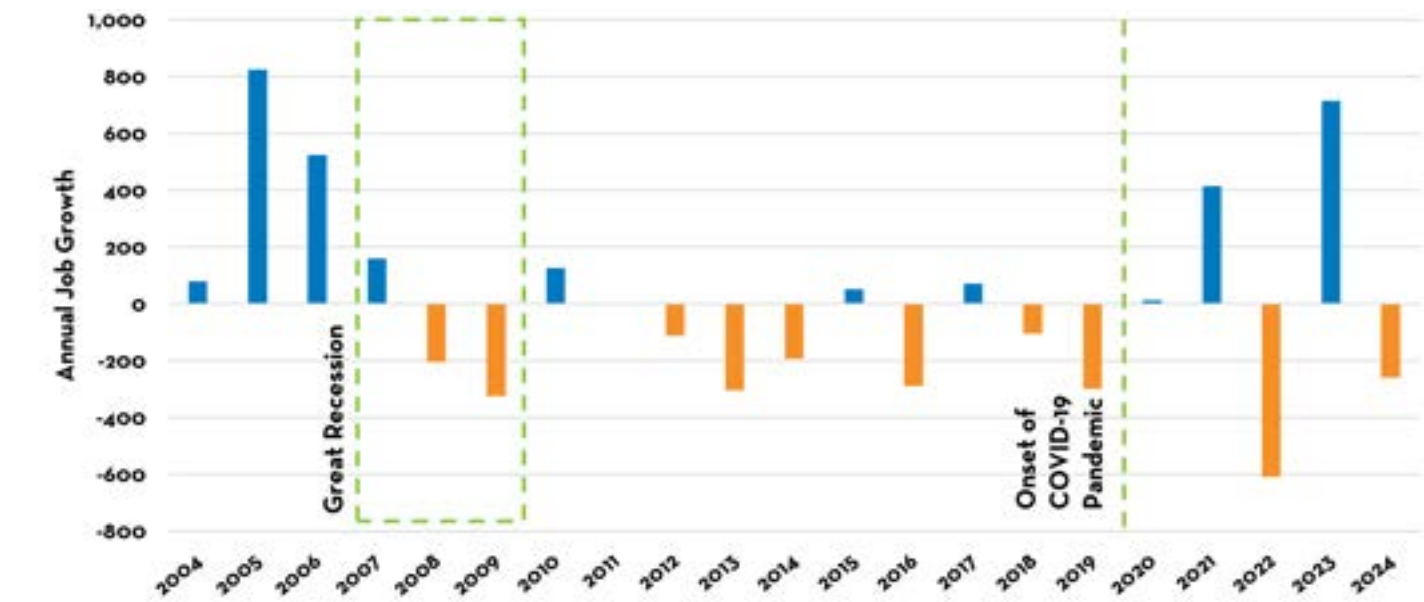


Source: ESRI BAO

ANNUALIZED JOB GROWTH

Hardee County experienced many job losses during the 2008 recession and saw a period of job market fluctuation and employment stagnation in the years after. Hardee County’s market experienced the largest fluctuations in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic, experiencing the largest growth since before the late 2008 recession in 2021 and 2023 and the sharpest declines in employment in 2022 and 2024. Overall, the County has experienced a net growth of around 194 jobs in the 21-year period.

Net New Jobs in Hardee County Per Year (2004-2024)



Source: Florida Department of Commerce

MAJOR EMPLOYERS

Public sector employers, including education, corrections, and local government, make up a significant portion of the top 10 major employers in Hardee County. Private sector employment is diverse but relatively small in scale, with representation across construction, healthcare, manufacturing, and retail.

Top 10 Employers (2025)

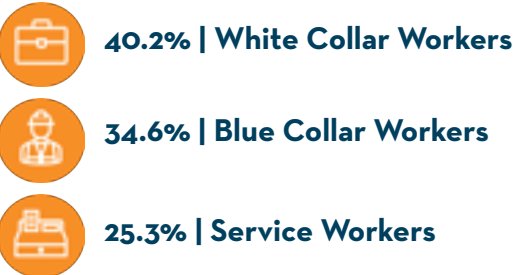
Rank	Company	Industry Sector	Estimated Employees
1	The School District of Hardee County	Educational Services	~750
2	Kemper Sports Management	Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	~500
3	Department of Corrections	Public Administration	~350
4	Walmart	Retail Trade	~200
5	Wauchula State Bank	Finance and Insurance	~200
6	Wanzek Construction	Utilities	~200
7	Lakeside Neurological	Health Care and Social Assistance	~200
8	Hardee County Board of County Commissioners	Public Administration	~150
9	Mach Connections	Manufacturing	~150
10	Hardee County Sheriffs Office	Public Administration	~100

Source: Florida Department of Commerce

Employee Profiles (2025)

The Study Area is home to a mix of employee types:

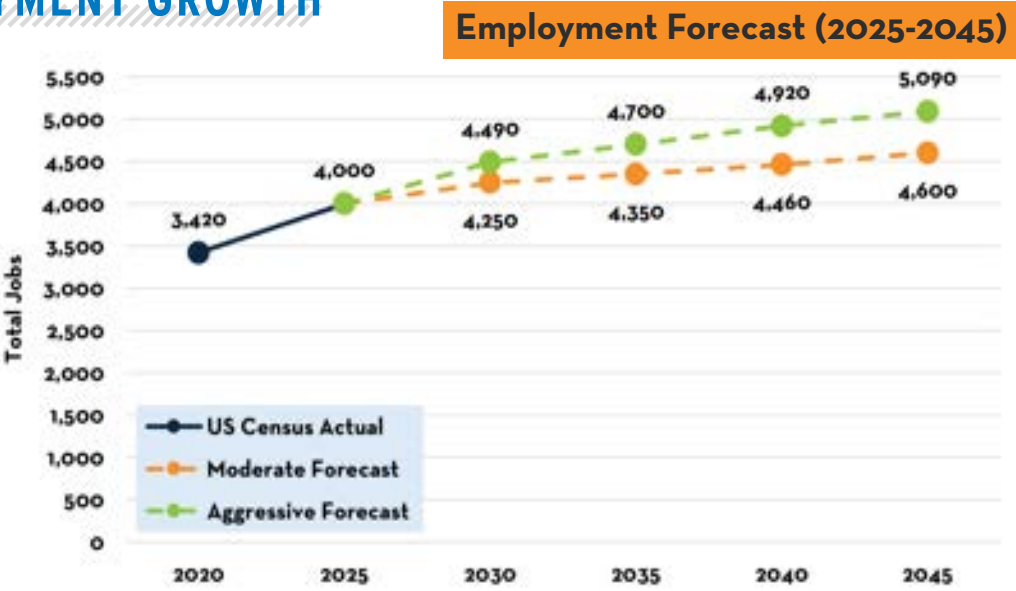
- **Service workers** perform customer-facing roles that support daily needs, such as food service, retail, and hospitality.
- **Blue collar workers** are skilled or manual laborers who work in trades, construction, manufacturing, or maintenance.
- **White collar workers** are typically office-based professionals involved in managerial, administrative, or technical roles.



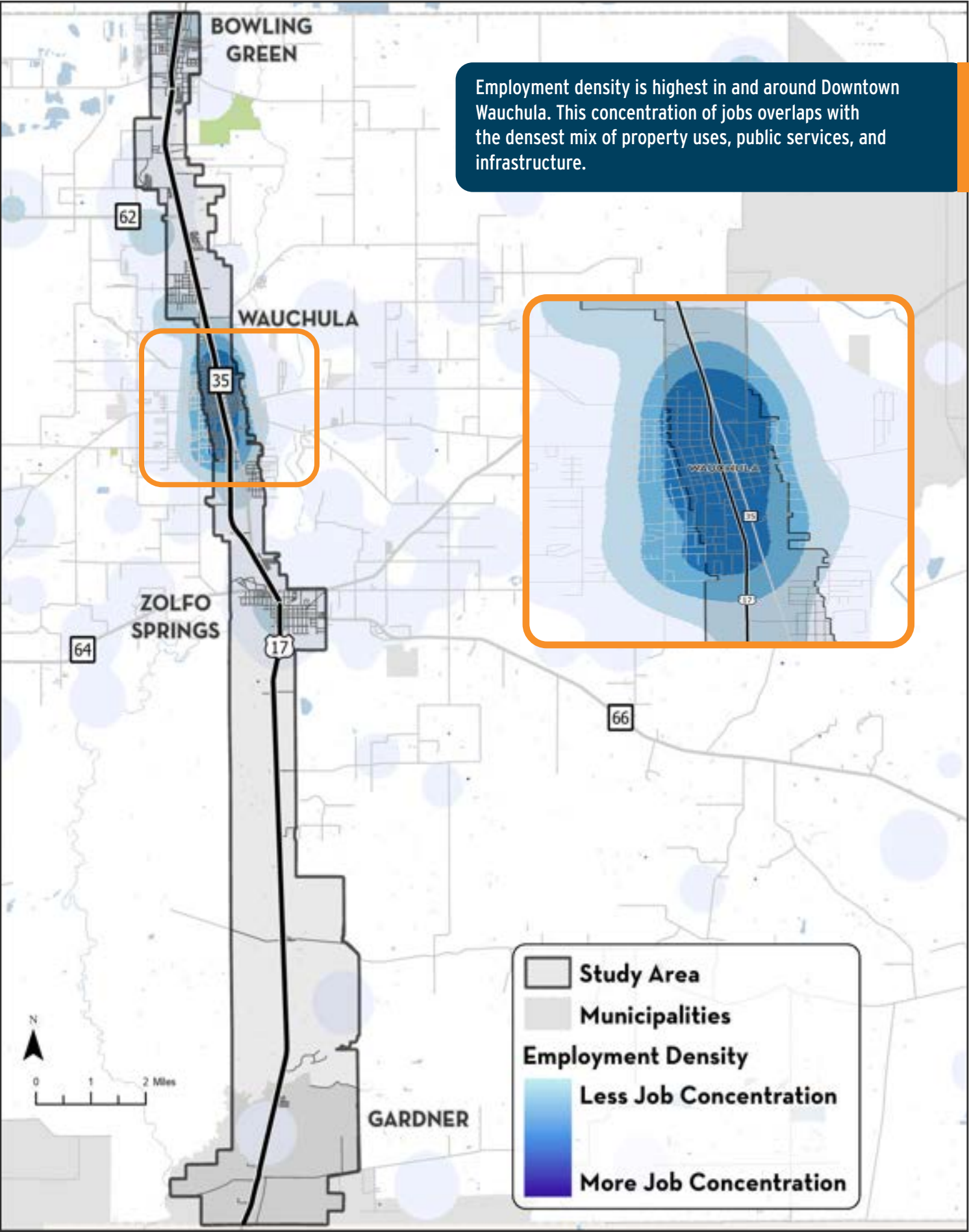
Source: ESRI BAO

PROJECTED EMPLOYMENT GROWTH

By 2045, the Study Area could support between 4,600 and 5,090 jobs, depending on economic conditions and future development. The moderate forecast reflects steady job growth, while the aggressive forecast assumes a stronger pace of employment expansion tied to broader investment and business activity in the area.



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, ESRI BAO, LEHD OnTheMap, Kimley-Horn



DEVELOPMENT STATUS

A parcel-level analysis of development status was conducted to better understand land availability and future development potential within the Study Area. Each parcel was assigned a development classification based on a combination of assessed building values, land values, and property use.

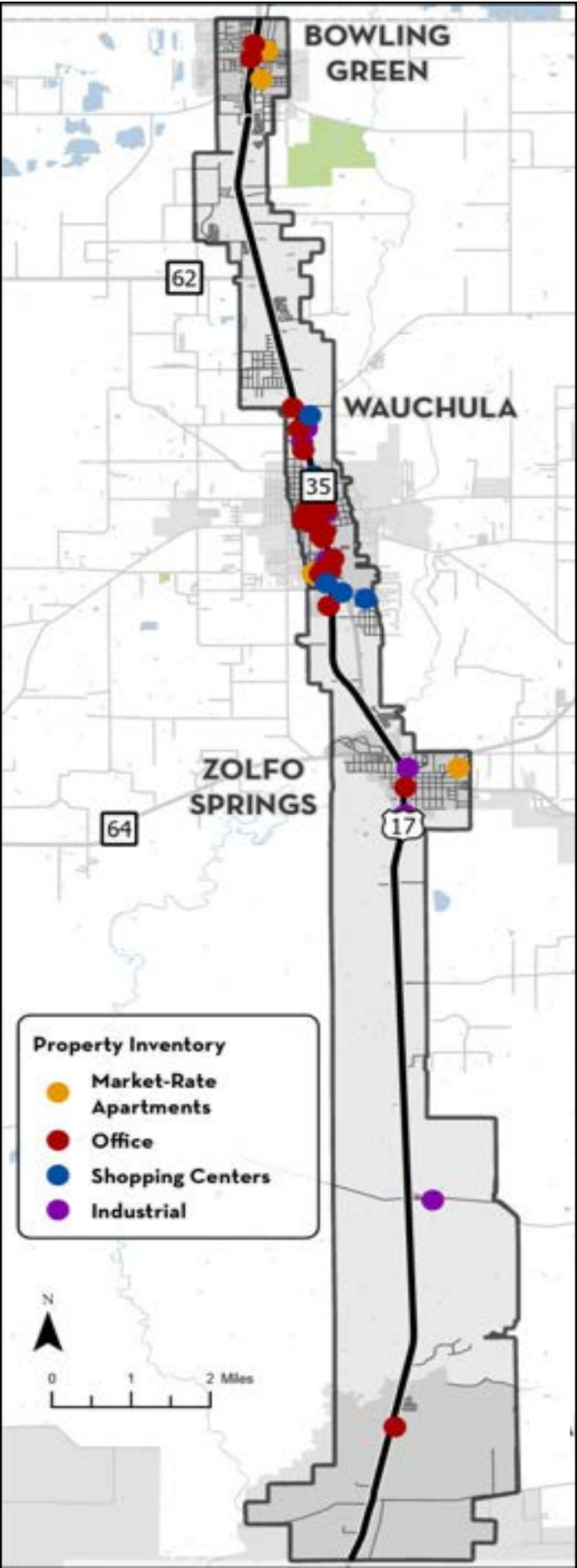
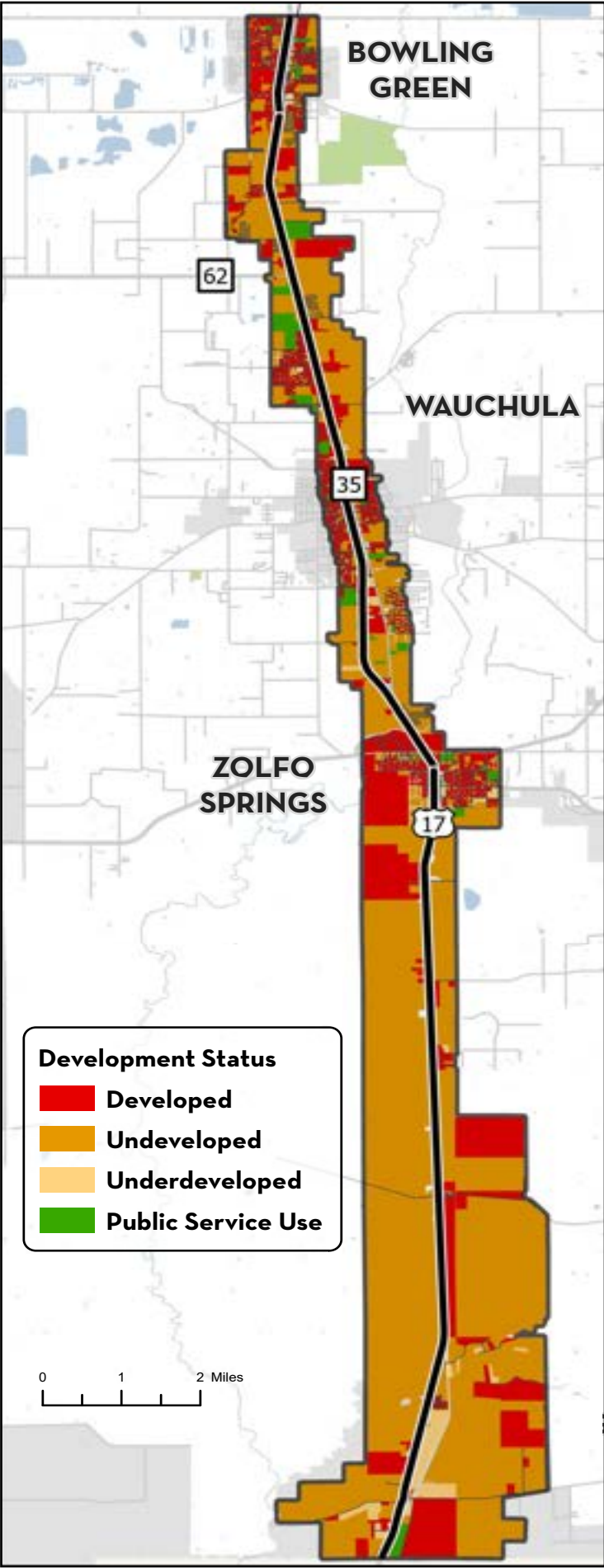
This classification reflects current land use intensity rather than zoning or future land use designations. Parcels classified as Undeveloped may include large swaths of agricultural land that may be in active use but lack structures, which results in a low or zero building value. While this methodology allows for a consistent, data-driven approach, it is important to acknowledge that not all land categorized as undeveloped is vacant or available for development in the near term.

Development opportunities are dispersed throughout the Study Area rather than concentrated in one location. As market conditions evolve, transportation investments are made, and community needs shift, land in any of these categories may be subject to reinvestment or redevelopment over time. This snapshot provides a baseline to help guide future planning and prioritization.

Parcel Development Classification

Status	Description	Area (acres)	Share
Developed	Building value is greater than land value	4,137	15.9%
Undeveloped	Parcels with building value of \$0	20,912	80.5%
Underdeveloped	Parcel where building value is less than the land value	476	1.8%
Public Service Use	Areas not (or not likely) available for development	456	1.8%

Source: Hardee County; Kimley-Horn



PROPERTY INVENTORY

The greatest concentration of property uses, including market-rate apartments, offices, shopping centers, and hotels, which is located in the central portion of the Study Area within the City of Wauchula. This cluster reflects Wauchula's role as the commercial and administrative hub of the corridor. In contrast, Bowling Green, Zolfo Springs, and Gardner have more limited but targeted property activity. The property types included in this inventory are:

- **Market-rate apartments:** Multifamily residential units that are priced according to local market conditions and are not subsidized or income-restricted.
- **Office properties:** Buildings used primarily for professional, administrative, or medical services
- **Shopping centers:** Multi-tenant retail centers typically anchored by national or regional brands and accompanied by smaller storefronts.
- **Industrial properties:** Facilities used for warehousing, distribution, manufacturing, or other light industrial activity.

In Study Area:	 Market Rate Apartments	 Office	 Shopping Centers	 Industrial
Total SF/Units	64	175,039	420,982	107,213
Total Properties	5	36	6	8
Newest Property	2019	2009	2005	2008
Avg. Lease Rate (/mon)	\$1,100	\$13.60	\$13.26	\$7.68
Avg. Vacancy	3.0%	1.5%	7.1%	5.6%

Source: CoStar; Kimley-Horn

STRENGTHS & OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH

STRENGTHS TO BUILD ON



ESTABLISHED ECONOMIC CORE

Downtown Wauchula is the primary center of jobs, services, and commercial activity along the corridor



AVAILABLE LAND

Undeveloped and underutilized parcels provide capacity for future business attraction and redevelopment



ACCESS & VISIBILITY

Strong north-south connectivity, supporting commerce, tourism, and investment opportunities



WORKFORCE NETWORK

Existing workforce network and career readiness pathways



REGIONAL GROWTH MOMENTUM

Ongoing growth in Polk County and surrounding areas is expanding economic activity and development pressure

POSITIONING THE CORRIDOR FOR LONG-TERM ECONOMIC GROWTH

Reinforcing Downtown Wauchula, activating underutilized sites along US 17, aligning workforce with industry needs, and connecting tourism assets will drive economic resilience and job growth



OPPORTUNITIES TO ADDRESS



CONCENTRATED ECONOMIC ACTIVITY

Employment and commercial uses are concentrated in Wauchula with limited activity in other corridor nodes



AGRICULTURAL TRANSITIONS

The decline of citrus production have altered the economic foundation, contributing to underutilized land, shifting workforce needs, and reduced economic activity in some areas



GAPS IN WORKFORCE ALIGNMENT

Training programs exist but stronger coordination is needed to match skills with employer demand and high-wage opportunities



LOW HOUSEHOLD INCOMES

A significant portion of households earns below \$50,000, indicating a need for higher-wage job growth



LIMITED BUSINESS RESOURCES

Small businesses may lack centralized guidance on permitting, funding, and technical assistance



LIMITED COORDINATION & VISIBILITY OF TOURISM ASSETS

Agricultural, historic, and recreational assets are not fully connected or marketed as cohesive corridor experience



IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY & ACTION PLAN

STRATEGY E1. STRENGTHEN WORKFORCE ALIGNMENT AND BUSINESS SUPPORT ALONG THE CORRIDOR

- **E1.1.** Strengthen coordination among employers, schools, and workforce partners through a US 17 corridor roundtable or similar ongoing partnership structure
- **E1.2.** Identify target industries and workforce needs tied to major corridor employers, opportunity sites, and emerging industry trends
- **E1.3.** Continue and expand regular business outreach and retention visits with corridor employers and small businesses
- **E1.4.** Expand partnerships with schools, colleges, and workforce providers to strengthen internships, apprenticeships, and career pathways aligned with corridor industries
- **E1.4.** Develop a small business resource guide for the US 17 corridor, providing information on starting, locating, and growing a business, including permitting, funding resources, and local support services

STRATEGY E2. ADVANCE DOWNTOWN AND CORRIDOR REDEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

- **E2.1.** Prepare a corridor opportunity site inventory of vacant and underutilized parcels along US 17
- **E2.2.** Evaluate tools and incentives to address long-term vacant and underutilized commercial properties along the corridor to encourage reinvestment and occupancy
- **E2.3.** Package catalyst redevelopment sites for marketing and investment in corridor communities beyond Wauchula, building on existing market analysis and redevelopment planning efforts
- **E2.4.** Support reinvestment and adaptive reuse of existing commercial properties along the corridor, including guidance, incentives, and tools to improve building conditions, occupancy, and long-term viability
- **E2.5.** Encourage temporary uses, façade improvements, and storefront activation in downtowns and key corridor nodes

STRATEGY E3. LEVERAGE TOURISM AND AGRITOURISM ASSETS TO SUPPORT CORRIDOR BUSINESSES

- **E3.1.** Implement corridor wayfinding linking downtowns, parks, river access points, and the Florida Cracker Trail
- **E3.2.** Package priority economic development, infrastructure, and downtown projects along the corridor for grant applications





CHAPTER 6

IMPROVE MOBILITY AND SAFETY

Transportation plays an important role in shaping the quality, efficiency, and safety of a community. A clear understanding of traffic volumes, travel patterns, existing challenges, and areas in need of improvement helps residents and decision-makers identify what is necessary to strengthen the corridor's overall performance. As Hardee County continues to grow, it is important to address both current and future mobility and safety needs within the transportation network.

Mobility focuses on how effectively people and goods can move from one location to another across different modes, including personal vehicles, public transit, bicycles, and pedestrian pathways. Strong mobility supports economic growth, reduces congestion and travel delays, and enhances the reliability of everyday travel for residents.

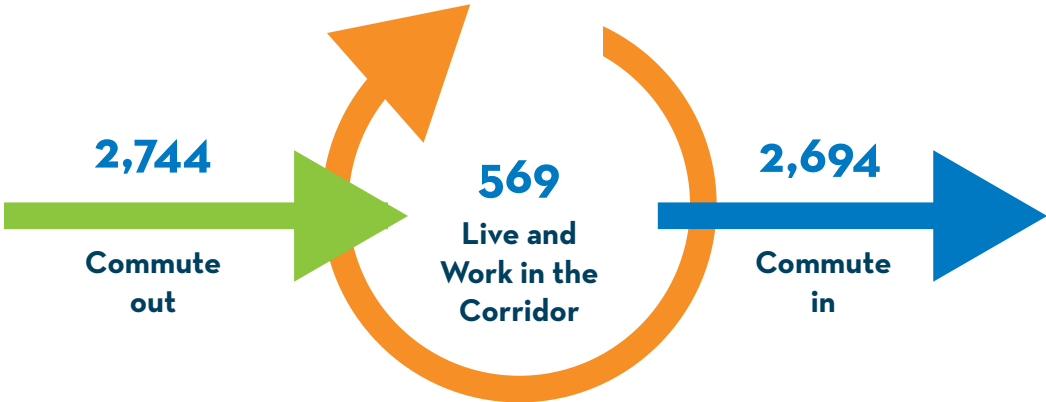
Safety is equally important as it also factors motorists, pedestrians, cyclists, and other road users. A safe network provides well-designed infrastructure such as connected sidewalks, visible crosswalks, and pedestrian friendly routes throughout the corridor, ensuring that people passing through regardless of how they travel can move safely. Prioritizing safety helps reduce the risk of vehicle-related and pedestrian-related crashes, contributing to a safer environment for all roadway users. By addressing both mobility and safety concerns, the transportation system can better support residents using motorized or non-motorized modes while promoting a more reliable and secure travel experience.

WHAT WE LEARNED: TRANSPORTATION

COMMUTE PATTERNS AND CORRIDOR FUNCTIONALITY

Commute patterns provide insight into the daily travel habits of residents within the study area. Approximately 75% of employed residents commute out of the area to destinations such as Bartow, Sebring, and Lakeland, while a similar proportion of workers commute into the study area for employment. These patterns highlight the corridor's role as both an outbound and inbound connector for regional travel.

Crash risk hotspots also reflect important aspects of corridor functionality. The intersection of US 17 and Florida Avenue in Wauchula experiences the highest concentration of crashes along the corridor. Law enforcement data indicates that 21.9% of northbound vehicles and 32.6% southbound vehicles exceed 60 mph at this location, and 22.4% of southbound traffic averages speed above the posted limit. These speeding patterns demonstrate operational and safety challenges that influence overall corridor performance.

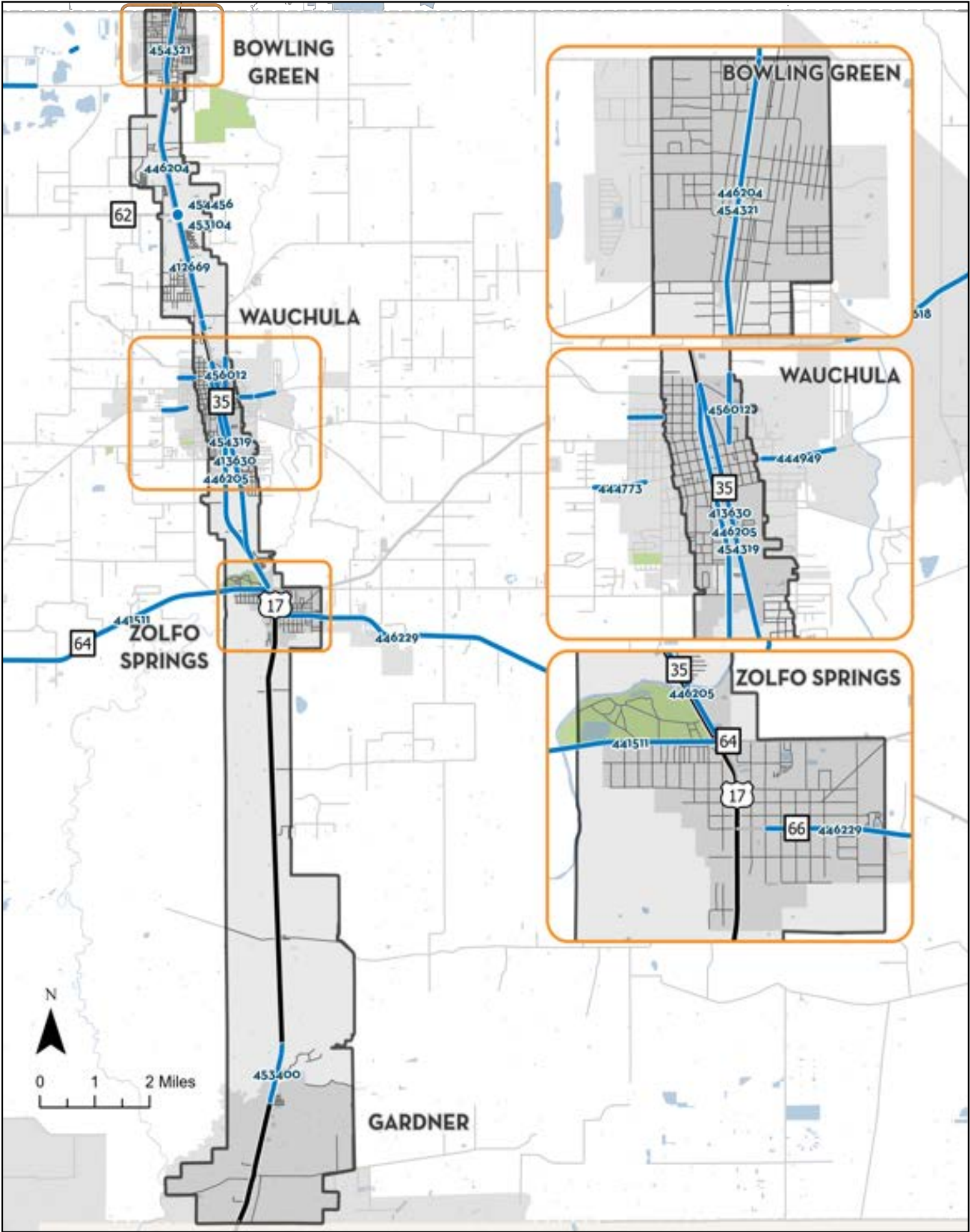


EXISTING AND PLANNED TRANSPORTATION INVESTMENTS

Current transportation projects funded within the corridor will include multiple resurfacing projects along US 17 and SR 64, as well as the reconstruction of two lanes on Heard Bridge Road. Additional improvements planned for US 17 include enhanced drainage, upgraded lighting, new traffic signals, updated traffic control devices, and the construction of a potential roundabout to improve traffic flow and safety. SR 66 is also scheduled for a resurfacing project, further contributing to a more dependable and efficient transportation network across the corridor.

5-Year Work Plan Projects (2026-2030)

ID	Type	Project Year	Road	Extent
446204	Resurfacing	2027	US 17	S of Heartland Way to N of Hilton Rd
446205	Resurfacing	2026-2027	US 17	N of SR 64 to Bell St
441511	Resurfacing	2026	SR 64	Main St to Spruce St
456012	Road Reconstruction - 2 Lane	2026	Heard Bridge Rd	N Wauchula boundary to E Oak St
453400	Drainage Improvements	2026-2028	US 17	Brookside Bluff to N of Bronco Dr
454456	Lighting; Traffic Signals	2026	US 17	At SR 62
412669	Traffic Control Devices/System	2026-2028	US 17	SR 62 to REA Rd
413630	Traffic Control Devices/System	2026-2028	US 17	Bell St to Peace River RV Entrance
454319	Transportation Planning	2026	US 17	Bell St to Peace River RV Entrance
454321	Transportation Planning	2026	US 17	S of Broward St to County Line
453104	Roundabout	2026 & 2029	US 17	At SR 62
446229	Resurfacing	2026	SR 66	US 17 (SR35) to Charlie Creek



TRAFFIC VOLUMES, SAFETY AND ACCESS CONDITIONS

Measurement

Understanding traffic volume within the corridor is very important, as it provides insight into daily travel demand, the number of users relying on the roadway, and the types of improvements needed to ensure safe and efficient access. US 17 carries the highest Annual Average Daily Traffic (AADT) in the area, with roughly 10,000 vehicles traveling the corridor each day. It also serves as a major freight route in Hardee County, accommodating an estimated 3,500 to 6,000 trucks daily. These notable amounts of vehicle and freight volumes underline the corridor’s critical role in supporting regional mobility, economic activity, and good movement.

Safety concerns along the corridor primarily stem from heavy vehicle dependence, limited public transit options, and the condition of key pedestrian and bicycle facilities. In many areas, sidewalks, bike lanes, and resolving connectivity issues are needed. Speed-related issues also present a significant safety challenge. Inconsistent speed limits, limited enforcement, and minimal visual cues encourage higher driving speeds throughout the corridor, increasing crash risks for drivers, pedestrians, and cyclists. Strengthening pedestrian infrastructure and addressing speeding behaviors are vital steps towards improving safety and mobility along the corridor.

What is AADT?
AADT, or Annual Average Daily Traffic, is a statistic that provides the average number of vehicles using a segment of road in a day. It is commonly used to measure congestion or utilization on major roadways.

Existing AADT

US 17 has a higher AADT than any other surrounding road. The entire corridor sees at least 10,000 vehicles per day on average. Roads that intersect with the corridor all see less than 10,000 vehicles per day. The section of US 17 between the northern border of Wauchula and SR 62 has the highest AADT in the study area, with an AADT over 20,000 vehicles on the average day.

Freight Traffic

US 17 serves as a major freight route for Hardee County. In addition to measuring total vehicle activity through AADT, the volume of freight movement on the corridor is tracked using truck-specific AADT. US 17 is once again the highest volume of vehicles in the study area. The majority of the corridor sees between 3,500 and 6,000 trucks per day. The sections in Bowling Green, in Wauchula, and between Wauchula and Zolfo Springs have a slightly lower truck AADT.

EMERGING OPPORTUNITY: SR 62 EAST-WEST CONNECTOR (CONCEPTUAL STUDY)

To help address freight congestion and safety concerns through Downtown Wauchula, Hardee County is exploring a potential east-west extension of SR 62, across US 17. This connection could provide an alternative route for freight traffic, reduce interactions with local vehicles and pedestrians, and enhance regional mobility and resiliency.



PURPOSE

Reduce truck traffic through downtown Wauchula



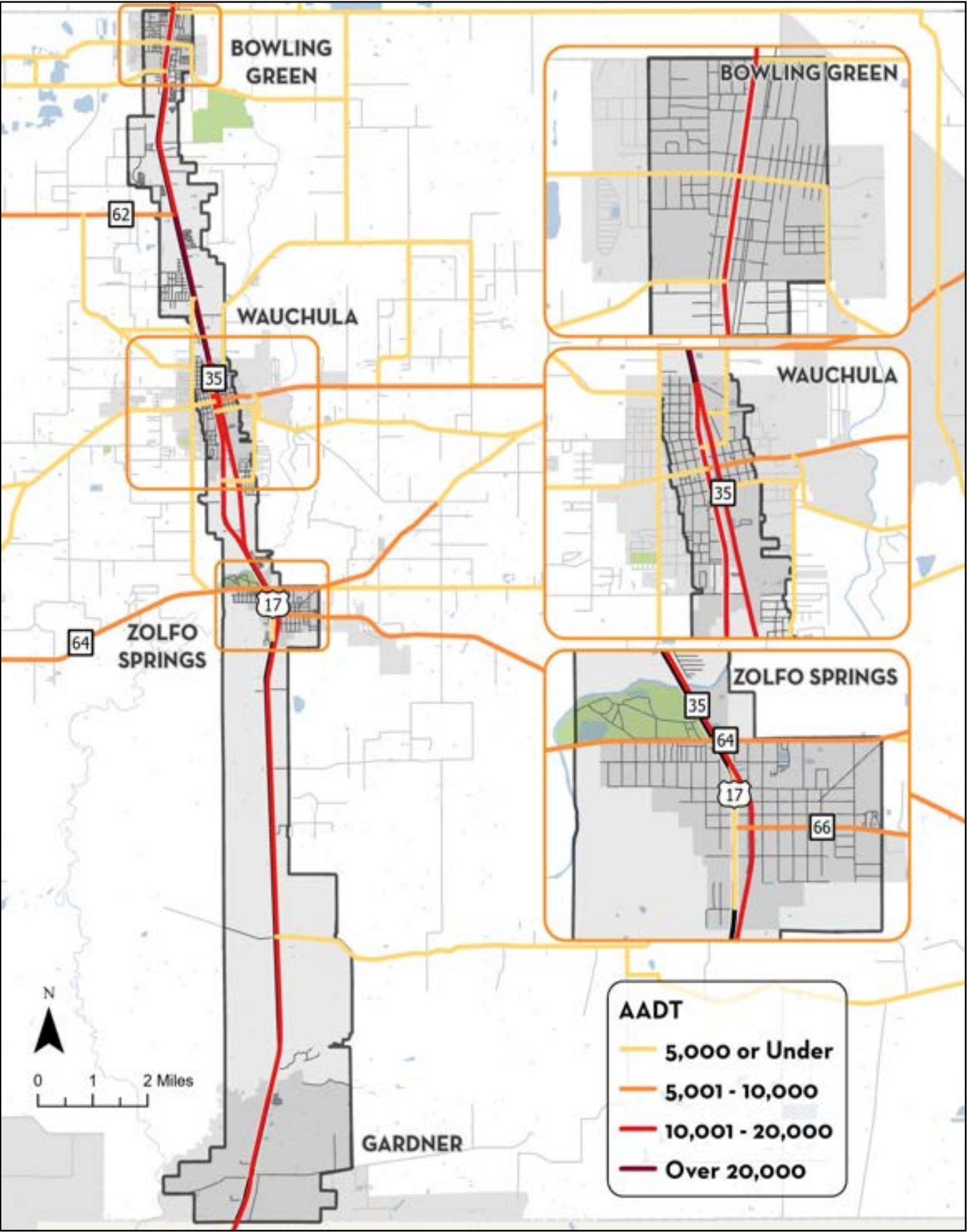
STATUS

Feasibility study (under evaluation)



NEXT STEP

Evaluate corridor options, safety benefits, and economic impacts



ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION AND TRANSIT CONSIDERATIONS

Transportation options within the corridor vary by location, though overall they remain limited. As noted previously, the corridor offers limited public transportation services. Pedestrian facilities that exist along the corridor, as well as in Bowling Green, Wauchula, and Zolfo Springs have the most connectivity due to their grid layouts. However, gaps in the sidewalk network highlight a broader need for improved infrastructure to address connectivity and safety concerns.

Recreational trails are less common within the urbanized footprint, but they still contribute to outdoor mobility and community health. An example is Paynes Creek Historic State Park near Bowling Green, which provides scenic walking trails that encourage physical activity and enhance access to natural areas. Bicycle accommodations are also present along portions of US 17 and selected side roads; however, these consist mainly of striped shoulders rather than physically protected lanes, which can pose safety concerns in higher-speed sections of the corridor.

Sidewalk



A sidewalk is a dedicated, paved pathway adjacent to roadways that ensures safe and accessible routes for pedestrians. It significantly impacts the corridor by enhancing walkability, reducing traffic congestion, and promoting a healthier, more connected population. Sidewalks are most concentrated in the municipalities of Bowling Green, Wauchula, and Zolfo Springs, with coverage primarily located along and around US 17.

Recreational Trails



Recreational trails create a network of natural corridors designed for pedestrian and recreational use. These trails are typically found in parks, nature reserves, and urban areas. They provide scenic, sustainable routes that promote outdoor activities, conserve green spaces, and improve overall livability. Recreational trails are less common within the urban footprint but play a role in supporting outdoor mobility and leisure. Notably, Paynes Creek Historic State Park near Bowling Green offers scenic walking trails that support nature access and public health.

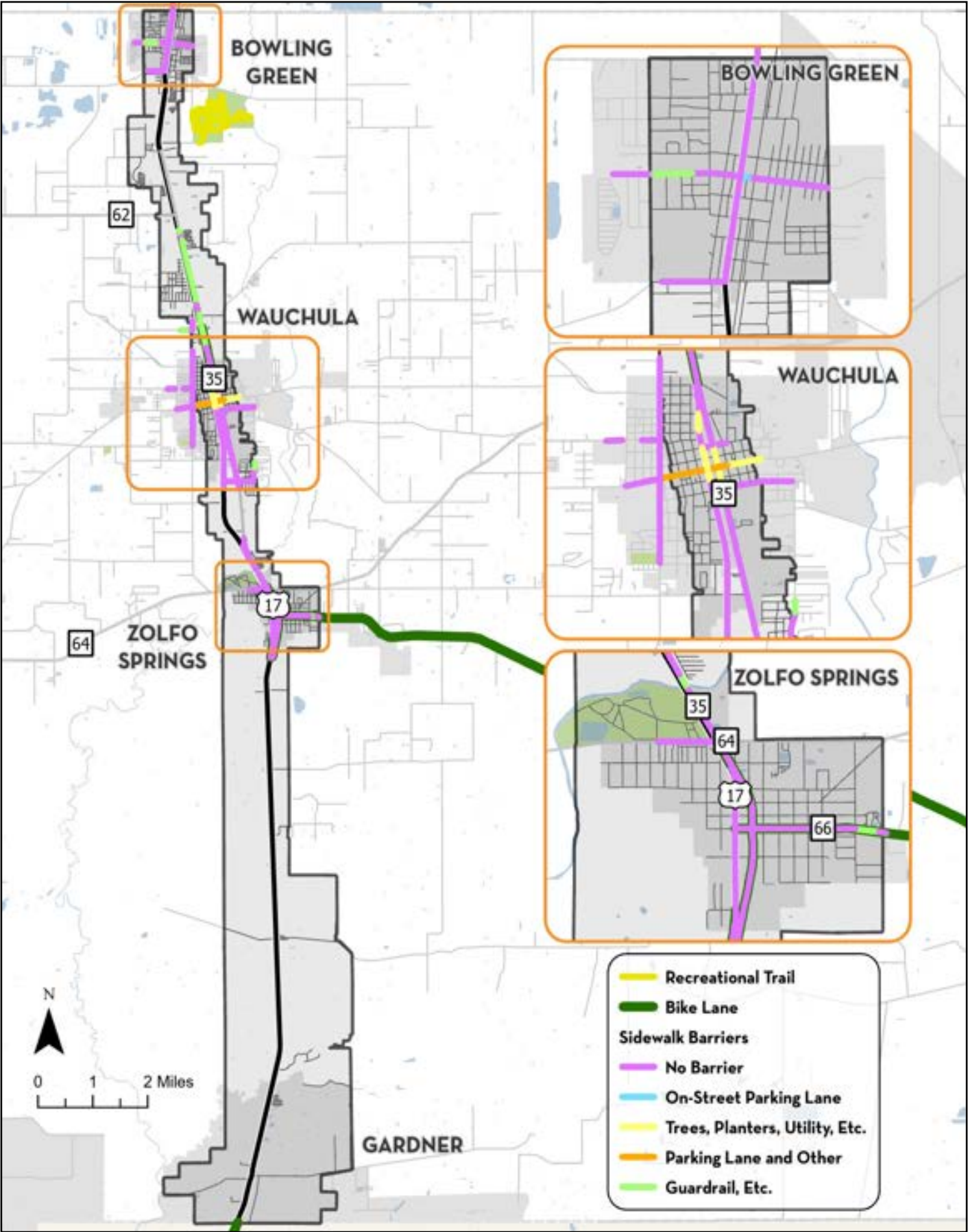
Bicycle Lanes



A bicycle lane is a marked travel lane along a portion of the roadway that has been designated for preferential or exclusive use for bicyclists. They are typically delineated with painted lines. Bicycle lanes are present along portions of US 17 and select side roads, offering limited but valuable infrastructure for cyclists. Most are striped shoulders rather than physically protected lanes, which may present safety concerns along high-speed corridors.

Where are the corridor's active transportation facilities?

Pedestrian facilities are largely concentrated within the three municipalities along the corridor: Bowling Green, Wauchula, and Zolfo Springs. The town centers of these three locations have sidewalks running along major roadways. Sidewalks are also placed along US 17 through the majority of each town's borders. Recreational trails run through Paynes Creek Historic State Park near Bowling Green. There are also bicycle lanes along select sections of US 17 as well as the length of SR 66.

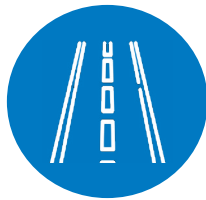


SAFETY & MOBILITY CHALLENGES



SPEEDING & SAFETY RISKS

High speeds contribute to crash risks and unpredictable travel behavior in multiple directions



INCONSISTENT ROADWAY DESIGN

Gaps in signage, striping, and roadway design lead to confusion, congestion, and inconsistent vehicle flow



LACK OF PEDESTRIAN INFRASTRUCTURE

Limited sidewalks and crossings force people to walk in unsafe or undesignated areas, increasing risk and conflicts



SAFETY & MOBILITY OPPORTUNITIES



SAFETY & OPERATIONS

- Add ADA-compliant facilities
- Realign restripe crosswalks
- Use smart signal timing to respond to real-time demand



TRAFFIC MANAGEMENT

- Implement speed feedback signs
- Use traffic calming that supports a regional connector
- Maintain efficient movement for freight and local traffic



MULTIMODAL IMPROVEMENTS

- Build connected sidewalks
- Enhance crossings
- Provide dedicated bike facilities
- Encourage walking and cycling in a safe, comfortable environment



TARGETED OPPORTUNITY AREAS

Not all segments of US 17 function the same - targeted improvements are needed based on context

HIGH SPEED SEGMENTS

Segments of the corridor experiencing higher travel speeds present some of the most critical safety challenges. Targeted strategies in these areas should focus on reinforcing appropriate speed behavior through visible, responsive measures that improve driver awareness and reduce crash risk, while maintaining the corridor's function as a primary travel route.

SCHOOLS & COMMUNITY AREAS

Locations near schools and community destinations require a heightened focus on pedestrian safety and accessibility. Enhancing sidewalks, crossings, and overall connectivity in these areas supports safer daily travel for students and families, while reinforcing the corridor as a place that serves both mobility and community needs.

FREIGHT & REGIONAL MOVEMENT ZONES

As a key regional connector, portions of the corridor must continue to support efficient freight movement. In these areas, improvements should balance safety enhancements with the operational needs of larger vehicles, ensuring that mobility for goods and services is maintained alongside a safer environment for all users.

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY & ACTION PLAN

STRATEGY M1. IMPROVE MULTIMODAL ACCESS BETWEEN NEIGHBORHOODS, SCHOOLS, PARKS, HOUSING AREAS, AND CORRIDOR DESTINATIONS

- **M1.1.** Identify priority sidewalk, crossing, and bicycle connectivity gaps linking neighborhoods, downtowns, schools, parks, and community destinations
- **M1.2.** Support expansion of the Florida Heartland Regional Trail and strengthen connections between the trail, downtowns, and nearby neighborhoods
- **M1.3.** Improve local street and neighborhood connections that provide safer alternatives to short trips on US 17
- **M1.4.** Prioritize safe walking, biking, and transit access between housing areas, schools, parks, and key corridor destinations where appropriate
- **M1.5.** Perform a transportation analysis focusing on transportation disadvantaged populations, household densities, and employment densities to provide guidance on transit options for the area

STRATEGY M2. ADVANCE CORRIDOR SAFETY IMPROVEMENTS FOR ALL ROADWAY USERS

- **M2.1.** Identify high-crash locations and priority safety issues along US 17, including wide turn radii, unsafe crossings, and lighting deficiencies
- **M2.2.** Prioritize intersection, crossing, and lighting improvements that improve safety for pedestrians, bicyclists, and drivers
- **M2.3.** Incorporate context-sensitive design measures in Town Cores and Community Corridors to support safer vehicle speeds and more comfortable pedestrian activity

STRATEGY M3. USE OPERATIONS AND TECHNOLOGY TO IMPROVE CORRIDOR PERFORMANCE AND MANAGE SPEEDS

- **M3.1.** Evaluate opportunities to improve traffic operations through signal timing, traffic monitoring, and intersection safety analysis
- **M3.2.** Implement targeted speed management tools in locations with documented speeding and crash concerns
- **M3.3.** Coordinate access management and driveway consolidation strategies that reduce conflicts and improve corridor function
- **M3.4.** Conduct a feasibility study for a potential east-west connector at SR 62 to improve corridor performance, reduce freight conflicts, and divert truck traffic





CHAPTER 7

EXPAND HOUSING AND STABILIZE NEIGHBORHOODS

As the corridor continues to evolve, housing will be a key factor in supporting economic development, strengthening neighborhoods, and improving overall quality of life. Unlike more traditional growth areas, housing conditions along the corridor must be understood within a broader context that includes rural land use patterns, agricultural activity, and varying levels of development intensity. These factors create a housing landscape that is not uniform, but instead reflects a range of conditions, from established neighborhoods and small-town centers to more rural and transitional areas.

This chapter evaluates housing through a lens of market alignment and opportunity, focusing on how well the existing housing supply supports current and future needs. The following sections present an overview of existing housing conditions, recent trends, and projected demand, which collectively inform strategies aimed at improving housing choice, supporting reinvestment, and guiding more intentional development along the US 17 corridor.

WHAT WE HEARD: HOUSING

NEIGHBORHOOD CONDITIONS AND STABILITY

Nearly half of the Study Area’s housing stock was developed prior to 1980, reflecting a period of more substantial residential development that shaped many of the corridor’s existing neighborhoods. Subsequent decades saw continued housing construction, particularly through the 1990s and early 2000s. While development has occurred more recently, the pace of new housing construction has been comparatively modest relative to earlier periods, particularly since 2010. As housing stock matures, ongoing maintenance, rehabilitation, and reinvestment become increasingly critical to maintaining both housing quality and long-term neighborhood stability. Well-maintained older housing can continue to serve as a valuable asset, supporting established neighborhoods and providing attainable options for residents. However, without consistent reinvestment, aging housing may experience deferred maintenance, declining conditions, and reduced market appeal over time.

The timing and distribution of housing development suggest that newer product has not been introduced at a scale sufficient to significantly shift the overall composition of the housing market. This limits the availability of modern housing options that align with current preferences, including updated layouts, energy efficiency, and proximity to services and employment. As a result, the housing market may struggle to compete with surrounding areas that offer a broader mix of newer and more diverse housing options.

Housing Units by Decade Completed



Source: ESRI BAO



HOUSEHOLDS

Nearly half of all households in the Study Area are married couples, with about 20% having children under 18. Female-headed households without a spouse or partner accounted for nearly a quarter of all households.

Average Household Size (2025)

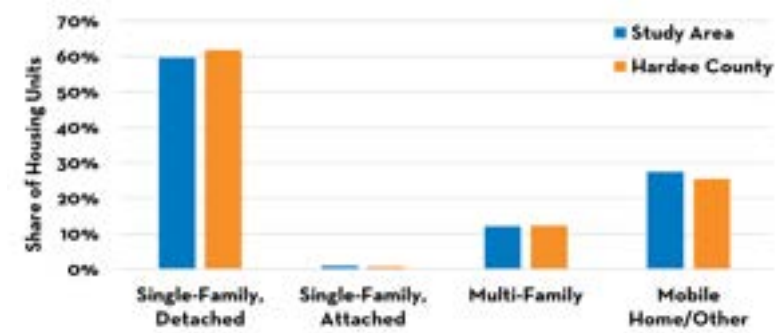


Source: ESRI BAO

HOUSING TYPES

The Study Area’s housing stock consists largely of detached, single-family, followed by mobile homes or other types with small portions of multi-family and single-family attached townhomes.

Housing Units by Type (2025)



Source: US Census ACS, 2019 - 2023; ESRI BAO

HOUSING TENURE

Study Area Occupancy Status (2010-2030)

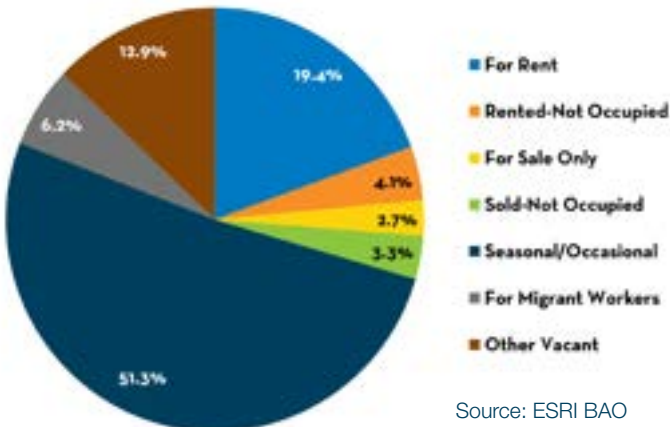
Occupancy	2010	2025	2030 (Projected)
Owner-Occupied	53.8%	51.8%	53.6%
Renter-Occupied	26.0%	23.2%	21.6%
Vacant	20.3%	25.0%	24.8%

Source: ESRI BAO

The Study Area is projected to maintain a majority of owner-occupied housing through 2030, with minimal change from 2010 levels. Meanwhile, renter-occupied housing has steadily declined and is expected to drop to just over 21% by 2030. Vacancy rates have risen over time and are projected to remain elevated, may reflect a combination of seasonal labor demands and temporary housing arrangements rather than long-term market surplus.

Vacant Housing Units by Status (2025)

Vacant housing units in the Study Area are largely attributed to seasonal or occasional use, which accounts for over half of all vacant units. An additional 6.2% are designated for migrant workers, reflecting the area’s agricultural workforce and related housing needs. Units available for rent make up 19.4% of vacancies, while the remaining share is spread across categories such as other vacant units, sold or rented but not yet occupied, and homes for sale.



Source: ESRI BAO

Seasonal and Agricultural Worker Housing

Seasonal and temporary agricultural employment programs support a meaningful component of the local economy and contribute to recurring housing demand across the corridor. This workforce is supported through the H2A temporary agricultural employment programs which generates recurring, seasonal demand for housing across the County. This demand is typically concentrated among a mix of larger and smaller agricultural operations, resulting in housing patterns that differ from traditional residential markets. Many units are occupied on a seasonal basis, contributing to elevated vacancy rates during portions of the year. As a result, vacancy in the Hardee County and the Study Area may not reflect excess housing supply, but rather the cyclical nature of agricultural employment and temporary occupancy. In addition, some housing units are specifically designed to accommodate temporary workers and may not function as part of the long-term housing inventory. These conditions emphasize the importance of distinguishing between seasonal and permanent housing needs when evaluating housing availability and demand. Ensuring that agricultural worker housing is safe, well-maintained, and appropriately located will be important to supporting the local workforce while also maintaining neighborhood quality and long-term housing stability.



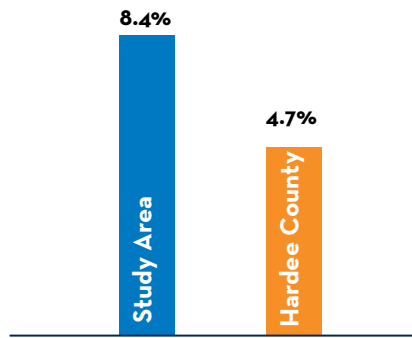
HOUSING UNIT GROWTH

The Study Area’s housing stock has increased by 8.4% over the past 15 years, outpacing the County growth rate of 4.7%. This growth has occurred despite a decline in the Study Area’s population, suggesting a shift in housing demand. A high share of seasonal housing may explain this pattern, indicating that many units are not occupied year-round.

PROJECTED HOUSING UNITS

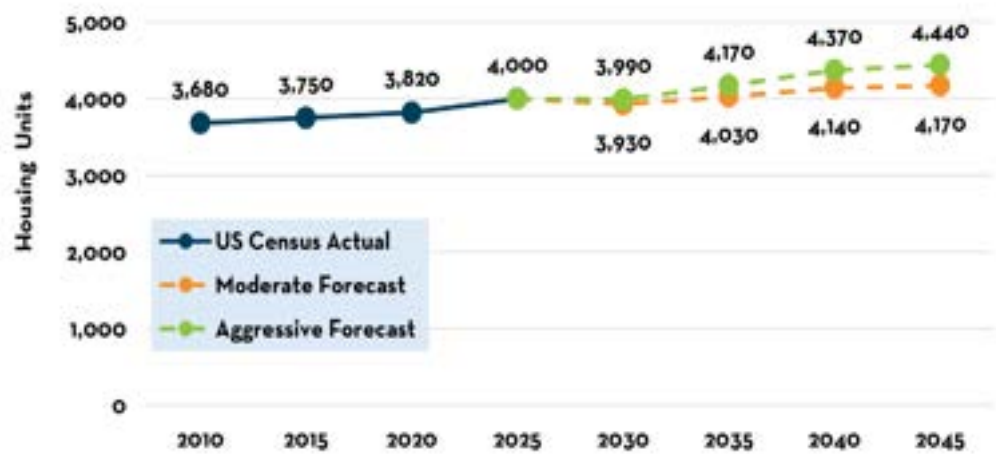
Looking ahead, housing growth is expected to continue in the Study Area, with projections showing a total of 4,170 to 4,440 housing units by 2045, depending on the pace of development. The moderate forecast reflects steady but limited housing construction, while the aggressive forecast assumes a slightly faster rate of new housing development in response to increased demand.

Housing Unit Growth, 2010-2025



Source: ESRI BAO

Housing Unit Forecast (2025-2045)



Source: ESRI BAO, Shimberg Center, Woods & Poole, Kimley-Horn

Median Home Value (2025)

\$165,678

Study Area

\$207,421

Hardee County



HOUSING SUPPLY AND MARKET ALIGNMENT

The housing market in the Study Area is not currently competitive with surrounding areas, limiting its ability to attract and retain residents. While home values are lower than in Hardee County, this does not translate to stronger demand. Instead, it reflects a housing supply that does not align with the expectations of today’s households.

Much of the existing housing stock consists of older, lower-density single-family homes, with limited availability of newer or alternative housing types such as townhomes, multifamily units, or quality rental options. This lack of product diversity restricts choice in the market and makes it difficult to accommodate a range of household types, including young professionals, families, and workforce populations.

At the same time, elevated vacancy rates, driven in part by seasonal and non-permanent housing, further indicate that the issue is not simply supply, but the type and quality of housing available. A portion of the housing inventory is not positioned to support long-term residency, which can weaken neighborhood stability and reduce overall market appeal.

These conditions create a cycle in which limited housing options constrain population growth, workforce attraction, and reinvestment. Without a broader mix of housing types and targeted reinvestment in existing neighborhoods, the Study Area will continue to face challenges in capturing demand that may otherwise be absorbed by nearby communities.

Addressing this issue will require a shift toward more intentional housing development patterns and reinvestment strategies that improve both the quality and competitiveness of the housing market along the corridor.

Infill Development and Housing Diversification

Future housing needs along the US 17 corridor will require a more intentional approach to how and where new housing is developed. Infill development, focused on utilizing vacant or underutilized parcels within existing communities, provides an opportunity to accommodate growth without extending infrastructure or encouraging dispersed development patterns. In addition, diversifying the housing stock beyond traditional single-family homes can help better meet the needs of a broader range of households, including young professionals, seniors, and workforce households. Housing types such as townhomes, duplexes, accessory dwelling units (ADUs), and small-scale multifamily can provide more attainable options while maintaining compatibility with existing neighborhoods. Promoting infill development and housing diversification can support more efficient land use, improve access to jobs and services, and strengthen long-term neighborhood stability along the corridor.



Townhomes



Duplexes



Accessory Dwelling Units

NEIGHBORHOOD STRENGTHS



STABLE NEIGHBORHOODS

Stable established neighborhoods provide attainable housing and long-term community anchors



AVAILABLE LAND

The Study Area has a significant amount of underutilized and vacant land with potential for residential growth



AFFORDABILITY

Home values remain relatively attainable compared to surrounding areas, providing an accessible entry for homeownership

What Does This Mean?

- Stable neighborhoods provide a strong foundation for long-term reinvestment, supporting housing quality, community stability, and sustained neighborhood viability over time
- Available vacant and underutilized land positions the corridor to accommodate future residential growth, particularly in areas with access to infrastructure, services, and the US 17 corridor
- Relative affordability offers an advantage for attracting residents, but will be most effective when paired with a broader range of housing options that meet evolving household needs.

NEIGHBORHOOD CHALLENGES



AGING HOUSING STOCK

Nearly half of the existing housing stock is aging and requires reinvestment to maintain quality and competitiveness



UNDERUTILIZED SITES

Many sites are not currently positioned or marketed for residential investment



LIMITED PRODUCT VARIETY

Limited diversity of housing types restricts choice and market competitiveness

What Does This Mean?

- An aging housing stock will require continued reinvestment, maintenance, and targeted improvements to preserve housing quality and maintain neighborhood stability
- Underutilized sites represent unrealized potential for residential development and will require intentional planning, site readiness, and policy alignment to support reinvestment
- Limited housing product diversity constrains market competitiveness and restricts housing choice, particularly for households seeking alternatives to traditional single-family housing

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY & ACTION PLAN

STRATEGY H1. ENCOURAGE INFILL HOUSING AND NEIGHBORHOOD COMPATIBLE DEVELOPMENT

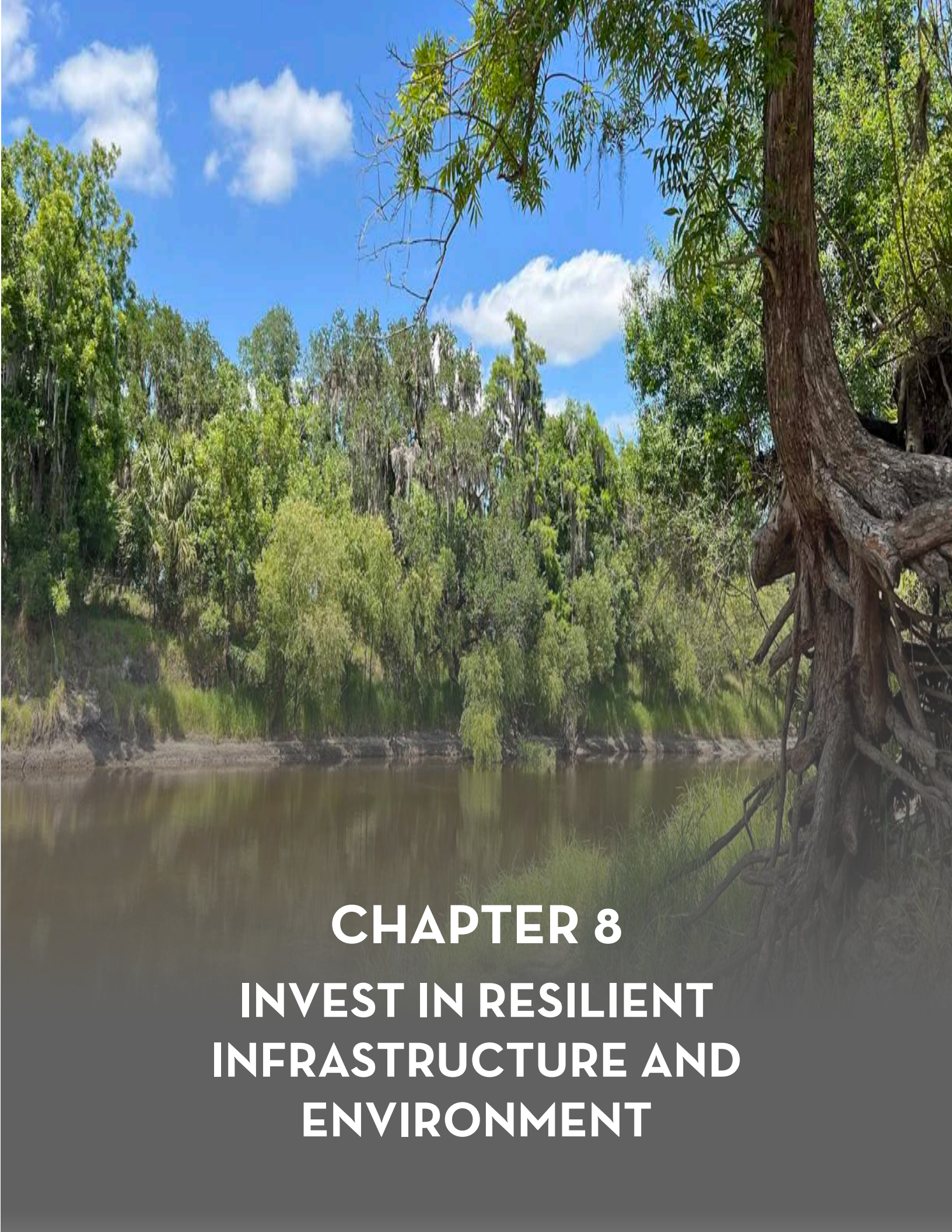
- **H1.1.** Identify priority infill and redevelopment sites along the corridor and evaluate infrastructure and mobility improvements needed to support housing development
- **H1.2.** Update zoning and development regulations to enable diverse housing types such as ADUs, duplexes, and small multifamily housing in appropriate corridor locations
- **H1.3.** Evaluate and refine existing incentives and development review processes to better support infill and market-rate housing in priority areas

STRATEGY H2. STABILIZE EXISTING NEIGHBORHOODS AND IMPROVE HOUSING CONDITIONS

- **H2.1.** Identify priority neighborhoods with substandard housing conditions and target rehabilitation and repair assistance programs to those areas
- **H2.2.** Expand and coordinate housing rehabilitation funding programs (SHIP, CDBG, and other tools) for owner-occupied and rental housing
- **H2.3.** Strengthen code enforcement and coordinated community-wide approaches to address vacant, abandoned, and deteriorating residential properties, including partnerships with local jurisdictions, property owners, and residents
- **H2.4.** Prioritize neighborhood infrastructure improvements (sidewalks, drainage, lighting) in capital improvement programs to support housing areas and connections to schools and parks
- **H2.5.** Coordinate with agricultural employers and state partners to ensure H2A housing is safe, well-maintained, and compliant with federal and state standards

STRATEGY H3. EXPAND AFFORDABLE, WORKFORCE, AND SUPPORTIVE HOUSING OPTIONS

- **H3.1.** Align workforce housing development with employment centers and transportation improvements that improve access to jobs
- **H3.2.** Coordinate with housing and service providers to identify gaps in emergency, transitional, supportive, and senior housing options and encourage development near services and transportation



CHAPTER 8

INVEST IN RESILIENT INFRASTRUCTURE AND ENVIRONMENT

As communities along the US 17 corridor continue to evolve, ensuring that infrastructure systems are reliable, adaptable, and aligned with future development needs will be essential. Resilience in this context extends beyond environmental considerations and includes the ability of utilities, stormwater systems, public facilities, and natural assets to function effectively under both everyday conditions and periods of disruption. These systems directly influence where growth can occur, how communities respond to challenges, and the long-term cost of maintaining public infrastructure.

This chapter evaluates infrastructure and environmental conditions through a lens of resilience and opportunity, identifying key system constraints and opportunities that will guide targeted investment, reduce risk, and support sustainable growth along the corridor.

WHAT WE LEARNED: INFRASTRUCTURE INFRASTRUCTURE READINESS AND GROWTH ALIGNMENT

Infrastructure capacity across the corridor is uneven and closely tied to where growth has historically occurred. Wauchula, Bowling Green, and Zolfo Springs have the most established utility systems, while areas outside these nodes often lack the infrastructure needed to support redevelopment or new employment uses. This creates a development pattern where land availability alone does not determine opportunity. Instead, the ability to extend or upgrade utilities, including water, wastewater, stormwater, and broadband, becomes a primary constraint.

Infrastructure limitations increase the cost and complexity of development, making reinvestment less feasible without coordinated planning and funding strategies. As a result, infrastructure readiness functions as a gatekeeper for growth, reinforcing the importance of aligning future development with areas that can be efficiently served.

Infrastructure Systems and Service Providers

Infrastructure across the US 17 corridor is delivered through a mix of municipal systems, regional utilities, and private providers. Service areas vary by location, influencing infrastructure capacity, coordination and long-term growth potential.



Water & Wastewater Systems

Service is focused in municipal areas; limited availability in outlying regions

- City of Wauchula
- Bowling Green Public Works
- Town of Zolfo Springs
- Charlie Creek Utilities
- TBBT Utility LLC



Stormwater Infrastructure

Coordination needed to manage localized flooding

- Municipal Public Works Dept.
- Hardee County
- FDOT



Electric Service

Regional utilities serve current development areas

- Duke Energy
- Peace River Electric Co-op
- City of Wauchula
- Florida Power & Light Company



Broadband Providers

Stronger coverage in town centers, limited rural access

- Comcast
- Spectrum
- Frontier



Solid Waste & Recycling

Waste services are coordinated at the County level

- Hardee County
- Private Haulers

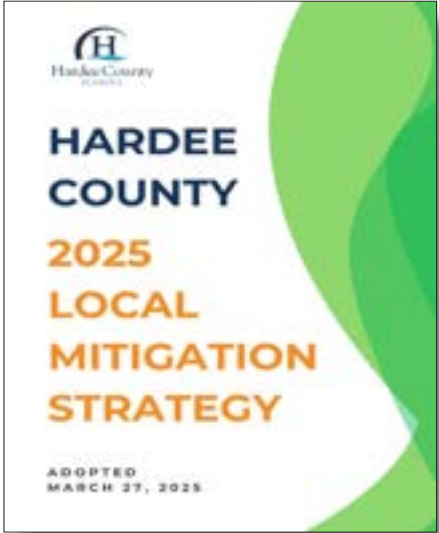
CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND CORRIDOR RESILIENCE

US 17 serves as a lifeline corridor, supporting not only daily travel but also emergency response, evacuation, and regional connectivity. The corridor’s ability to remain functional during disruptions depends on the reliability of infrastructure systems and the coordination between local, regional, and state partners.

Critical facilities, including utilities, emergency services, and public infrastructure, must be supported by systems that can withstand stress and recover quickly. However, coordination across jurisdictions remains a key challenge, particularly in aligning infrastructure planning, emergency preparedness, and long-term investment strategies. Strengthening corridor resilience will require a shared approach to identifying priority assets, maintaining lifeline routes, and ensuring that infrastructure systems support both everyday conditions and emergency scenarios.

County Coordination & Mitigation Planning

Infrastructure and emergency response systems along the corridor operate within a multi-jurisdictional framework that includes Hardee County and its municipalities. The Local Mitigation Strategy (LMS) establishes a planning process that brings together local governments, agencies, and community partners to identify risks, prioritize mitigation actions, and coordinate long-term resilience efforts. This coordinated approach ensures that infrastructure investments align with shared priorities and that response efforts are effectively managed across jurisdictional boundaries. Ongoing coordination, regular plan updates, and integration with other planning efforts, such as capital improvement programs and land use planning, support a more unified and adaptive approach to resilience.



Infrastructure Interdependency

Critical infrastructure systems across the corridor are highly interconnected, meaning that disruptions to one system can have cascading impacts on others. The LMS evaluates infrastructure systems collectively—including utilities, transportation networks, and public facilities—to better understand how hazards affect overall system performance.

For example, flooding or severe weather events can disrupt power supply, which in turn may affect water and wastewater treatment operations, communication systems, and emergency response capabilities. Similarly, transportation disruptions can limit access to critical facilities and delay response and recovery efforts. Recognizing these interdependencies ensures that infrastructure investments support system-wide reliability.

Exposure & Resilience Considerations

Hazard events, including flooding, severe weather, and extreme temperatures, can directly impact infrastructure systems, public safety, and economic activity. These events may disrupt utilities, damage transportation networks, and introduce risks to public health and safety. The LMS highlights the importance of identifying vulnerable areas, protecting critical assets, and incorporating mitigation strategies into both new development and redevelopment.

Strengthening resilience will require a proactive approach that prioritizes investments in reliable infrastructure, supports redundancy in critical systems, and aligns infrastructure planning with hazard mitigation strategies. This includes improving system capacity, protecting natural assets that provide mitigation benefits, and ensuring that infrastructure systems can recover quickly following disruption.

STORMWATER AND FLOOD RISK CONDITIONS

Flooding risks extends across a significant portion of the corridor, with approximately 107,000 acres of land and water areas identified as vulnerable. These areas are generally concentrated along major waterways including the Peace River, Horse Creek, and Charlie Creek, and affect all jurisdictions along the corridor.

Flooding has widespread impacts on economies and infrastructure. Flood events present both immediate threats to public safety and long-term constraints on economic activity. Repetitive flooding has been recorded in flood-prone communities and residential areas like Bronco Drive and Riverview Heights, as well as along key corridors such as County Line Rd. West Banana St. and Central Ave.

Frequent or prolonged flooding events can cause millions or even billions of dollars in property damage across the corridor, undermine infrastructure systems and delay recovery.

- Flood events can overwhelm stormwater infrastructure, reducing water/wastewater treatment capacity, contaminating potable water supplies, or damaging critical facilities.
- Repetitive flooded areas include Bronco Dr and Riverview Heights (Wauchula), where flood claims and recovery costs are recurring
- Flash flooding can occur in less than 1 hour and rising waters may reach over 1 foot deep, posing immediate safety risks and rendering key corridors impassable.



107,443 ACRES AT FLOOD RISK

- Approximately 38% of Hardee County
- Extends through cities and unincorporated areas
- Highest risk along Peace River, Horse Creek, and Charlie Creek.

IMPACTS OF RECURRING FLOODING



Utilities contamination & capacity impacts



Transportation disruptions & closures



Business damage & lost economic activity



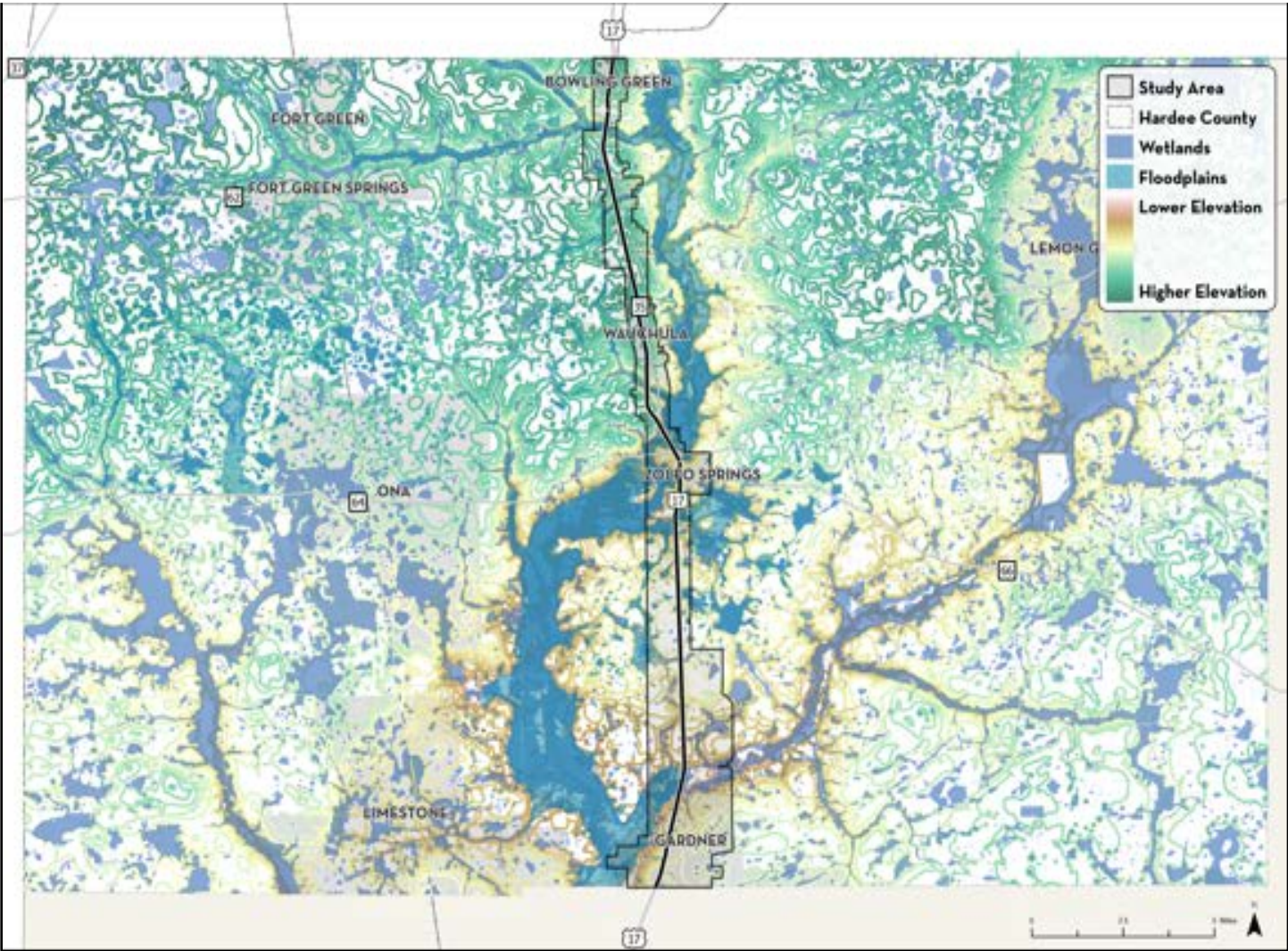
Agriculture damage & public health risks

NATURAL SYSTEMS & ENVIRONMENTAL ASSETS

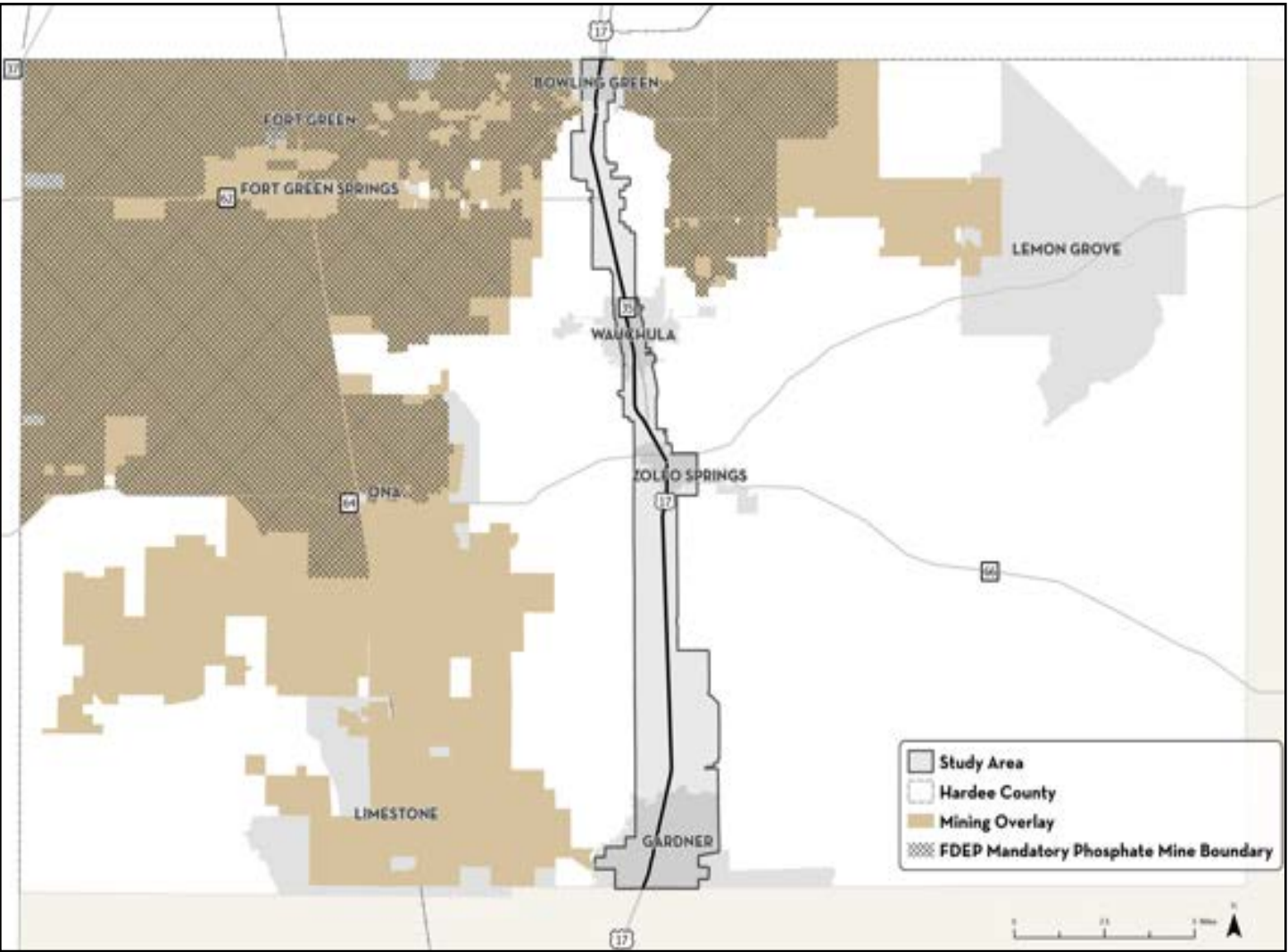
Natural systems play a defining role in shaping both the opportunities and constraints of the corridor. The Peace River and surrounding drainage patterns form the backbone of the corridor’s environmental framework, supporting water quality, recreation, and regional identity.

These assets also influence where and how development can occur. Floodplains, agricultural lands, and environmentally sensitive areas limit the expansion of infrastructure while reinforcing the importance of directing growth toward serviced locations. At the same time, these natural systems present opportunities to integrate green infrastructure, expand park and trail networks, and enhance access to recreational assets.

When leveraged effectively, environmental systems can function as both resilience infrastructure and economic drivers, supporting tourism, quality of life, and long-term sustainability.



MINING LAND USES



Phosphate mining plays an important role in the economy and land use patterns of Hardee County. Much of the land west and south of the Study Area falls within the County’s Mining Overlay District, with large portions also included in the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) Mandatory Phosphate Mine Boundary. These areas represent active or planned mining operations that are subject to both local and state oversight. While the Study Area itself avoids direct overlap with the phosphate mine boundary, its proximity means that regional infrastructure, including US 17, serves as a key corridor for transporting materials and supporting mining-related operations.



STRENGTHS & OPPORTUNITIES

STRENGTHS TO BUILD ON



TARGETED INFRASTRUCTURE CAPACITY IN KEY AREAS

Infrastructure systems within town cores and serviced areas provide a foundation for reinvestment, though capacity and availability vary across the corridor



NATURAL SYSTEMS SUPPORT RESILIENCE AND DEFINE GROWTH PATTERNS

The Peace River, floodplains, and agricultural lands contribute to environmental resilience while shaping where development can occur



US 17 AS A REGIONAL LIFELINE CORRIDOR

US 17 supports daily mobility, freight movement, and emergency response, reinforcing its role as a regional connector



COORDINATED PLANNING FRAMEWORKS IN PLACE

Local and regional plans provide a framework for aligning infrastructure investment, hazard mitigation, and future growth

A UNIFIED APPROACH TO CORRIDOR RESILIENCE

Strengthening corridor resilience will require a unified approach, that prioritizes investments in reliable infrastructure, supports public safety, and economic activity, these events may disrupt utilities, damage transportation networks, and introduce risks to public health and safety.

OPPORTUNITIES TO ADDRESS



INFRASTRUCTURE CAPACITY GAPS AND MODERNIZATION NEEDS

Uneven infrastructure capacity and aging systems limit redevelopment potential and require targeted upgrades in priority areas



WIDESPREAD FLOOD RISK AND STORMWATER CONSTRAINTS

Flooding affects a significant portion of the corridor, impacting safety, infrastructure performance, and redevelopment feasibility



LONG-TERM INFRASTRUCTURE MAINTENANCE AND FUNDING CHALLENGES

Deferred maintenance, funding limitations, and coordination challenges may reduce system reliability and delay critical improvements



BROADBAND ACCESS AND DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE GAPS

Uneven broadband coverage limits economic opportunity, workforce access, and business development, particularly in rural areas



CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE VULNERABILITY AND SYSTEM INTERDEPENDENCIES

Interconnected infrastructure systems create cascading risks, where disruptions to utilities, transportation, or critical facilities impact overall corridor function

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY & ACTION PLAN

STRATEGY R1. MODERNIZE INFRASTRUCTURE TO SUPPORT TARGETED GROWTH

- **R1.1.** Assess infrastructure capacity (utilities, stormwater, broadband) serving priority redevelopment nodes and Employment & Industry Centers
- **R1.2.** Develop a phasing and funding strategy for utility extensions and infrastructure upgrades aligned with priority sites and Context Zones
- **R1.3.** Coordinate broadband expansion with service providers to improve reliability and coverage for businesses and residents
- **R1.4.** Identify priority streetscape and drainage improvements in Town Cores and key Community Corridor nodes

STRATEGY R2. IMPROVE STORMWATER MANAGEMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL RESILIENCE

- **R2.1.** Conduct targeted drainage and flood mitigation assessments in Town Cores and key Community Corridors
- **R2.2.** Develop a prioritized stormwater capital program that coordinates with roadway, streetscape, and redevelopment projects
- **R2.3.** Integrate green infrastructure, tree canopy, and heat mitigation elements into corridor public-space and streetscape projects
- **R2.4.** Prioritize infrastructure projects that reduce flooding, improve stormwater performance, and enhance water quality outcomes

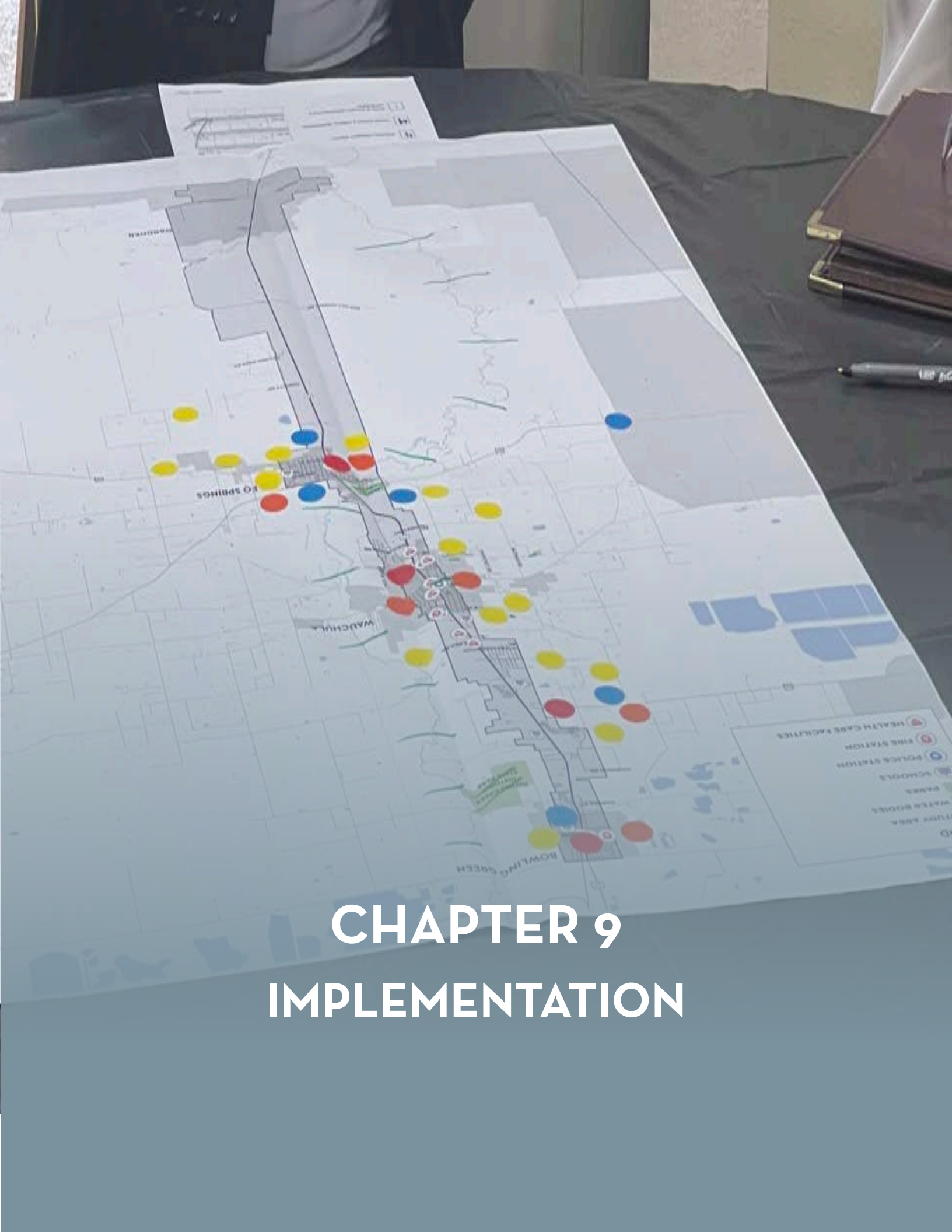
STRATEGY R3. STRENGTHEN CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

- **R3.1.** Identify critical facilities and lifeline routes along the corridor and incorporate resilience needs into infrastructure planning
- **R3.2.** Coordinate with FDOT, HRTPO, and emergency management agencies to strengthen evacuation routes and post-event recovery capacity
- **R3.3.** Align capital improvement planning and infrastructure asset management practices across Hardee County and municipalities

STRATEGY R4. PROTECT NATURAL ASSETS AND EXPAND GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE

- **R4.1.** Identify conservation, greenway, and trail opportunities that strengthen access to the Peace River and other natural assets
- **R4.2.** Coordinate park access, trails, and wayfinding improvements as part of the corridor implementation program
- **R4.3.** Promote redevelopment and adaptive reuse of brownfield or post-mining sites where appropriate





CHAPTER 9 IMPLEMENTATION

HOW TO USE THIS PLAN

The US 17 Economic Development Initiative is designed to function as a practical implementation tool, not solely a policy document. Building on the vision, goals, and strategies established in previous chapters, this plan provides a structured framework to guide decision-making, prioritize investments, and coordinate actions across jurisdictions and partners. This chapter translates planning concepts into clear, actionable direction, enabling Hardee County, its municipalities, and partner organizations to move from strategy to execution in a coordinated and measurable way. As introduced earlier in the report, the initiative is intended to support informed decisions related to land use, infrastructure, workforce development, and economic growth while aligning public and private investment along the corridor.

While this plan provides a clear framework, it is not intended to be static. Market conditions, funding availability, and community priorities will continue to evolve over time. As such, this document should be used as a living guide, with periodic updates to reflect progress, emerging opportunities, and changing conditions. Regular coordination among County staff, municipalities, and partner organizations will be critical to maintaining momentum and ensuring that implementation efforts remain aligned with the corridor’s long-term vision.

INTENDED USE AND APPLICATION

This plan is designed to be used in multiple ways, depending on the decision context:

Guide Public Investment Decisions
The plan helps prioritize infrastructure, mobility, and public facility investments to ensure they support long-term economic activity and corridor functionality

Support Development Review and Evaluation
Strategies and context zones provide a consistent framework for evaluating private development proposals and ensuring alignment with corridor goals and character

Inform Grant Funding and Programs
The identified strategies and actions can be used to support grant applications, capital improvement planning, and targeted funding initiatives

Coordinate Across Jurisdiction and Partners
Given the multi-jurisdictional nature of the US 17 corridor, the plan serves as a shared reference point for Hardee County, municipalities, regional agencies, and organizations to align efforts and resources

Guide Incremental and Long-Term Decision Making
The plan is structured to support both near-term actions and long-term initiatives, allowing the County to respond to opportunities as they arise while maintaining alignment with the broader vision

FROM VISION TO IMPLEMENTATION

The structure of this plan is intentionally designed to move from vision, goals, strategies, and actions. The five goal areas establish the overarching framework for the corridor’s future, while the strategies and actions identified in previous chapters provide targeted direction for achieving those goals.

Organizing actions by priority and timeframe

Identifying responsible lead agencies and partners

Highlight resources considerations (time and costs)

Aligning actions with corridor context zones

VISION

GOALS

STRATEGIES

ACTIONS

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

The Implementation Matrix translates the plan’s vision and strategies into a clear, actionable framework for execution. Organized by the five goal areas, the matrix serves as a decision-making tool that identifies what actions should occur, where they should be focused, and how they can be realistically implemented over time.

Developed through a combination of technical analysis, stakeholder input, and coordination with local and regional partners, the matrix reflects both market realities and community priorities. This collaborative approach ensures that recommended actions are not only aspirational, but grounded in the operational, financial, and institutional context of Hardee County and its municipalities. For each strategy the matrix defines key components necessary to move from planning to implementation.

Context Zones

Identifies where the action is most applicable based on the corridor’s distinct development patterns, to ensure that recommendations are tailored to the physical and functional characteristics of each area.

- Rural Conservation (RC)
- Rural Services (RS)
- Town Core (TC)
- Town Fringe (TF)
- Community Corridors (CC)
- Employment and Industry Centers (EIC)

Type of Action

Clarifies the nature of the recommendation, distinguishing between policy, infrastructure, programmatic, regulatory, or partnership-based actions. This helps define the level of effort and approach required for implementation.

- Plan/Study
- Policy/Regulation
- Program/Initiative
- Project/Investment

Timeframe

Establishes when an action should begin and the anticipated timeframe for completion. This allows for sequencing of efforts and ensure alignment with funding cycles and capital planning.

- | Initiation | Duration |
|--------------------------|--------------|
| • Short-Term (0-2 years) | • Ongoing |
| • Mid-Term (3-5 years) | • Standalone |
| • Long-Term (5+ years) | |

Responsible Entities

Identifies the primary organization(s) responsible for advancing each action. Given the multi-jurisdictional nature of the corridor and the role of agencies, this helps clarify accountability and coordination needs.

- Central Florida Regional Planning Council (CFRPC)
- Chamber of Commerce (COC)
- Community Redevelopment Agencies (CRA)
- Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT)
- Housing Authority (HA)
- Hardee County (HC)
- Heartland Regional Transportation Planning Organization (HRTPO)
- Industrial Development Authority (IDA)
- Municipalities (MUNI)
- Schools (SCH)
- The Development Group (TDG)
- Utilities (UTIL)
- Workforce Development Agencies (WFD)

Resources

Provides a high-level estimate of the effort required to implement each action. These indicators support prioritization and help align actions with available staffing capacity and funding availability.

- High
- Medium
- Low

Community Priority

Reflects the importance of each action based on stakeholder and community input gathered throughout the planning process.



Priority Actions



			Context Zone	Type of Action		Timeframe		Responsible Entities	Resource		Community Priority	
						Initiation	Duration		Time	Costs		
REINFORCE COMMUNITY IDENTITY												
STRATEGY IDENTITY 1	Create a recognizable US 17 corridor identity that highlights Hardee County’s downtowns, agricultural heritage, and natural assets											
IDENTITY 1.1	Develop a coordinated US 17 corridor branding and identity program	All	Plan/Study	Short-Term (0-2 years)		Standalone	HC MUNI	Medium	Medium			
IDENTITY 1.2	Build on and coordinate existing gateway initiatives to establish a cohesive, tiered system identifying county entry points, municipal boundaries, and downtown approaches	RS TC CC	Program/Initiative	Short-Term (0-2 years)		Standalone	HC MUNI	Medium	Medium			
IDENTITY 1.3	Implement corridor wayfinding connecting downtowns, parks, river access, and tourism destinations	RS TC CC	Project/Investment	Mid-Term (3-5 years)		Standalone	HC	Medium	High			
IDENTITY 1.4	Establish a US 17 corridor coordination group to guide implementation of corridor branding, gateway design, and wayfinding standards	All	Program/Initiative	Short-Term (0-2 years)		Ongoing	HC MUNI	Medium	Low			
STRATEGY IDENTITY 2	Strengthen the visibility and role of downtowns along the US 17 corridor											
IDENTITY 2.1	Launch 2–3 early placemaking projects along the corridor to establish visible identity	TC CC	Project/Investment	Mid-Term (3-5 years)		Standalone	MUNI	Medium	Medium			
IDENTITY 2.2	Identify corridor-visible public spaces and civic anchors near US 17	TC CC	Plan/Study	Short-Term (0-2 years)	Standalone	MUNI	Low	Low				
IDENTITY 2.3	Encourage public art, murals, and façade improvements on corridor-facing buildings to strengthen the visual presence of downtowns along US 17	TC CC	Program/Initiative	Short-Term (0-2 years)	Ongoing	MUNI TDG CRA	Low	Low				
IDENTITY 2.4	Implement small-scale gateway and streetscape improvements at downtown approaches to signal entry into Town Cores from US 17	TC	Program/Initiative	Short-Term (0-2 years)	Ongoing	MUNI TDG CRA	Medium	Medium				

		Context Zone	Type of Action		Timeframe		Responsible Entities	Resource		Community Priority	
					Initiation	Duration		Time	Costs		
STRATEGY IDENTITY 3	Celebrate agricultural heritage and natural assets along the corridor										
IDENTITY 3.1	Promote agritourism destinations, heritage sites, and rural businesses through corridor signage and marketing	RC RS	Program/Initiative		Short-Term (0-2 years)	Ongoing	HC TDG COC	Low	Low		
IDENTITY 3.2	Identify locations for seasonal markets, harvest events, and agritourism activities along US 17	RS TC	Plan/Study		Mid-Term (3-5 years)	Standalone	TDG MUNI	Low	Low		
IDENTITY 3.3	Improve visibility, access, and awareness of major natural assets such as the Peace River, parks, and trails through wayfinding, marketing, and coordinated promotion	RS RS TC	Project/Investment		Long-Term (5+ years)	Standalone	HC FDOT HRTPO	Medium	High		
STRATEGY IDENTITY 4	Strengthen public spaces and civic destinations along US 17										
IDENTITY 4.1	Prioritize public space improvements that support downtown activity and community events	TC	Plan/Study		Short-Term (0-2 years)	Standalone	CRA MUNI	Low	Low		
IDENTITY 4.2	Coordinate public space investments with redevelopment and small business initiatives	TC CC	Program/Initiative		Mid-Term (3-5 years)	Standalone	COC CRA	Medium	Medium		
REINFORCE COMMUNITY IDENTITY											
STRATEGY ECONOMY 1	Strengthen workforce alignment and business support along the corridor										
ECONOMY 1.1	Strengthen coordination among employers, schools, and workforce partners through a US 17 corridor roundtable or similar ongoing partnership structure	All	Program/Initiative		Short-Term (0-2 years)	Ongoing	IDA	Low	Low		
ECONOMY 1.2	Identify target industries and workforce needs tied to major corridor employers, opportunity sites, and emerging industry trends	CC EIC	Plan/Study		Short-Term (0-2 years)	Standalone	TDG	Medium	Medium		
ECONOMY 1.3	Continue and expand regular business outreach and retention visits with corridor employers and small businesses	TC CC EIC	Program/Initiative		Short-Term (0-2 years)	Ongoing	COC	Low	Low		
ECONOMY 1.4	Expand partnerships with schools, colleges, and workforce providers to strengthen internships, apprenticeships, and career pathways aligned with corridor industries	TC CC EIC	Program/Initiative		Short-Term (0-2 years)	Ongoing	WFD SCH MUNI	Medium	Medium		

		Context Zone	Type of Action		Timeframe		Responsible Entities	Resource		Community Priority
					Initiation	Duration		Time	Costs	
ECONOMY 1.5	Develop a small business resource guide for the US 17 corridor, providing information on starting, locating, and growing a business, including permitting, funding resources, and local support services	TC CC EIC	Program/Initiative		Mid-Term (3-5 years)	Ongoing	TDG	Low	Low	
STRATEGY ECONOMY 2	Advance downtown and corridor redevelopment opportunities									
ECONOMY 2.1	Prepare a corridor opportunity site inventory of vacant and underutilized parcels along US 17	TC CC EIC	Plan/Study		Short-Term (0-2 years)	Standalone	TDG	Medium	Medium	
ECONOMY 2.2	Evaluate tools and incentives to address long-term vacant and underutilized commercial properties along the corridor to encourage reinvestment and occupancy	CC TC EIC	Plan/Study		Short-Term (0-2 years)	Standalone	HC MUNI	Medium	High	
ECONOMY 2.3	Package catalyst redevelopment sites for marketing and investment in corridor communities beyond Wauchula, building on existing market analysis and redevelopment planning efforts	TC CC	Program/Initiative		Long-Term (5+ years)	Standalone	IDA TDG	High	High	
ECONOMY 2.4	Support reinvestment and adaptive reuse of existing commercial properties along the US 17 corridor, including guidance, incentives, and tools to improve building conditions, occupancy, and long-term viability	TC CC	Program/Initiative		Short-Term (0-2 years)	Ongoing	HC MUNI	Medium	Medium	
ECONOMY 2.5	Encourage temporary uses, façade improvements, and storefront activation in downtowns and key corridor nodes	TC CC	Program/Initiative		Short-Term (0-2 years)	Ongoing	CRA	Low	Low	
STRATEGY ECONOMY 3	Leverage tourism and agritourism assets to support corridor businesses									
ECONOMY 3.1	Implement corridor wayfinding linking downtowns, parks, river access points, and the Florida Cracker Trail	RC RS TC CC	Project/Investment		Long-Term (5+ years)	Standalone	HC MUNI	Medium	High	
ECONOMY 3.2	Package priority economic development, infrastructure, and downtown projects along the corridor for grant applications	TC CC EIC	Program/Initiative		Short-Term (0-2 years)	Ongoing	HC MUNI	Medium	Low	

			Context Zone	Type of Action		Timeframe		Responsible Entities	Resource		Community Priority
						Initiation	Duration		Time	Costs	
IMPROVE MOBILITY AND SAFETY											
STRATEGY MOBILITY 1	Improve multimodal access between neighborhoods, schools, parks, housing areas, and corridor destinations										
MOBILITY 1.1	Identify priority sidewalk, crossing, and bicycle connectivity gaps linking neighborhoods, downtowns, schools, parks, and community destinations	TF TC RC	Plan/Study	Short-Term (0-2 years)		Standalone	HC MUNI HRTPO	Medium	Low		
MOBILITY 1.2	Support expansion of the Florida Heartland Regional Trail and strengthen connections between the trail, downtowns, and nearby neighborhoods	RC RS TC CC	Project/Investment	Mid-Term (3-5 years)		Ongoing	HC MUNI HRTPO	High	High		
MOBILITY 1.3	Improve local street and neighborhood connections that provide safer alternatives to short trips on US 17	TF TC CC	Project/Investment	Mid-Term (3-5 years)		Ongoing	HC MUNI FDOT	High	High		
MOBILITY 1.4	Prioritize safe walking, biking, and transit access between housing areas, schools, parks, and key corridor destinations where appropriate	TF TC CC RS	Program/Initiative	Short-Term (0-2 years)		Ongoing	HC MUNI SCH	Medium	Medium		
MOBILITY 1.5	Perform a transportation analysis focusing on transportation disadvantaged populations, household densities, and employment densities to provide guidance on transit options for the area	All	Plan/Study	Short-Term (0-2 years)		Standalone	HC MUNI HRTPO	Medium	Medium		
STRATEGY MOBILITY 2	Advance corridor safety improvements for all roadway users										
MOBILITY 2.1	Identify high-crash locations and priority safety issues along US 17, including wide turn radii, unsafe crossings, and lighting deficiencies	TC CC EIC	Plan/Study	Short-Term (0-2 years)	Standalone	FDOT HC HRTPO	Medium	Low			
MOBILITY 2.2	Prioritize intersection, crossing, and lighting improvements that improve safety for pedestrians, bicyclists, and drivers	TC CC TF	Project/Investment	Mid-Term (3-5 years)	Ongoing	FDOT HC MUNI	High	High			
MOBILITY2.3	Incorporate context-sensitive design measures in Town Cores and Community Corridors to support safer vehicle speeds and more comfortable pedestrian activity	TC CC	Policy/Regulation	Long-Term (5+ years)	Ongoing	FDOT HC MUNI	Medium	Medium			

		Context Zone	Type of Action		Timeframe		Responsible Entities	Resource		Community Priority	
					Initiation	Duration		Time	Costs		
STRATEGY MOBILITY 3	Use operations and technology to improve corridor performance and manage speeds										
MOBILITY 3.1	Evaluate opportunities to improve traffic operations through signal timing, traffic monitoring, and intersection safety analysis	CC TC EIC	Plan/Study		Short-Term (0-2 years)	Standalone	FDOT HRTPO	Medium	Medium		
MOBILITY 3.2	Implement targeted speed management tools in locations with documented speeding and crash concerns	CC TC RS	Project/Investment		Mid-Term (3-5 years)	Ongoing	FDOT HC	Medium	Medium		
MOBILITY 3.3	Coordinate access management and driveway consolidation strategies that reduce conflicts and improve corridor function	CC EIC RS	Policy/Regulation	Mid-Term (3-5 years)	Ongoing	FDOT HC MUNI	High	Medium			
MOBILITY 3.4	Conduct a feasibility study for a potential east–west connector at SR 62 to improve corridor performance, reduce freight traffic, and divert truck traffic	CC TC	Plan/Study	Mid-Term (3-5 years)	Standalone	HC FDOT	Low	Medium			
EXPAND HOUSING AND STABILIZE NEIGHBORHOODS											
STRATEGY HOUSING 1	Encourage infill housing and neighborhood-compatible development										
HOUSING 1.1	Identify priority infill and redevelopment sites along the corridor and evaluate infrastructure and mobility improvements needed to support housing development	TC TF CC	Plan/Study		Short-Term (0-2 years)	Standalone	HC MUNI	Medium	Low		
HOUSING 1.2	Update zoning and development regulations to enable diverse housing types such as ADUs, duplexes, and small multifamily housing in appropriate corridor locations	TC TF CC	Policy/Regulation		Mid-Term (3-5 years)	Ongoing	HC MUNI	Medium	Low		
HOUSING 1.3	Evaluate and refine existing incentives and development review processes to better support infill and market-rate housing in priority areas	TC TF CC	Program/Initiative		Mid-Term (3-5 years)	Ongoing	HC MUNI CRA	Medium	Medium		

		Context Zone	Type of Action		Timeframe		Responsible Entities	Resource		Community Priority
					Initiation	Duration		Time	Costs	
STRATEGY HOUSING 2	Stabilize existing neighborhoods and improve housing conditions									
HOUSING 2.1	Identify priority neighborhoods with substandard housing conditions and target rehabilitation and repair assistance programs to those areas	TC RS	Plan/Study		Short-Term (0-2 years)	Standalone	HC HA MUNI	Medium	Low	
HOUSING 2.2	Expand and coordinate housing rehabilitation funding programs (SHIP, CDBG, and other tools) for owner-occupied and rental housing	TC TF RS	Program/Initiative		Mid-Term (3-5 years)	Ongoing	HC HA MUNI	High	High	
HOUSING 2.3	Strengthen code enforcement and coordinated, community-wide approaches to address vacant, abandoned, and deteriorating residential properties, including partnerships with local jurisdictions, property owners, and residents	TF RS	Policy/Regulation		Mid-Term (3-5 years)	Ongoing	HC MUNI	Medium	Medium	
HOUSING 2.4	Prioritize neighborhood infrastructure improvements (sidewalks, drainage, lighting) in capital improvement programs to support housing areas and connections to schools and parks	RC RS	Project/Investment		Long-Term (5+ years)	Ongoing	HC MUNI UTLI	High	High	
HOUSING 2.5	Coordinate with agricultural employers and state partners to ensure H2A housing is safe, well-maintained, and compliant with federal and state standards	RC RS	Program/Initiative		Short-Term (0-2 years)	Ongoing	HC HA	Low	Low	
STRATEGY HOUSING 3	Expand affordable, workforce, and supportive housing options									
HOUSING 3.1	Align workforce housing development with employment centers and transportation improvements that improve access to jobs	CC EIC TF	Plan/Study	Mid-Term (3-5 years)		Ongoing	HC MUNI WFD	Medium	Medium	
HOUSING 3.2	Coordinate with housing and service providers to identify gaps in emergency, transitional, supportive, and senior housing options and encourage development near services and transportation	TC TF	Plan/Study	Short-Term (0-2 years)		Standalone	HC MUNI HA	Medium	Low	

			Context Zone	Type of Action		Timeframe		Responsible Entities	Resource		Community Priority
						Initiation	Duration		Time	Costs	
INVEST IN RESILIENT INFRASTRUCTURE AND ENVIRONMENT											
STRATEGY RESILIENCY 1	Modernize infrastructure to support targeted growth										
RESILIENCY 1.1	Assess infrastructure capacity (utilities, stormwater, broadband) serving priority redevelopment nodes and Employment & Industry Centers	TC CC EIC	Plan/Study	Short-Term (0-2 years)		Standalone	HC MUNI UTLI	Medium	Low		
RESILIENCY 1.2	Develop a phasing and funding strategy for utility extensions and infrastructure upgrades aligned with priority sites and Context Zones	TC CC EIC	Plan/Study	Short-Term (0-2 years)		Standalone	HC UTLI MUNI	Medium	Low		
RESILIENCY 1.3	Coordinate broadband expansion with service providers to improve reliability and coverage for businesses and residents	All	Program/Initiative	Short-Term (0-2 years)		Ongoing	HC UTLI	Medium	Medium		
RESILIENCY 1.4	Identify priority streetscape and drainage improvements in Town Cores and key Community Corridor nodes	TC CC	Plan/Study	Short-Term (0-2 years)		Standalone	HC MUNI	Medium	Low		
STRATEGY RESILIENCY 2	Improve stormwater management and environmental resilience										
RESILIENCY 2.1	Conduct targeted drainage and flood mitigation assessments in Town Cores and key Community Corridors	TC CC	Plan/Study	Short-Term (0-2 years)		Standalone	HC MUNI	Medium	Medium		
RESILIENCY 2.2	Develop a prioritized stormwater capital program that coordinates with roadway, streetscape, and redevelopment projects	TC TC EIC	Program/Initiative	Mid-Term (3-5 years)		Ongoing	HC MUNI	Medium	Medium		
RESILIENCY 2.3	Integrate green infrastructure, tree canopy, and heat mitigation elements into corridor public-space and streetscape projects	TC CC	Policy/Regulation	Mid-Term (3-5 years)		Ongoing	HC MUNI	Medium	Medium		
RESILIENCY 2.4	Prioritize infrastructure projects that reduce flooding, improve stormwater performance, and enhance water quality outcomes	All	Program/Initiative	Mid-Term (3-5 years)		Ongoing	HC MUNI	High	High		

		Context Zone	Type of Action		Timeframe		Responsible Entities	Resource		Community Priority	
					Initiation	Duration		Time	Costs		
STRATEGY RESILIENCY 3	Strengthen critical infrastructure and emergency preparedness										
RESILIENCY 3.1	Identify critical facilities and lifeline routes along the corridor and incorporate resilience needs into infrastructure planning	All	Plan/Study		Short-Term (0-2 years))	Standalone	HC MUNI	Medium	Low		
RESILIENCY 3.2	Coordinate with FDOT, HRTPO, and emergency management agencies to strengthen evacuation routes and post-event recovery capacity	All	Program/Initiative		Short-Term (0-2 years))	Ongoing	FDOT HRTPO MUNI	Medium	Low		
RESILIENCY 3.3	Align capital improvement planning and infrastructure asset management practices across Hardee County and municipalities	All	Program/Initiative		Long-Term (5+ years)	Ongoing	HC MUNI CFRPC	Medium	Low		
STRATEGY RESILIENCY 4	Protect natural assets and expand green infrastructure										
RESILIENCY 4.1	Identify conservation, greenway, and trail opportunities that strengthen access to the Peace River and other natural assets	RS RC	Plan/Study		Short-Term (0-2 years)	Standalone	HC MUNI	Medium	Low		
RESILIENCY 4.2	Coordinate park access, trails, and wayfinding improvements as part of the corridor implementation program	TC CC RS	Project/Investment		Long-Term (5+ years)	Ongoing	HC MUNI COC	High	Medium		
RESILIENCY 4.3	Promote redevelopment and adaptive reuse of brownfield or post-mining sites where appropriate	CC EIC	Program/Initiative		Mid-Term (3-5 years)	Ongoing	IDA HC MUNI	High	High		

PATHWAY TO IMPLEMENTATION

The US 17 Economic Development Initiative is designed to move from planning to action through a coordinated, phased approach. Implementation will require alignment across Hardee County, its municipalities, and key partners to ensure that actions are advanced efficiently and in a manner consistent with the corridor’s long-term vision.



Near-Term (0–2 Years) Establish Momentum and Build Capacity

- Advancing priority actions identified through the Implementation Matrix
- Initiating coordination among lead agencies and partners
- Developing tools, guidance, and programs that support reinvestment and business growth
- Aligning implementation efforts with existing plans, funding sources, and capital programs



Mid-Term (3–5 Years) Scale and Expand Implementation Efforts

- Advancing infrastructure and corridor improvement projects
- Implementing incentive programs and redevelopment strategies
- Strengthening partnerships to support economic development, housing, and workforce initiatives
- Leveraging grant funding and external resources to support key actions



Long-Term (5+ Years) Sustain Investment and Long-Term Transformation

- Continuing reinvestment in corridor assets and infrastructure systems
- Supporting redevelopment and adaptive reuse of underutilized properties
- Monitoring corridor performance and adjusting strategies as needed
- Reinforcing the corridor’s role as a regional economic connector

MONITORING & PLAN UPDATES

Implementation of this plan is intended to be ongoing and adaptive. Regular coordination and evaluation will be essential to maintaining progress and ensuring that actions remain aligned with evolving conditions.



Track Progress

- Use the Implementation Matrix as a working tool to monitor action status
- Coordinate regularly with lead agencies and partners to assess progress
- Identify barriers, funding opportunities, and implementation adjustments



Updating the Plan

- Conduct a formal progress review every 3 to 5 years
- Update priorities, timelines, and actions based on:
 - » Market conditions
 - » Infrastructure capacity
 - » Community priorities
- Incorporate new opportunities, partnerships, and funding sources as they emerge

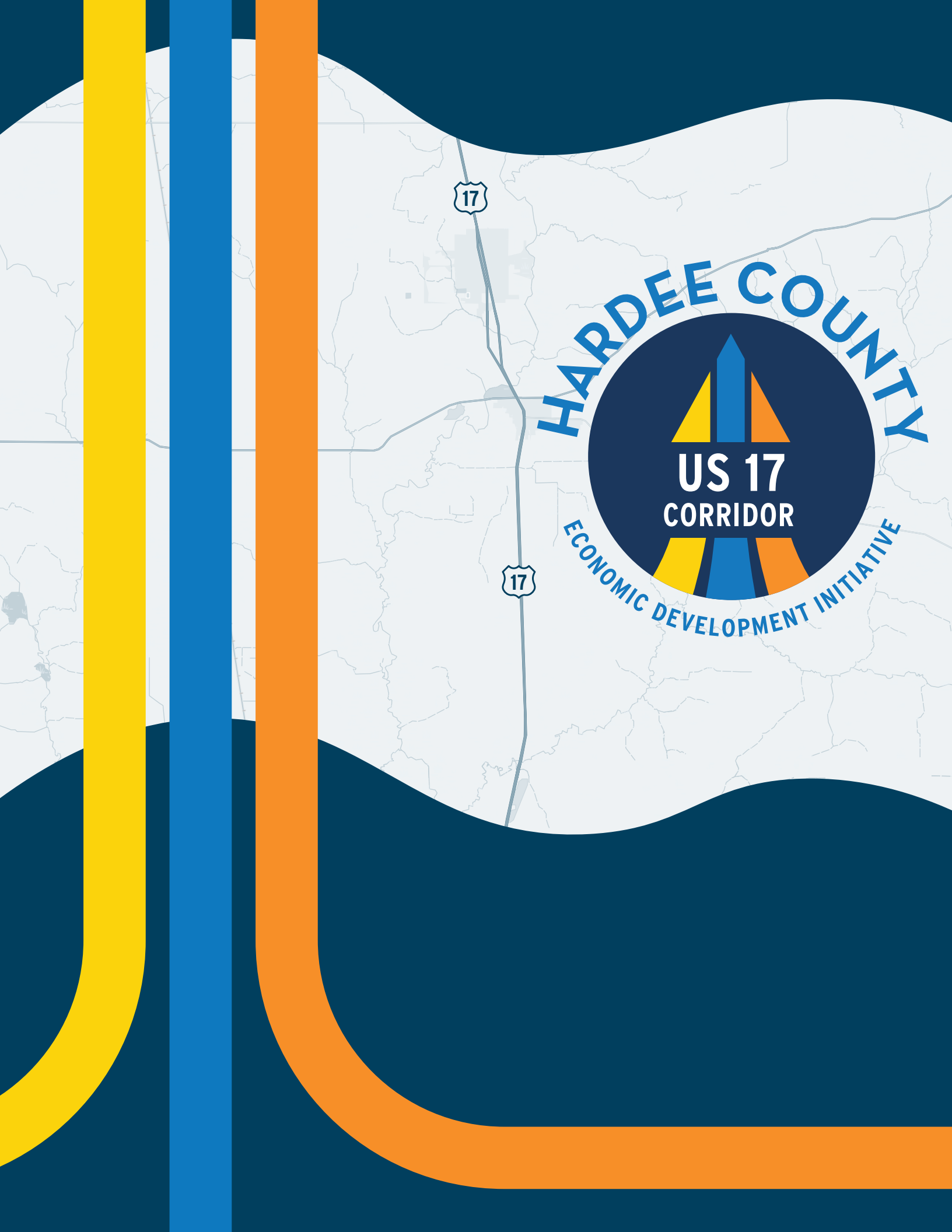


This approach ensures the plan remains relevant, actionable, and responsive over time.

CONCLUSION

The US 17 Corridor represents an opportunity to align growth, investment, and community priorities in a way that strengthens Hardee County’s long-term economic and community outcomes. This plan provides a clear framework to guide that effort, grounded in data, shaped by community input, and supported by actionable strategies.

Successful implementation will depend on continued coordination, targeted investment, and sustained commitment from public, private, and institutional partners. By advancing the actions outlined in this initiative, Hardee County can support reinvestment, enhance corridor functionality, and position the US 17 corridor as a more connected, resilient, and economically competitive place.



HARDEE COUNTY

US 17
CORRIDOR

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE