HARDEE COUNTY

US 17 CORRIDOR

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

AUGUST 2025

CORRIDOR CHARACTERISTICS REPORT

DRAFT



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INTRODUCTION

Running approximately 21 miles through the heart of Hardee County, the US 17 corridor connects the communities of Bowling Green, Zolfo Springs, and Wauchula. These communities serve as commercial, institutional, and civic hubs for the region, housing many of the county's employers, public services, and local businesses. US 17 supports a mix of industries including agriculture, retail, healthcare, and logistics, while also serving as a key freight and mobility route. As Hardee County looks to the future, the US 17 corridor will continue to play a central role in supporting growth, attracting new investment, and enhancing quality of life for residents.

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.

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)

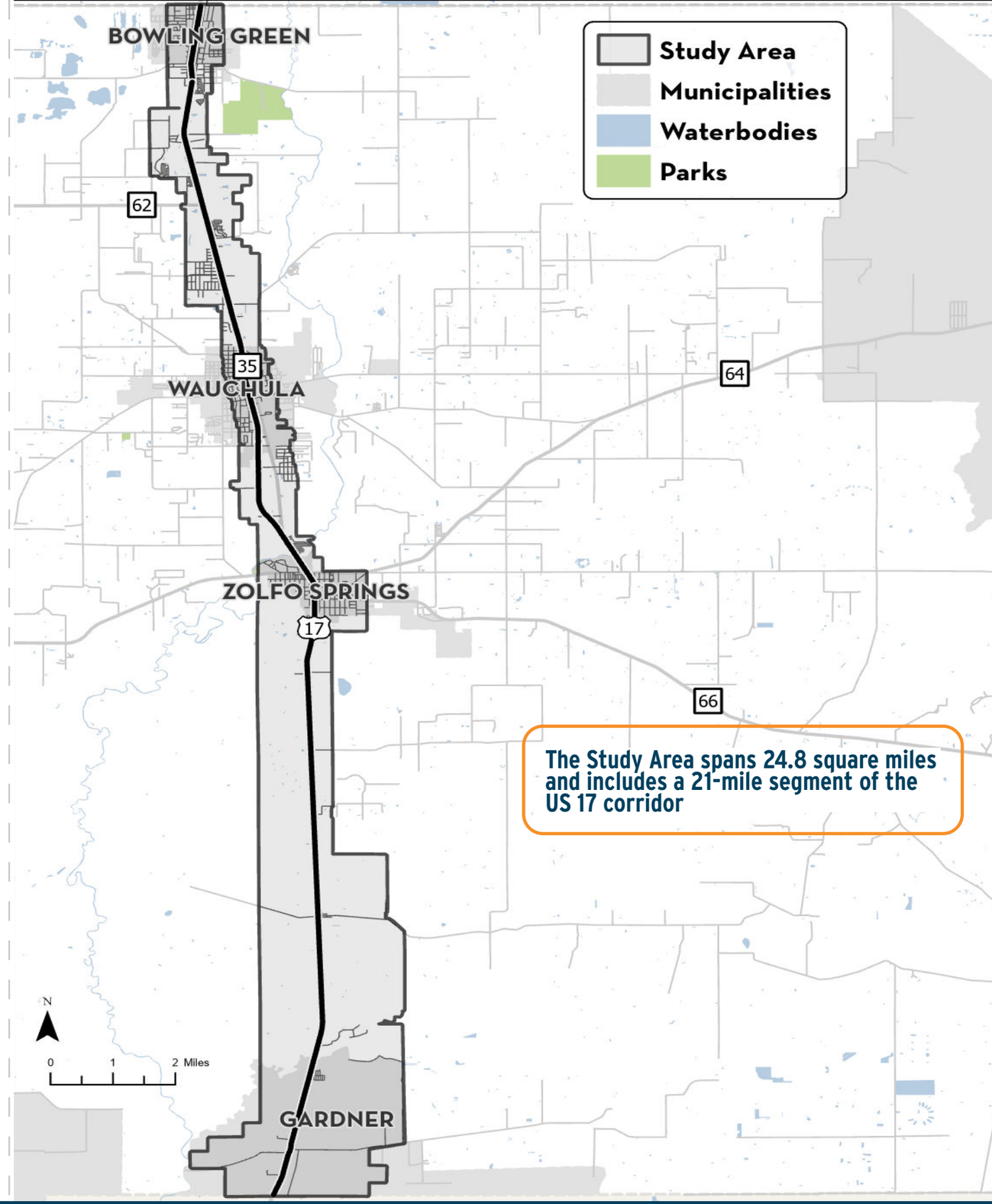
24.8
Total Square Miles

8,665
Total Population

4,009
Total Jobs

$57,478
Median Household Income

$165,678
Median Housing Value



PLANNING PROCESS

The US 17 Economic Development Study follows a three-phase process—Discover, Plan, and Communicate—to guide decision-making, shape recommendations, and build consensus among stakeholders. 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.

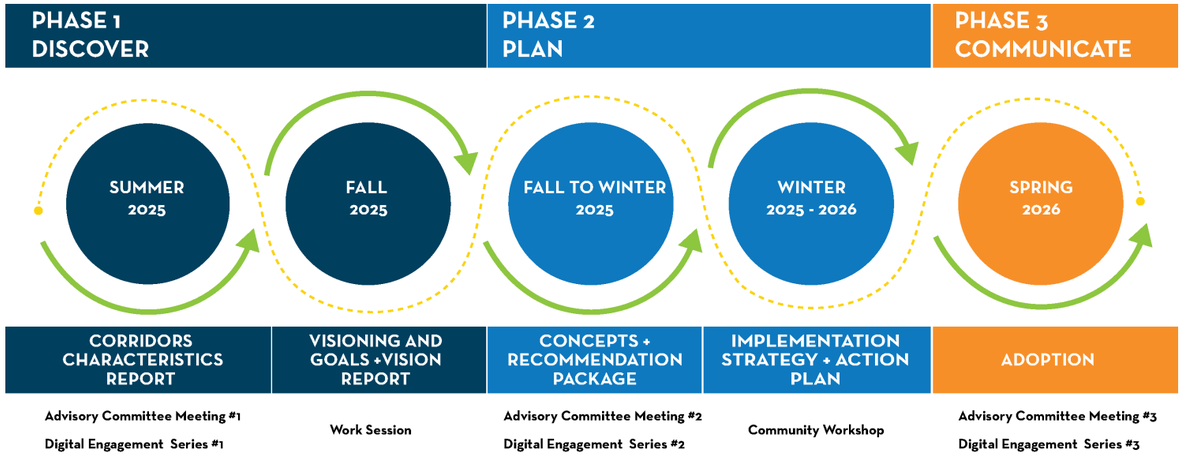
PHASE 2: PLAN

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





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:

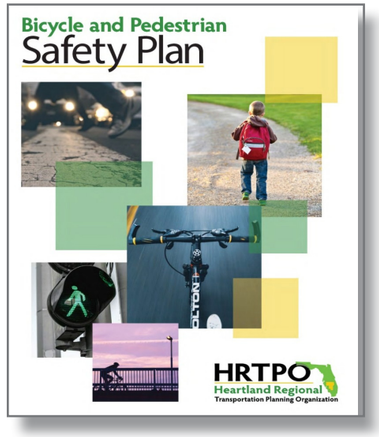
- Expanding housing options and infrastructure to meet diverse community needs
- Improving access to healthcare and public safety services
- Coordinating land use, transportation, and utility planning to support growth
- Strengthening workforce development and diversifying the local economy
- Preserving 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:

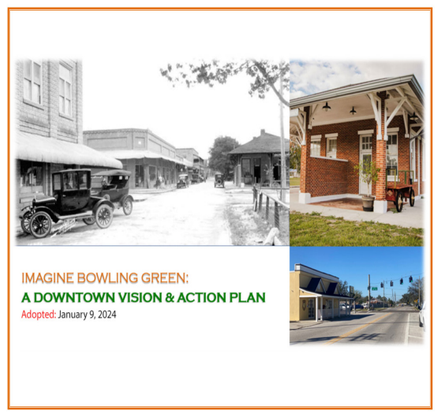
- Re-establishing a vibrant and connected downtown core
- Promoting walkable, community-oriented development
- Encouraging reinvestment along the realigned US 17 corridor
- Expanding recreational opportunities and mixed-use activity in the downtown area

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

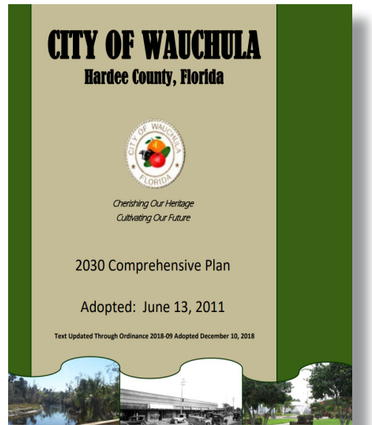
The Bowling Green Downtown Vision and Action Plan outlines a community-driven strategy to revitalize the City's historic core. The plan prioritizes economic development, walkability, and placemaking to support a vibrant and resilient downtown. Key objectives include:

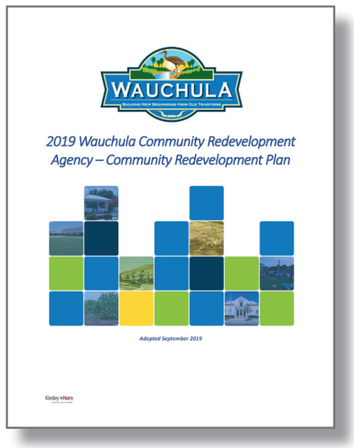
- Creating a walkable, livable environment that supports business growth
- Attracting development that increases foot traffic and enhances services
- Improving the visual character and sense of place in the downtown area

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)

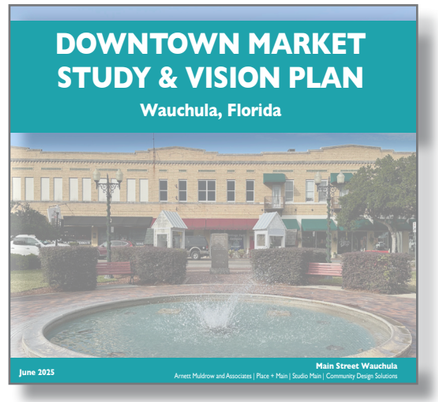
The Wauchula CRA Master Plan builds upon the 2010 plan to address updated conditions and identify priorities for economic revitalization and community enhancement. The plan emphasizes targeted redevelopment, strategic investment, and policies to support a vibrant and inclusive district. Key strategies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



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)

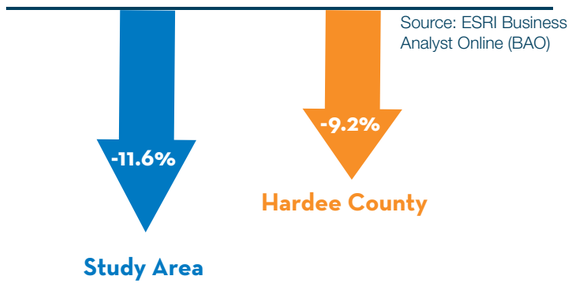
8,665

Study Area

25,184

Hardee County

Population Growth/Decline (2010-2025)



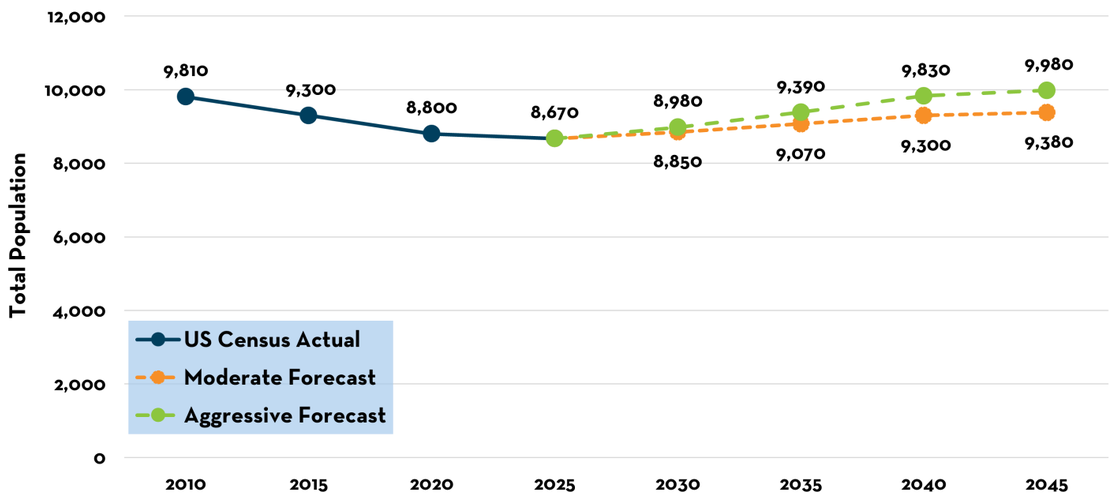
Source: ESRI Business Analyst Online (BAO)

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)



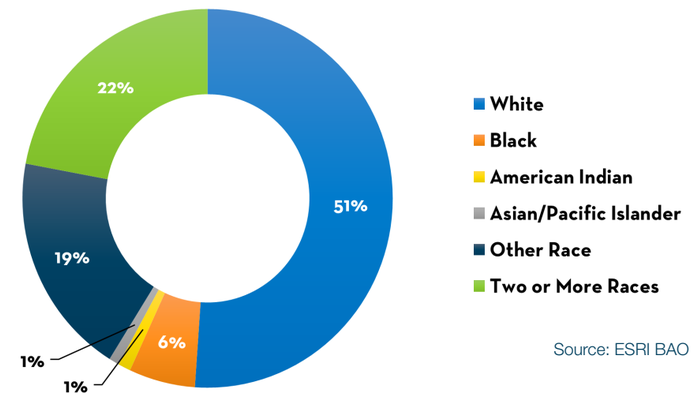
Source: Bureau of Economic and Business Research, ESRI BAO, Florida Office of Economic and Demographic Research, Shimberg Center, Woods & Poole, Kimley-Horn

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)



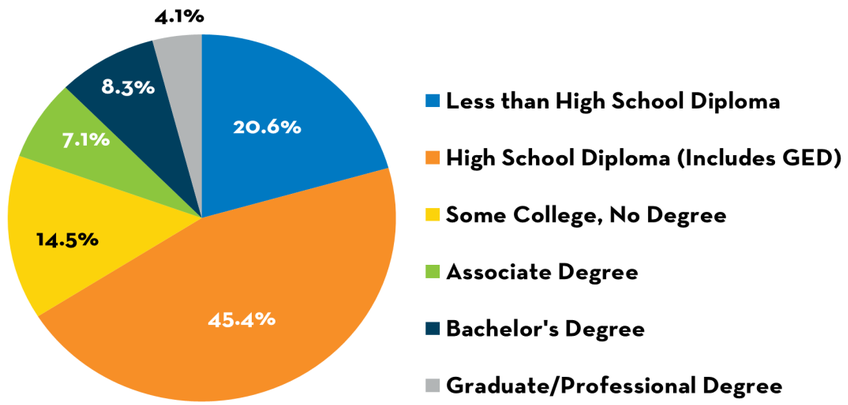
Source: ESRI BAO

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)



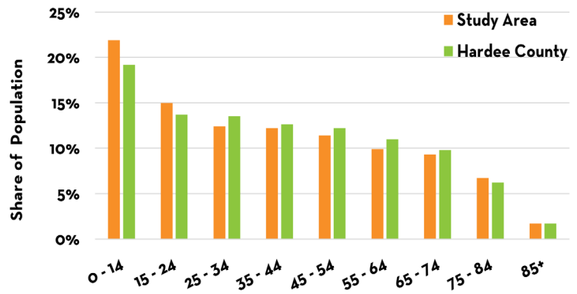
Source: ESRI BAO

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.

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)



Source: ESRI BAO

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)

G
4.5%
Greatest Gen: Born 1945/ Earlier

B
17.1%
Baby Boomer: Born 1946 to 1964

X
16.9%
Generation X: Born 1965 to 1980

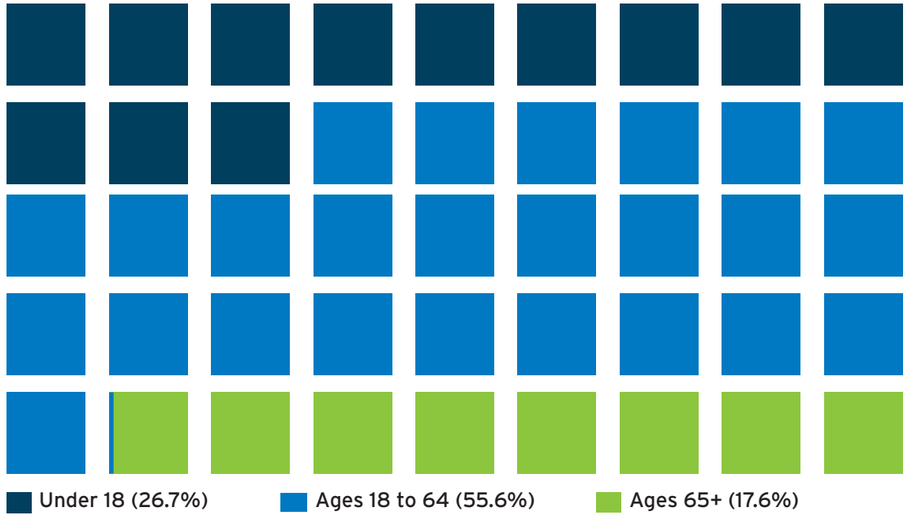
M
21.9%
Millennial: Born 1981 to 1998

Z
27.0%
Generation Z: Born 1999 to 2016

A
12.6%
Alpha: Born 2017 to Present

Source: ESRI BAO

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.

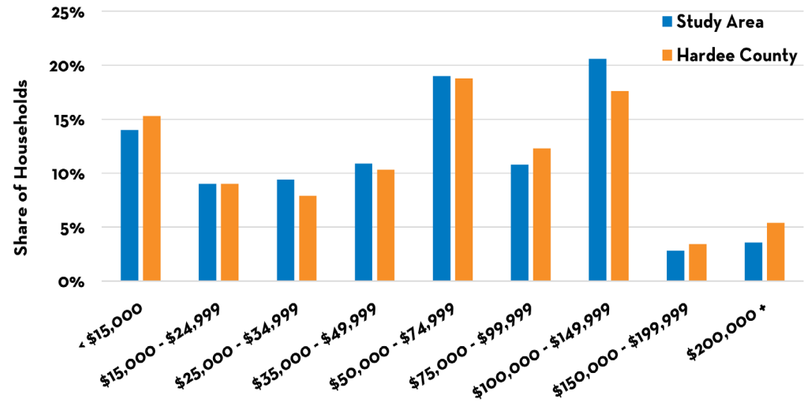
ECONOMY

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)

Study Area		Study Area
$57,478	+13.9% →	$65,479
2025		2030

Hardee County		Hardee County
$59,071	+12.5% →	$66,435
2025		2030

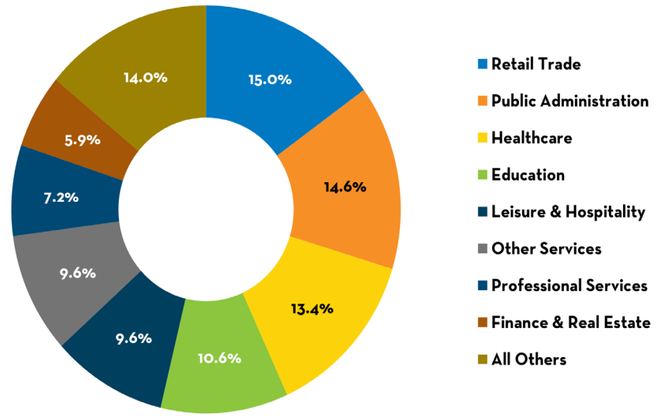
Source: ESRI BAO

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)

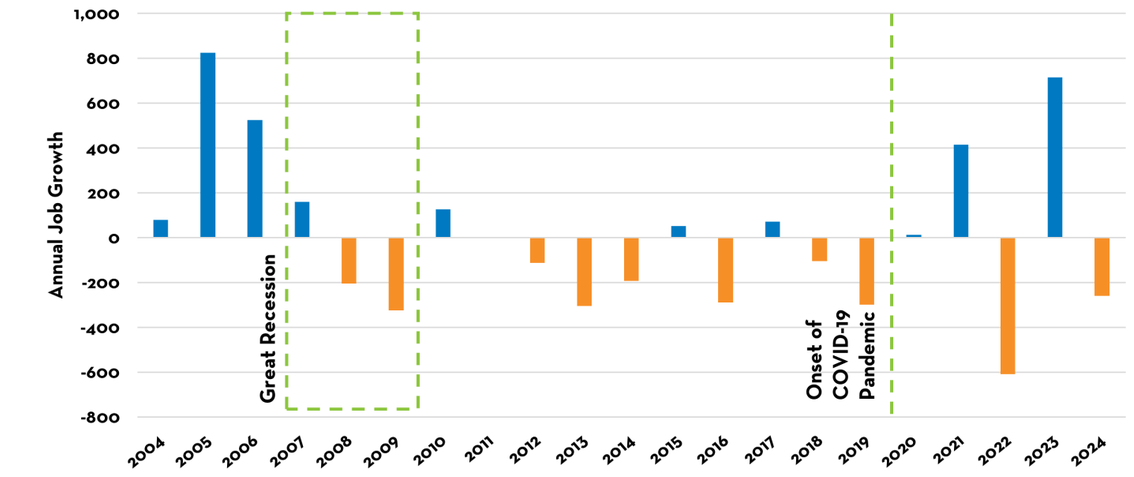


Source: ESRI BAO

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 Neurologic	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.

40.2% | White Collar Workers

34.6% | Blue Collar Workers

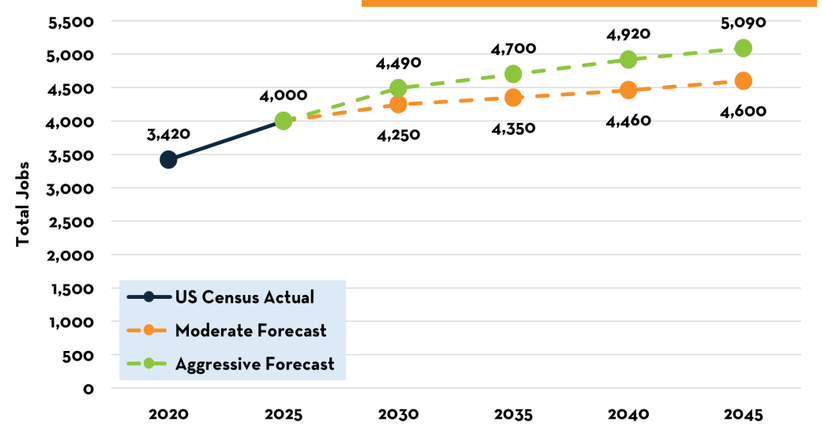
25.3% | Service Workers

Source: ESRI BAO

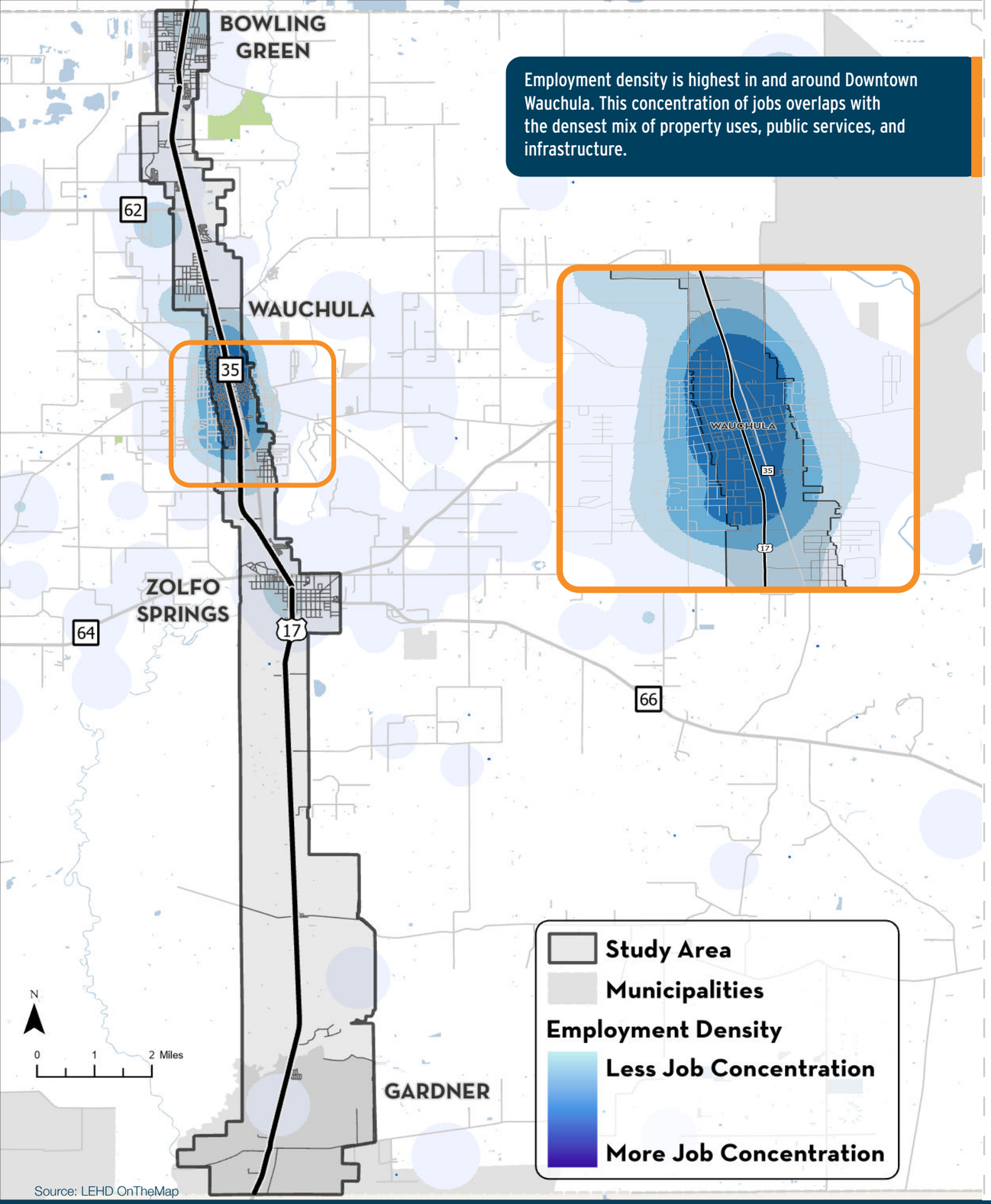
PROJECTED EMPLOYMENT GROWTH

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.

Employment Forecast (2025-2045)



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



Source: LEHD OnTheMap

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)



54%

Households in the Study Area consist of 1- or 2-persons

Source: ESRI BAO

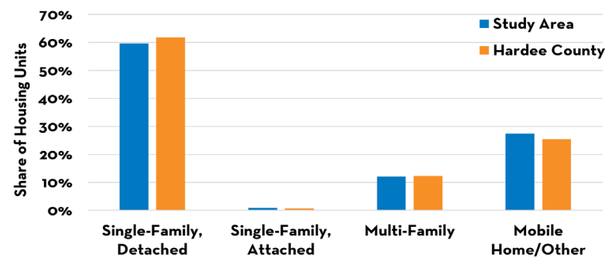
HOUSING

Understanding current housing conditions is critical to supporting future land use decisions, identifying gaps in the housing market, and planning for future residential demand along the US 17 corridor. This section examines housing types, recent growth trends, and projected housing needs.

HOUSING TYPES

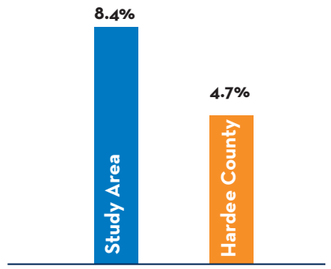
The Study Area's housing stock consists largely of detached, single-family, followed by mobile homes or other types with small portions of multi-family and single-family attached townhomes.

Housing Units by Type (2025)



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

Housing Unit Growth, 2010-2025



Source: ESRI BAO

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.

HOUSING TYPES

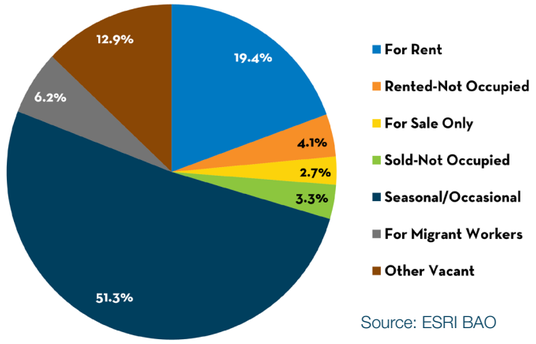
Study Area Occupancy Status (2010-2030)

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)

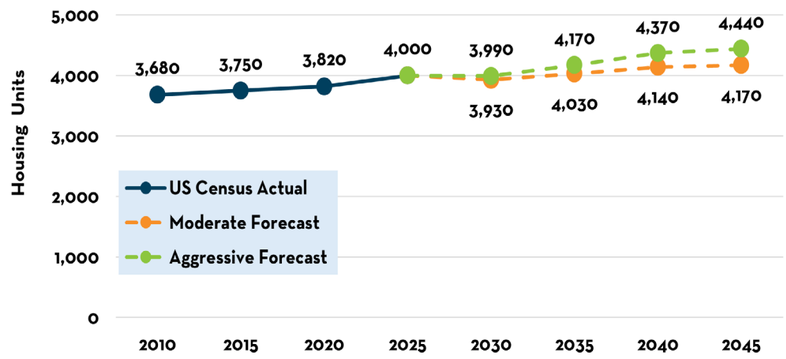


Source: ESRI BAO

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.

PROJECTED HOUSING UNITS

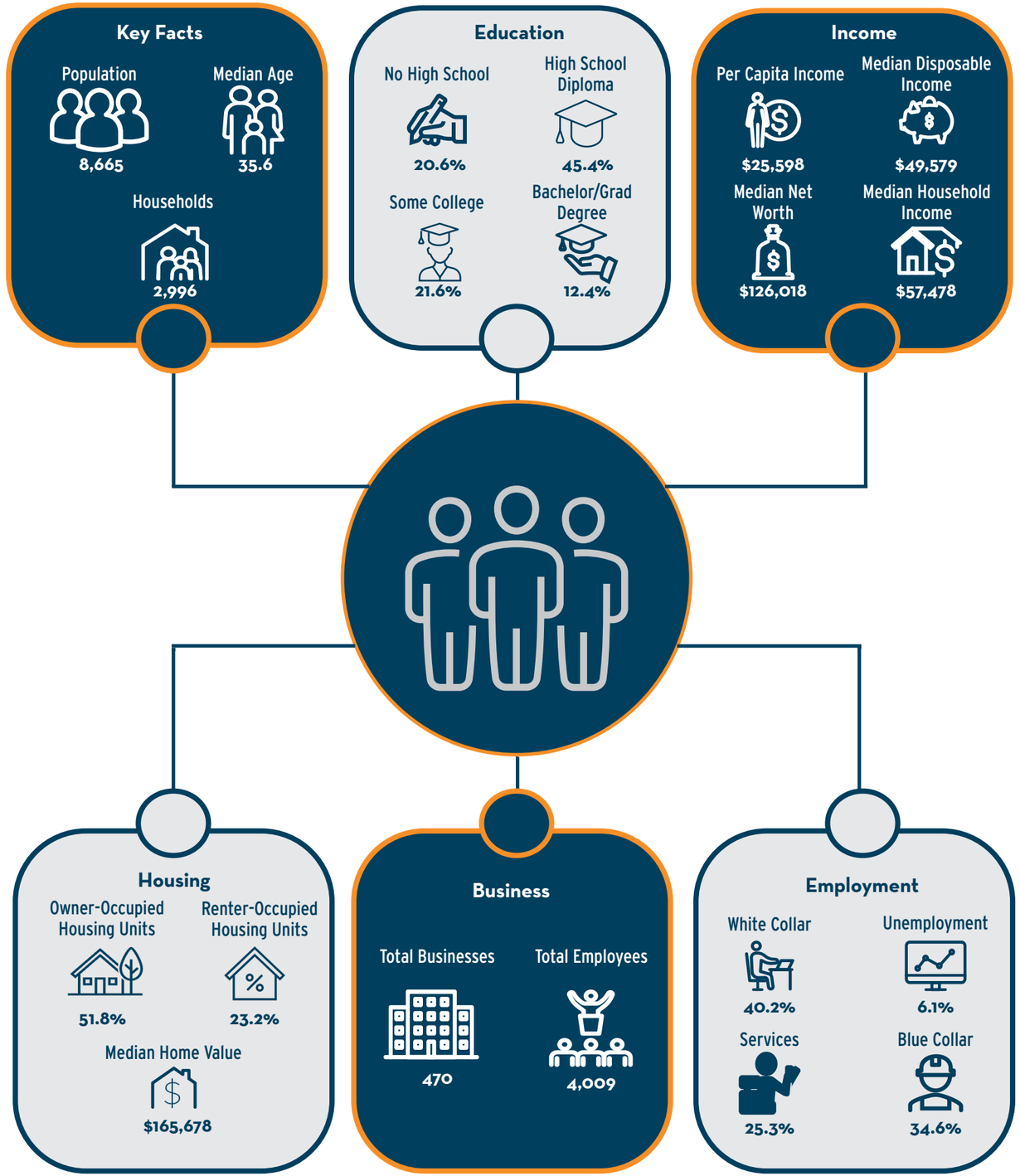
Housing Unit Forecast (2025-2045)



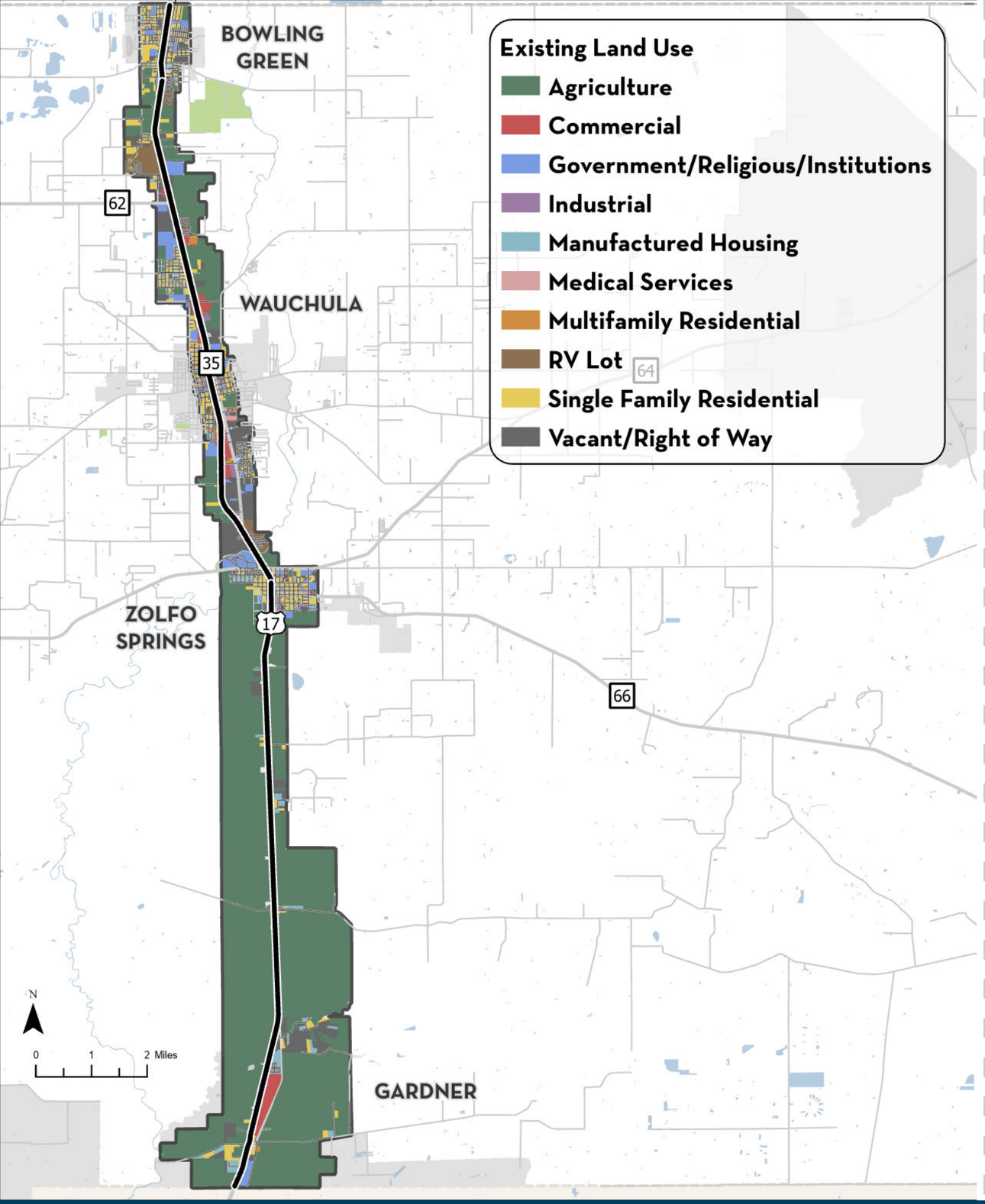
Source: ESRI BAO, Shimberg Center, Woods & Poole, Kimley-Horn

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.

STUDY AREA OVERVIEW (2025)



Source: ESRI BAO, Kimley-Horn



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.

Agriculture
82.1% | 21,339 acres

Medical Services
0.0% | 11 acres

Commercial
1.7% | 437 acres

Multifamily Residential
0.3% | 84 acres

Government/Religious/ Institutions
3.2% | 827 acres

Recreational Vehicle Lot
1.3% | 330 acres

Industrial
0.3% | 86 acres

Single Family Residential
3.6% | 932 acres

Manufactured Housing
1.0% | 267 acres

Vacant/Right of Way
6.4% | 1,668 acres

Source: Hardee County; 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.

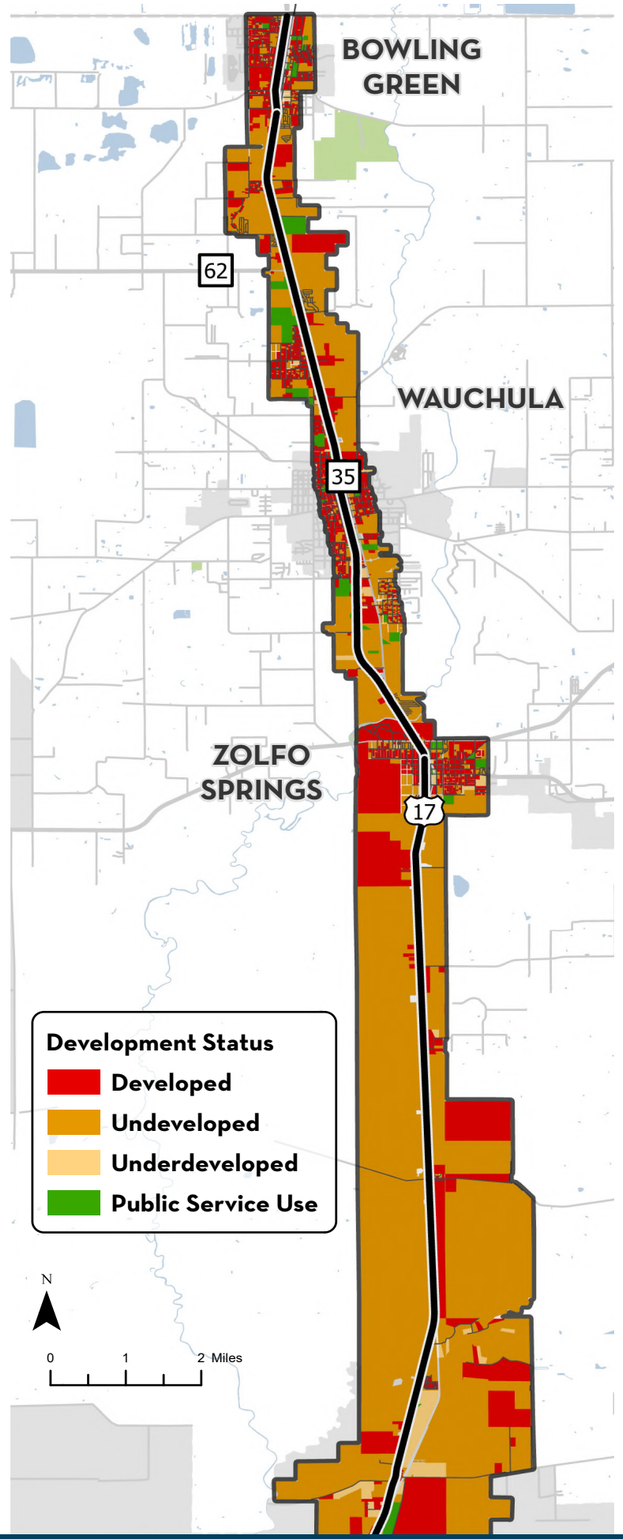
This classification reflects current land use intensity rather than zoning or future land use designations. Parcels classified as Undeveloped may include large swaths of agricultural land that may be in active use but lack structures, which results in a low or zero building value. While this methodology 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%

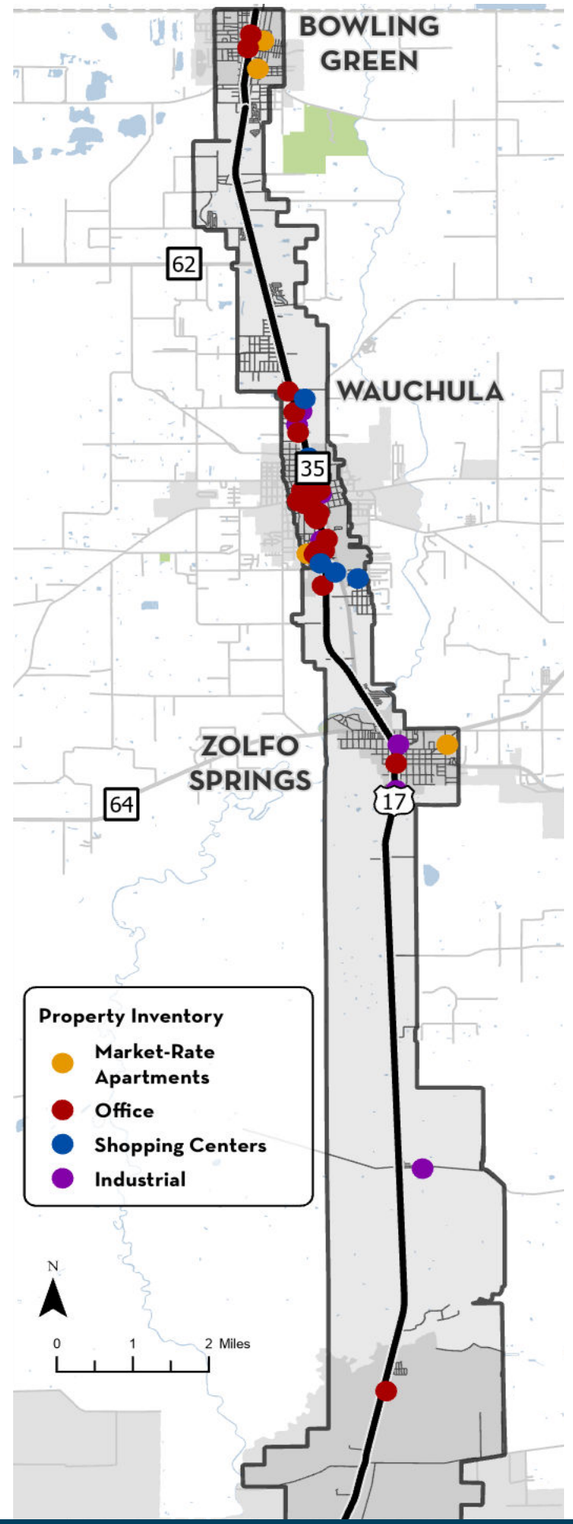
Source: Hardee County; Kimley-Horn



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

TRANSPORTATION

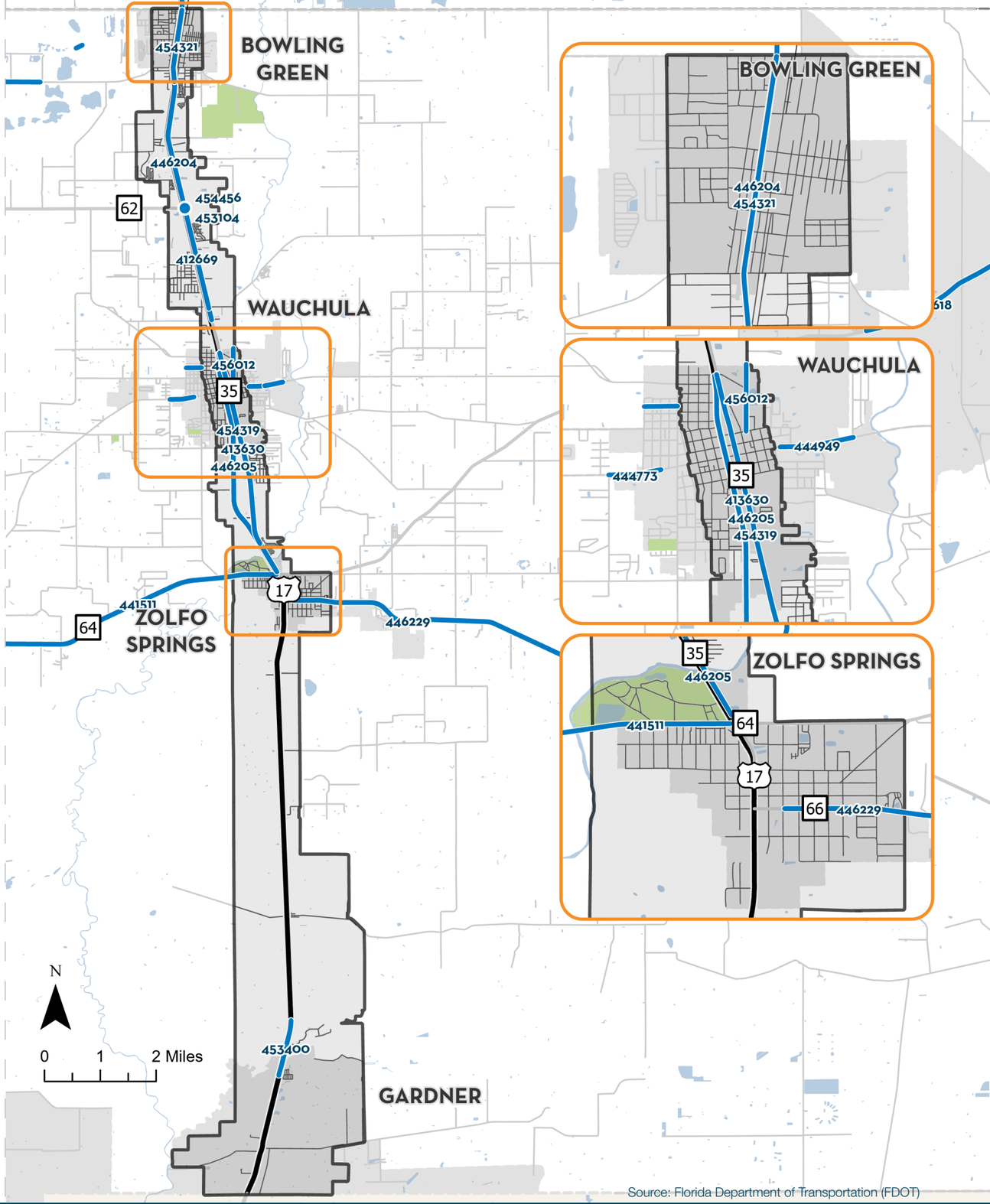
FUNDED ROADWAY PROJECTS

Changes to the roadway and design of US 17 have significant impacts on the economic development of the corridor. An inventory of existing and funded projects will aid in decision-making and forecasting conditions in the area.

A variety of projects in the Study Area are funded for the near future along US 17 through Hardee County. Major funded projects come from the statewide State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) The 5-Year Work Plan represents a section of the total projects in the STIP. The current Work Plan includes projects between the fiscal years of 2026 and 2030.

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



Source: Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT)

TRANSIT AND ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION

While Hardee County lacks fixed-route public transit service, the US 17 corridor benefits from a modest but important network of active transportation infrastructure that supports mobility, access, and community health. These facilities include sidewalks, recreational trails, and designated bicycle lanes that collectively enhance walkability and multimodal access, particularly within the three incorporated municipalities. Despite these assets, connectivity between municipalities is limited, and active transportation options largely diminish outside of the town limits. As growth and development continue along the corridor, there are opportunities to enhance regional walkability and bikeability by addressing network gaps, improving safety along high-traffic roads, and planning for multimodal infrastructure that connects residential, commercial, and recreational destinations more seamlessly



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

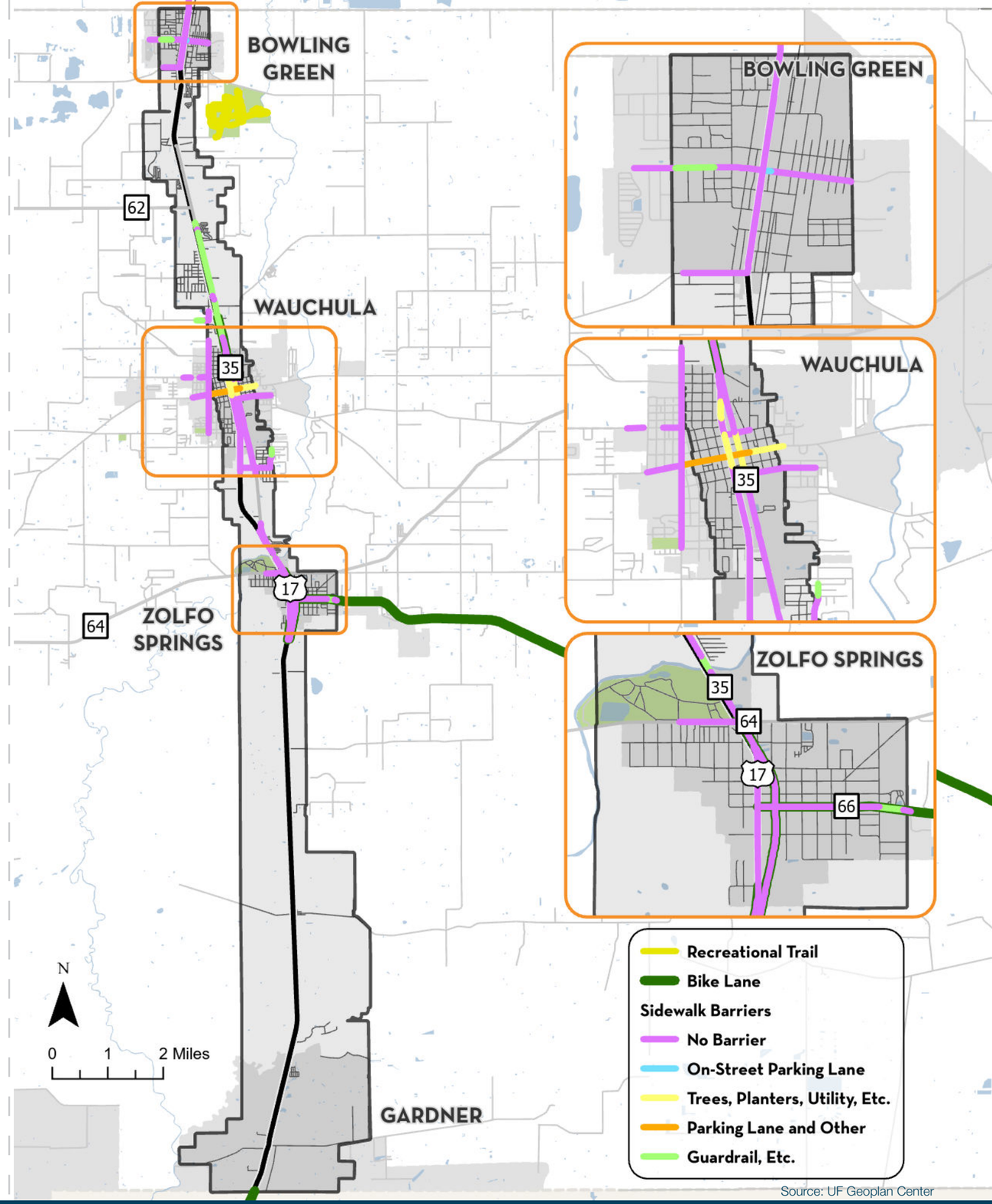
Recreational trails create a network of natural corridors designed for pedestrian and recreational use. These trails are typically found in parks, nature reserves, and urban areas. They provide scenic, sustainable routes that promote outdoor activities, conserve green spaces, and improve overall livability. 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.



Source: UF Geoplan Center

ANNUAL AVERAGE DAILY TRAFFIC

Measurement

The daily functioning of the US 17 corridor is greatly impacted by the level of congestion over time. One indicator for this congestion and roadway utilization is Annual Average Daily Traffic, or AADT. This measurement provides only the number of vehicles using the roadway, and does not dictate congestion, which can be impacted by a number of other roadway design factors such as speed, number of lanes, number of intersections, etc.

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.

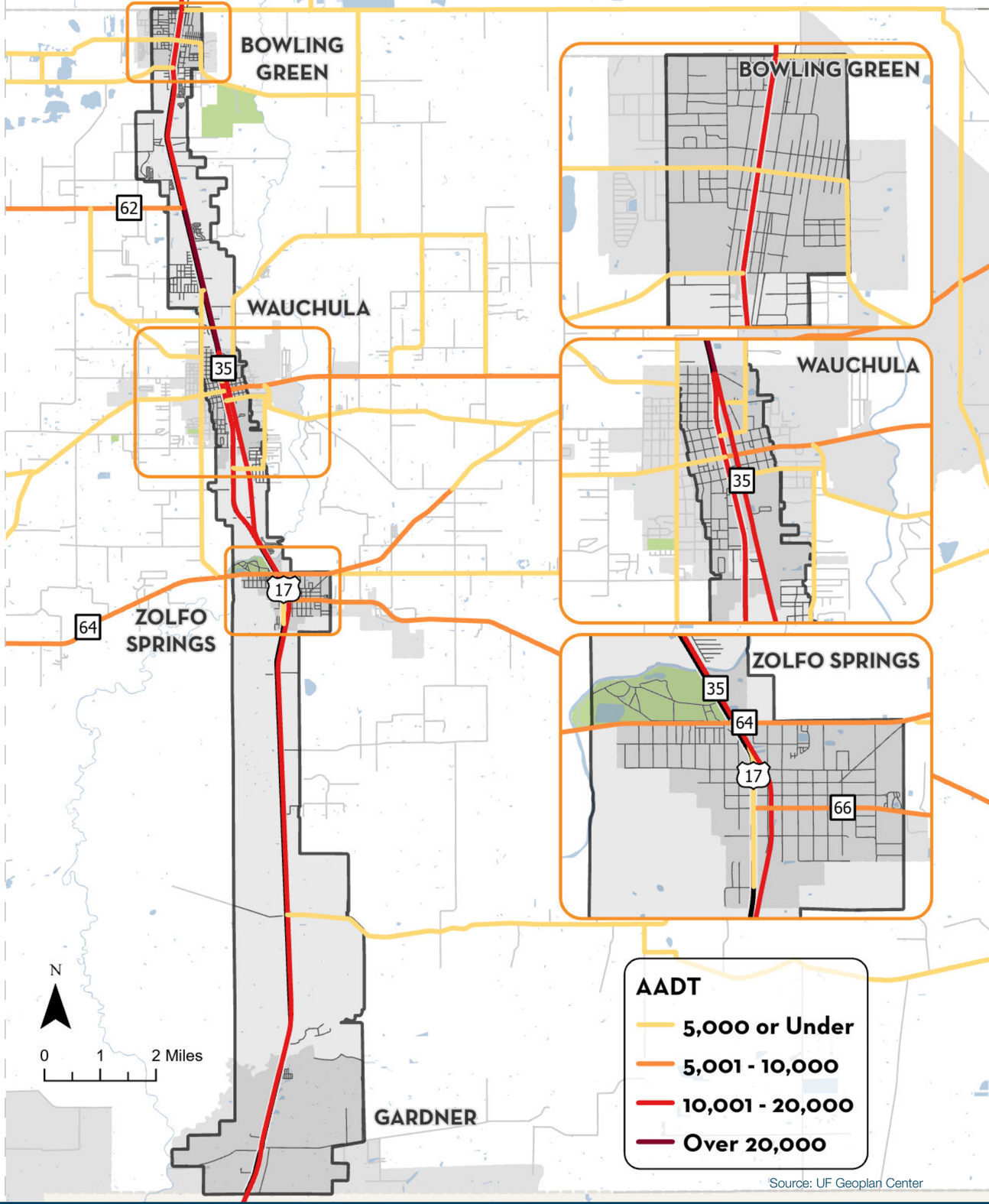
Freight Traffic

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.

COMMUTING PATTERNS

Over 75% of employed residents commute out of the Study Area for work, primarily to nearby cities such as Bartow, Sebring, and Lakeland. At the same time, the Study Area draws in nearly as many workers, with most commuters coming from Wauchula, Bowling Green, and Zolfo Springs. Wauchula accounts for the highest number of both residents and jobs within the Study Area, and 569 individuals both live and work within the Study Area.





Source: UF Geoplan Center

SPEEDING

Speed Limits

US 17 has posted speed limits ranging from 50 to 65 mph through most of Hardee County. Within the municipalities of Bowling Green, Wauchula, and Zolfo Springs, posted speeds drop significantly, some segments are posted as low as 30–40 mph. These transitions often occur over short distances, particularly between Bowling Green and Wauchula and again between Wauchula and Zolfo Springs. This inconsistency in speed limits, combined with limited enforcement or visual cues, contributes to speeding behavior and safety concerns.

Traffic Signals

Traffic signals play a critical role in moderating speed and improving safety across the corridor. Most signals are located within Wauchula, where congestion is higher and traffic flow requires more management. Bowling Green and Zolfo Springs each have signals placed at major intersections along US 17 to enhance safety at high-volume points. North of Wauchula, two intersections are signalized specifically to address crash risk in areas where speed limits transition.

The spatial pattern of crashes—particularly those attributed to speeding—tends to cluster near the outskirts of Wauchula and Zolfo Springs, as well as in Bowling Green, where speed transitions are frequent but enforcement or design changes may be lacking.

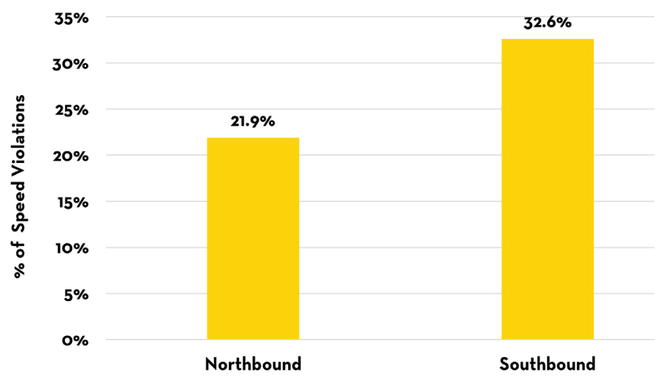
Crash Risk Hotspot

The intersection of US 17 and Florida Avenue in Wauchula has the highest concentration of crashes along the corridor, with significant concern around speeding. Local law enforcement data shows that:

- 21.9% of northbound vehicles exceeded 60 mph through this intersection
- 32.6% of southbound vehicles exceeded 60 mph
- 22.4% of southbound vehicles averaged a speed above the limit through the intersection

These high speeds, combined with the intersection's design, are likely contributing to the elevated crash rate observed in this location.

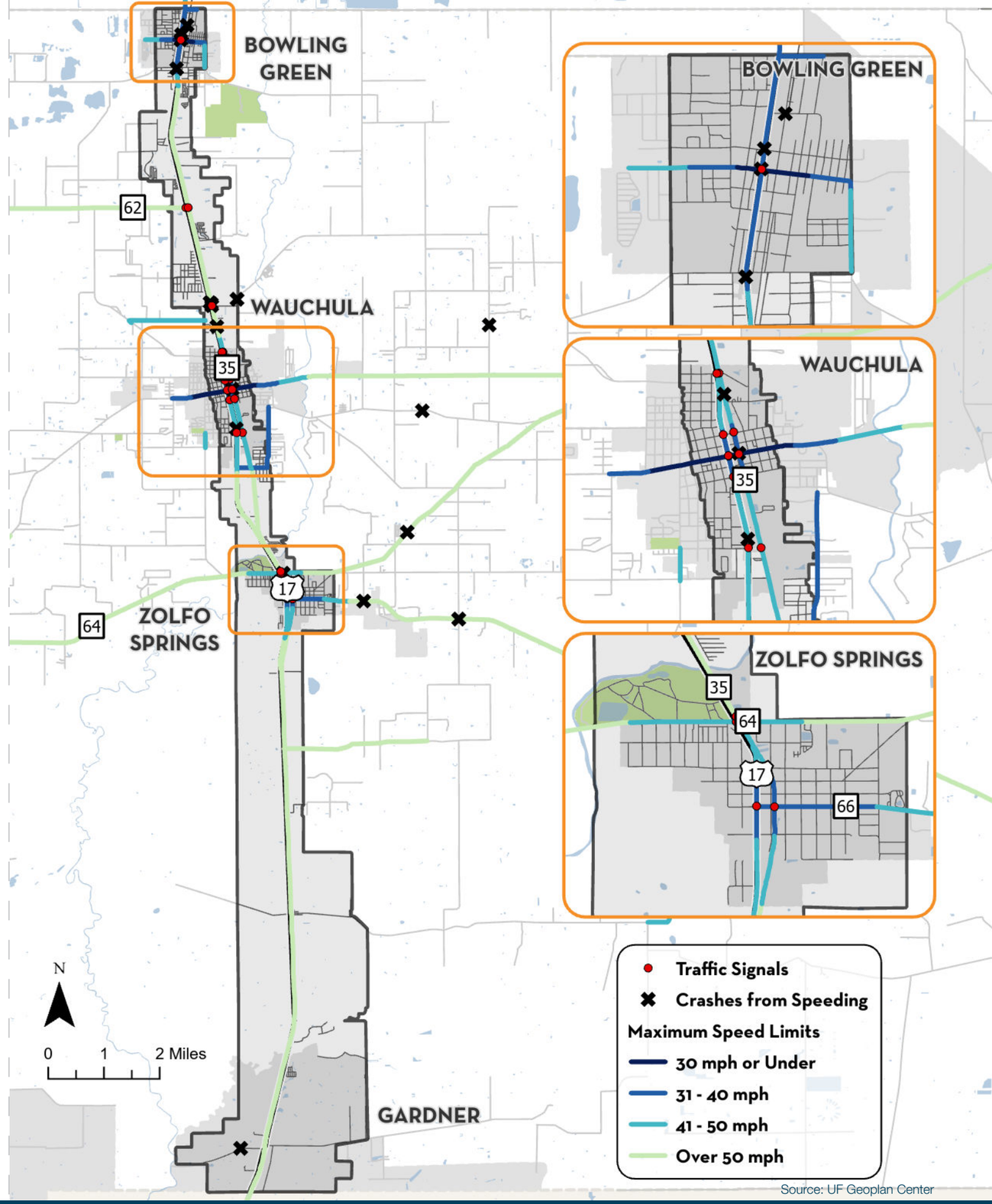
Share of Vehicles Exceeding 60 MPH at US 17 and Florida Avenue (November 2024)



Data represents vehicle speeds recorded over a 6-day period in November 2024 at the intersection of US 17 and Florida Avenue.

Source: Hardee County Sheriff's Dept.

Speed-related crashes are most concentrated in Bowling Green and at the edges of Wauchula and Zolfo Springs, where abrupt speed transitions are most common.



Source: UF Geoplan Center

TRANSPORTATION SAFETY

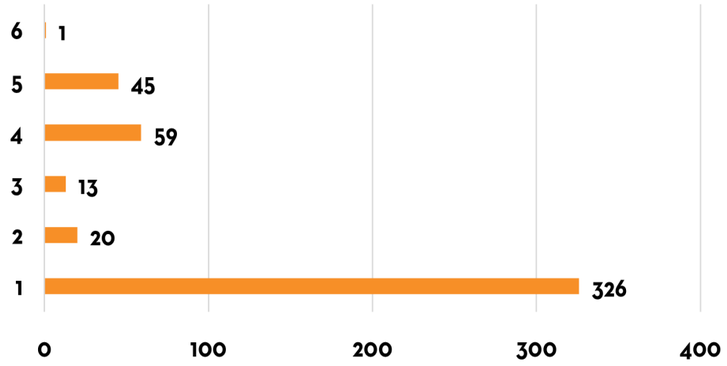
Crash Data Analysis

The majority of crashes in the Study Area occurred directly on US 17, especially within and near the three municipalities—Bowling Green, Wauchula, and Zolfo Springs. The densest cluster of crashes is concentrated in downtown Wauchula, with other notable hotspots located just north of the city and near SR 62. Serious injury crashes are similarly concentrated, with the greatest density appearing north of Wauchula. While crash volumes are high in downtown Wauchula, this area experienced fewer serious injuries or fatalities than other segments of the corridor.

Crash Conditions

Between 2018 and 2022, a total of 718 crashes were reported within the Study Area, including 386 crashes that occurred along US 17. Of these, 300 took place within the municipal boundaries of Bowling Green, Wauchula, or Zolfo Springs. Lighting conditions played a significant role in crash severity. Most crashes occurred during daylight hours, but nearly 1 in 5 crashes happened when lighting was poor, typically at night or in dim conditions, highlighting potential visibility concerns along the corridor.

Crash Lighting Conditions (2018-2022)



Source: UF Geoplan Center

Crashes in Town

300

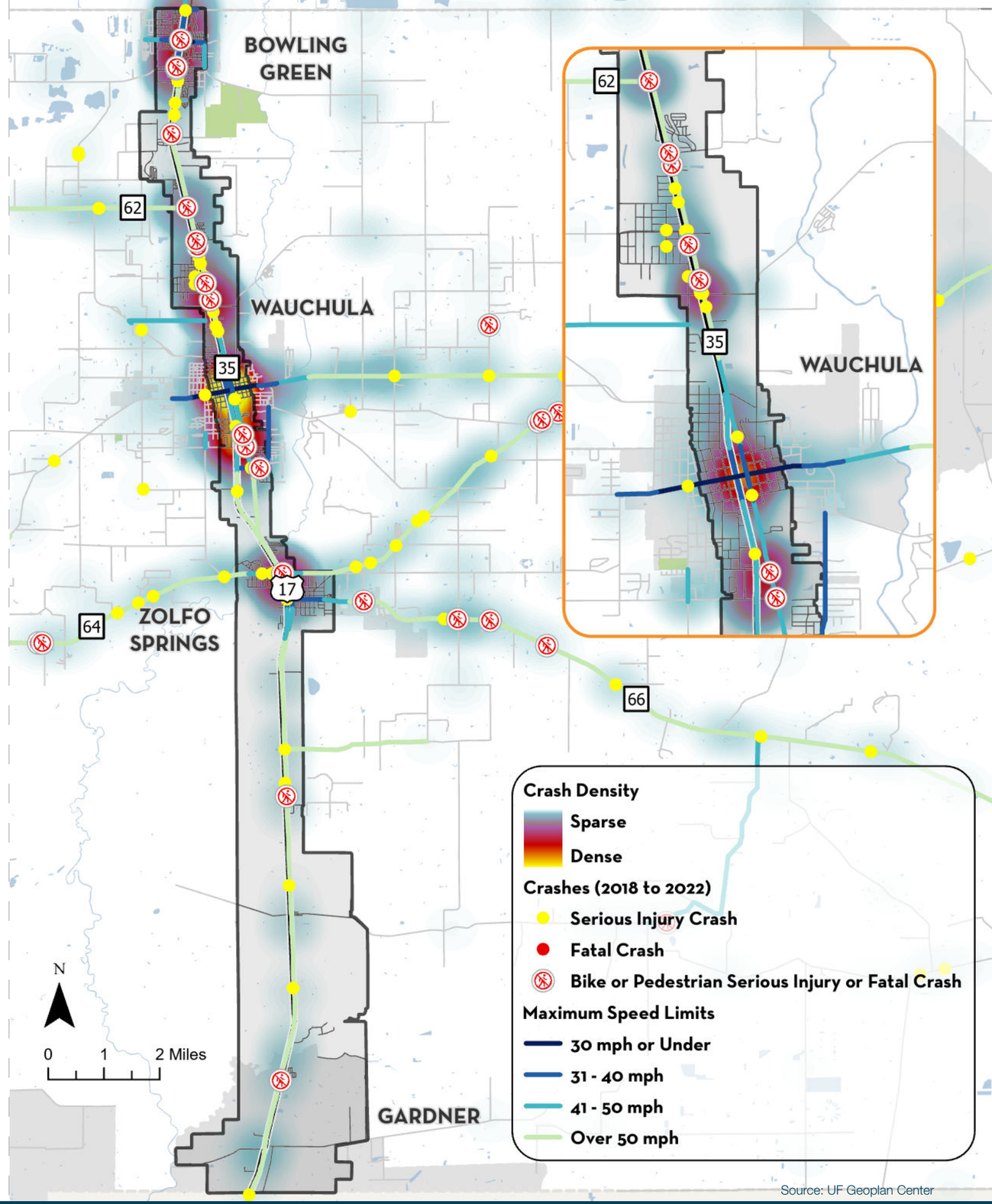
Total Crashes

718

Crashes on US 17

386

In crash reports, lighting is measured on a scale of 1-6, with 1 representing full light and 6 representing dark and obscured conditions. The majority of crashes happen in broad daylight, typically during peak hours. As lighting conditions worsen, however, a number of crashes take place at night when lighting is not the best. These crashes may be reduced or prevented by more comprehensive lighting of the roadway along US 17.

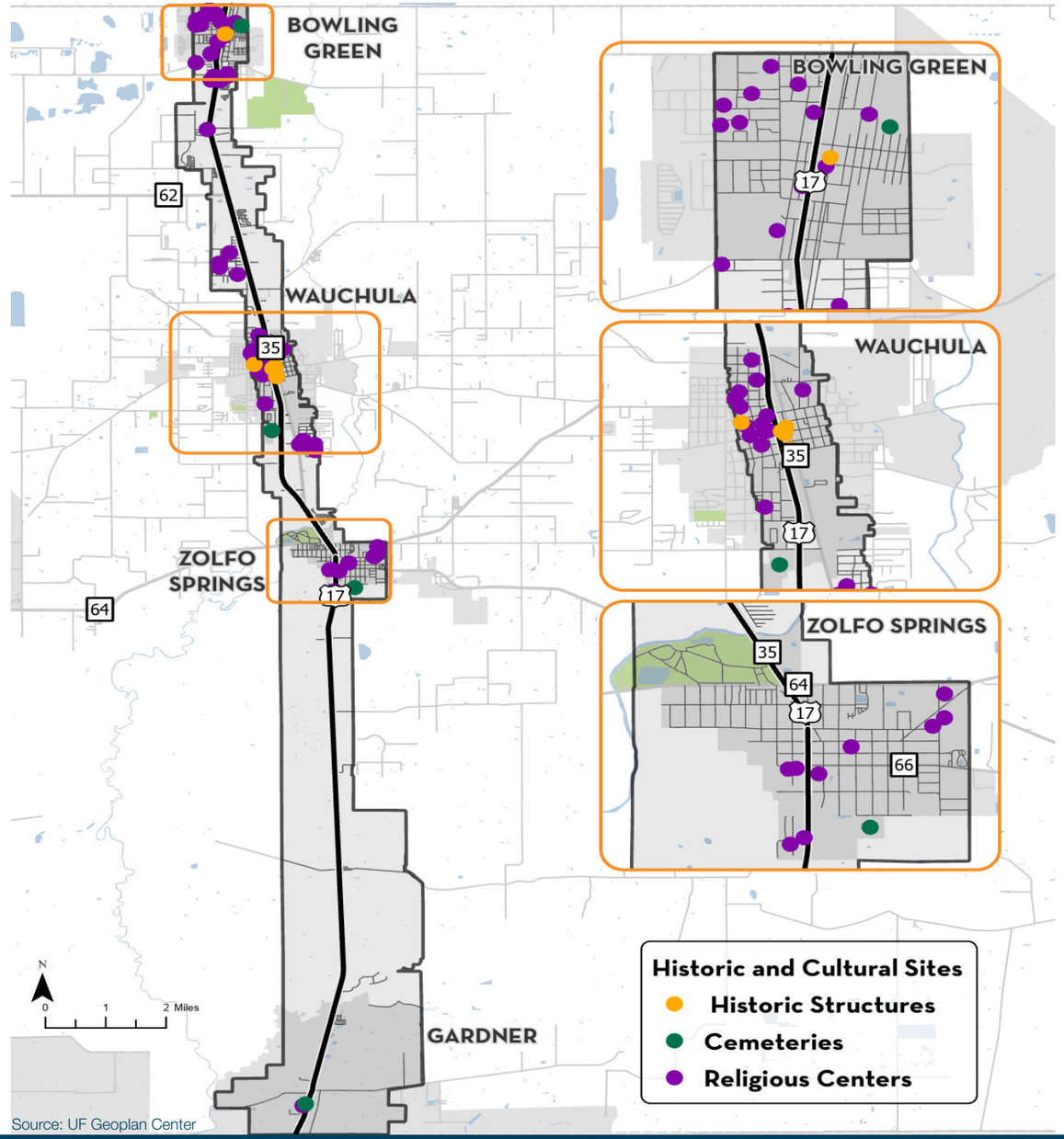


Source: UF Geoplan Center

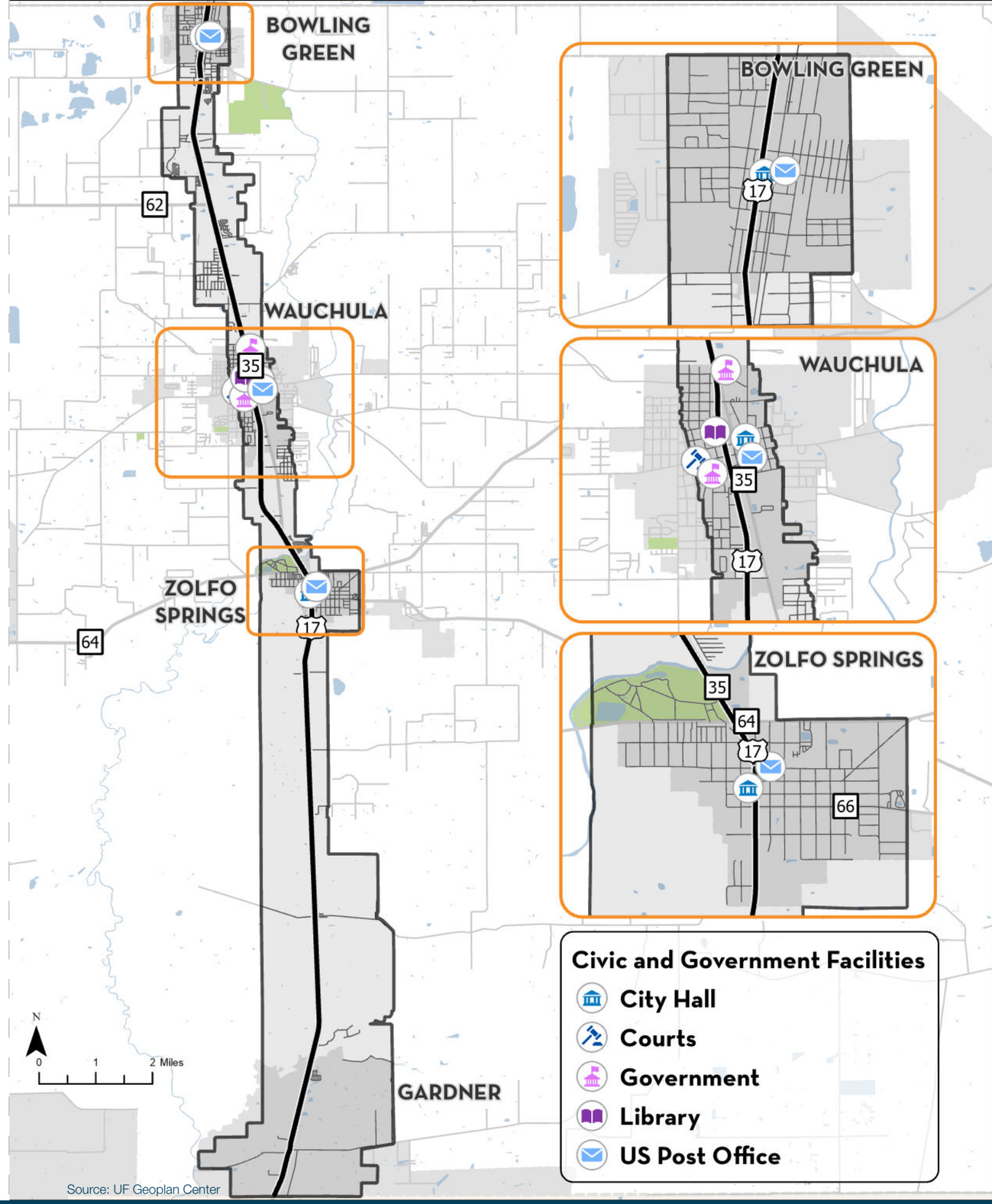
COMMUNITY ASSETS

PUBLIC AND COMMUNITY FACILITIES

The Study Area is anchored by civic and community facilities primarily concentrated in Bowling Green, Wauchula, and Zolfo Springs. These assets not only provide essential public services such as courts, libraries, and post offices, but also reflect the area's historic and cultural fabric, particularly in Wauchula, where a higher concentration of government facilities and historic structures supports its role as the county seat and primary service hub.



Source: UF Geoplan Center



Source: UF Geoplan Center

SCHOOLS

Hardee County schools are currently operating below full capacity, with district wide utilization averaging just under 70%. Wauchula Elementary and North Wauchula Elementary have capacity to accommodate more students, and no new classroom construction is planned through 2029 according to the 2024-2025 Work Plan. Bowling Green Elementary is slated for consolidation with Hilltop Elementary beginning in the 2025–2026 school year, further reducing excess capacity in the district while optimizing facility use.

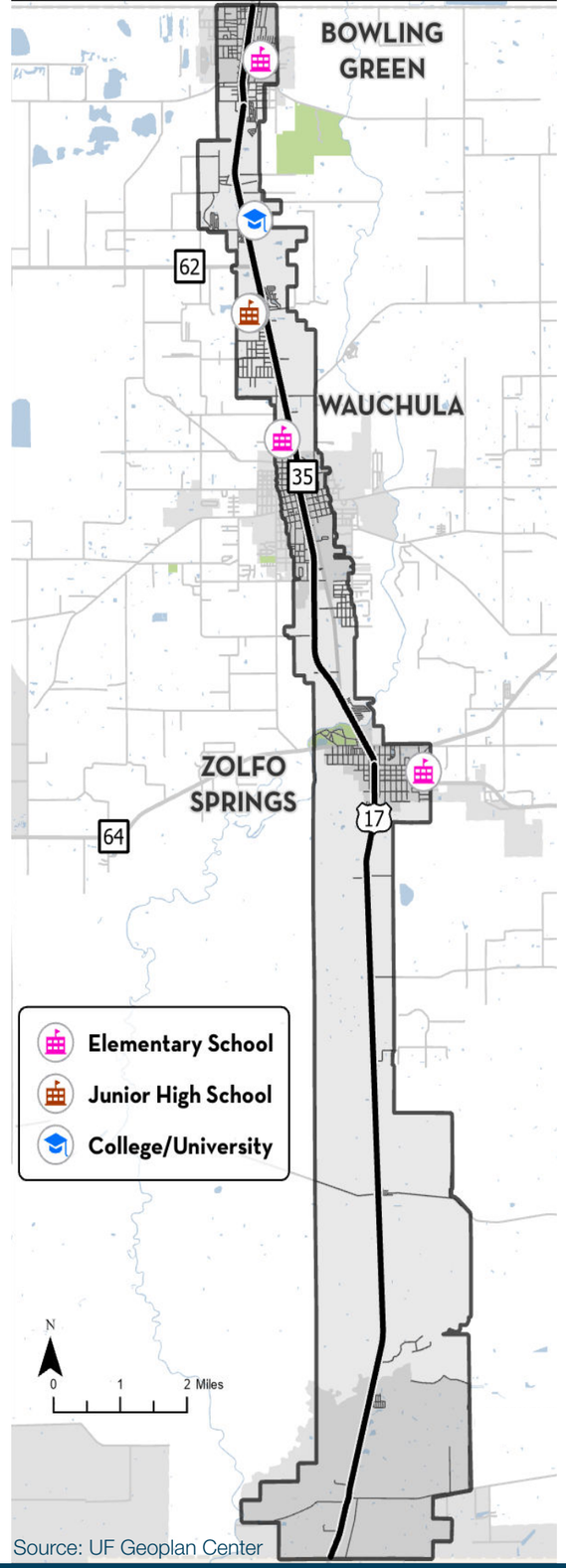
School Enrollment Trends (2023-2029)

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

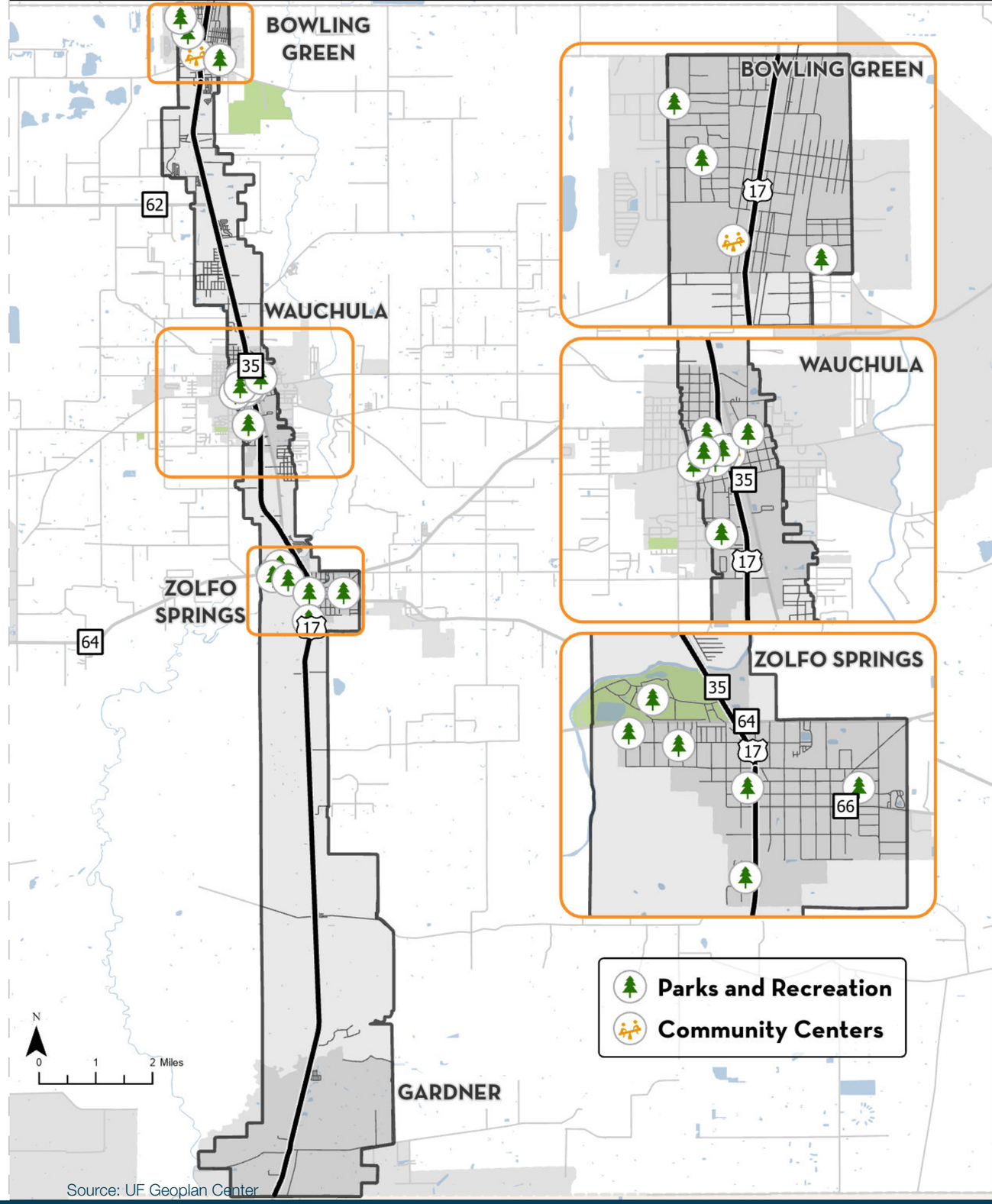
Source: Hardee County School District

PARKS AND RECREATION SPACES

The Study Area contains 16 parks and recreation sites and 6 community centers, offering a mix of open space, playgrounds, athletic amenities, and neighborhood gathering spaces. Wauchula, as the population and civic hub, hosts the highest concentration of facilities, including several historic parks and civic associations. Zolfo Springs and Bowling Green also maintain a strong presence of local parks, many of which are oriented toward mixed-use recreation or neighborhood-scale needs. While no regional-scale facilities are located within the Study Area, the proximity of larger destinations such as Payne's Creek State Historic Park enhances access to outdoor recreation and complements the strong foundation of neighborhood parks, veterans halls, and fraternal organizations.



Source: UF Geoplan Center



Source: UF Geoplan Center

PUBLIC SAFETY AND HEALTHCARE FACILITIES

A reliable network of public safety and healthcare services supports the communities along the US 17 Study Area. Coverage is provided through a mix of municipal and County agencies, ensuring that both incorporated and rural areas have access to law enforcement, fire protection, and basic medical care. While many key facilities are concentrated in Wauchula, overlapping jurisdictions and coordinated service delivery help extend critical services throughout the entire Study Area.

Police Coverage



Law enforcement in Hardee County is led by the Hardee County Sheriff's Office, which provides countywide policing and public safety services, including unincorporated areas and general support to the municipalities. Within the Study Area, both the Wauchula Police Department and the Bowling Green Police Department operate local stations to serve their respective communities. This layered approach ensures both municipal-level responsiveness and broader County jurisdiction coverage across the corridor.

Fire and Emergency Response

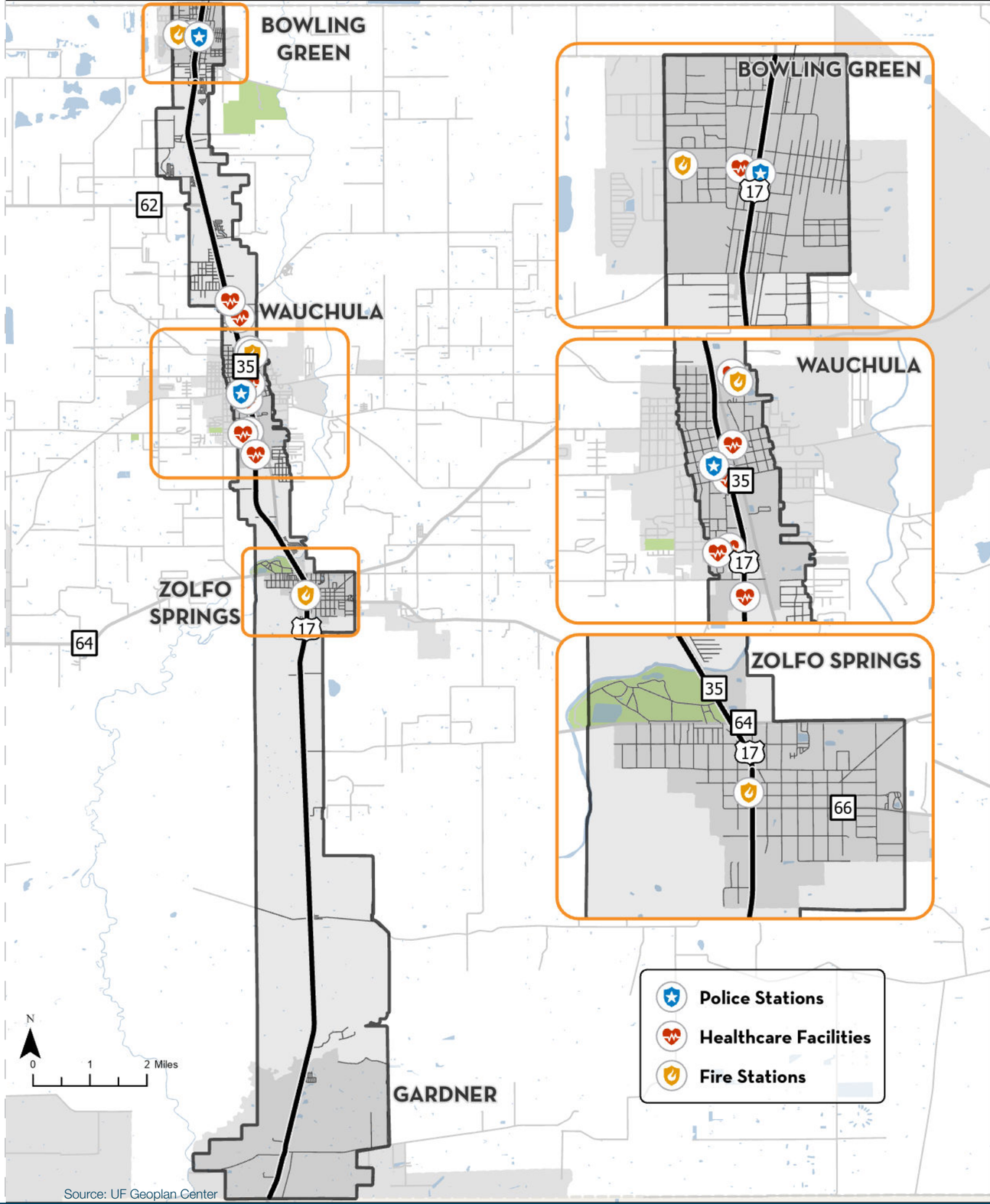


Fire protection in the Study Area is provided through a combination of municipal and County-operated fire departments, ensuring coverage across the corridor's communities. The Hardee County Fire Rescue division serves unincorporated areas and supports emergency services countywide, while local stations in Bowling Green and Zolfo Springs are city-operated. Wauchula's station is operated by the County. This multi-jurisdictional structure helps maintain coverage and emergency response capacity across both urban and rural portions of the US 17 corridor.

Healthcare Facilities



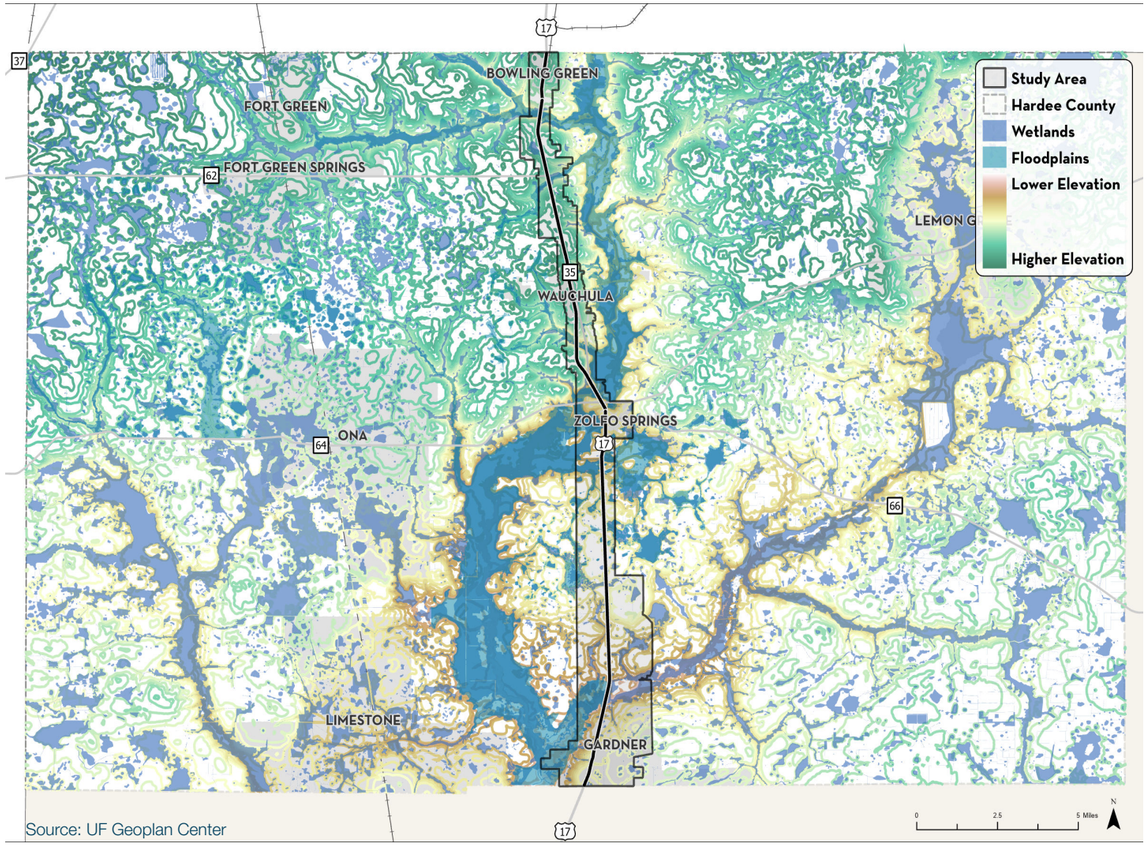
Healthcare infrastructure in the Study Area is primarily concentrated in Wauchula, which hosts the Hardee County Health Department, several pediatric and general care providers, and regional clinics. While AdventHealth Wauchula, the County's only hospital, is located just outside the Study Area boundary, it serves as the primary provider of inpatient and emergency care for residents across the corridor. Within the Study Area, outpatient services and local medical offices in Wauchula and Bowling Green such as the Bowling Green Medical Clinic, help serve local residents meet routine and preventive care needs, though more specialized services may require travel outside of Hardee County.



Source: UF Geoplan Center

NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

TOPOGRAPHY

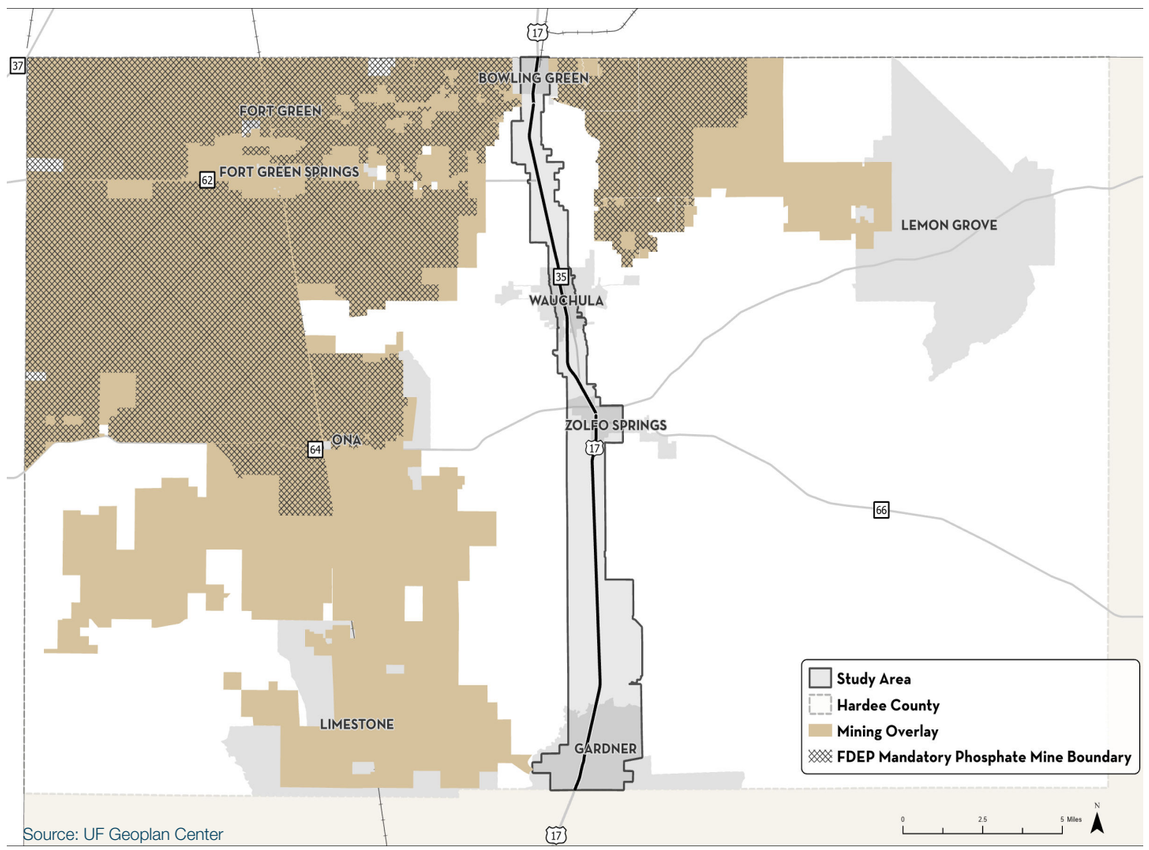


Source: UF Geoplan Center

The US 17 Study Area traverses a diverse landscape shaped by elevation changes, wetlands, and flood-prone areas. The Study Area generally follows a low-lying path along the Peace River, with elevation rising to the east and west. The southern portion of the Study Area is characterized by wetlands and FEMA-designated floodplains, which may present limitations for future development and infrastructure expansion. While the central corridor remains the most developable due to flatter terrain, understanding these physical characteristics is essential for guiding sustainable growth and protecting natural resources.



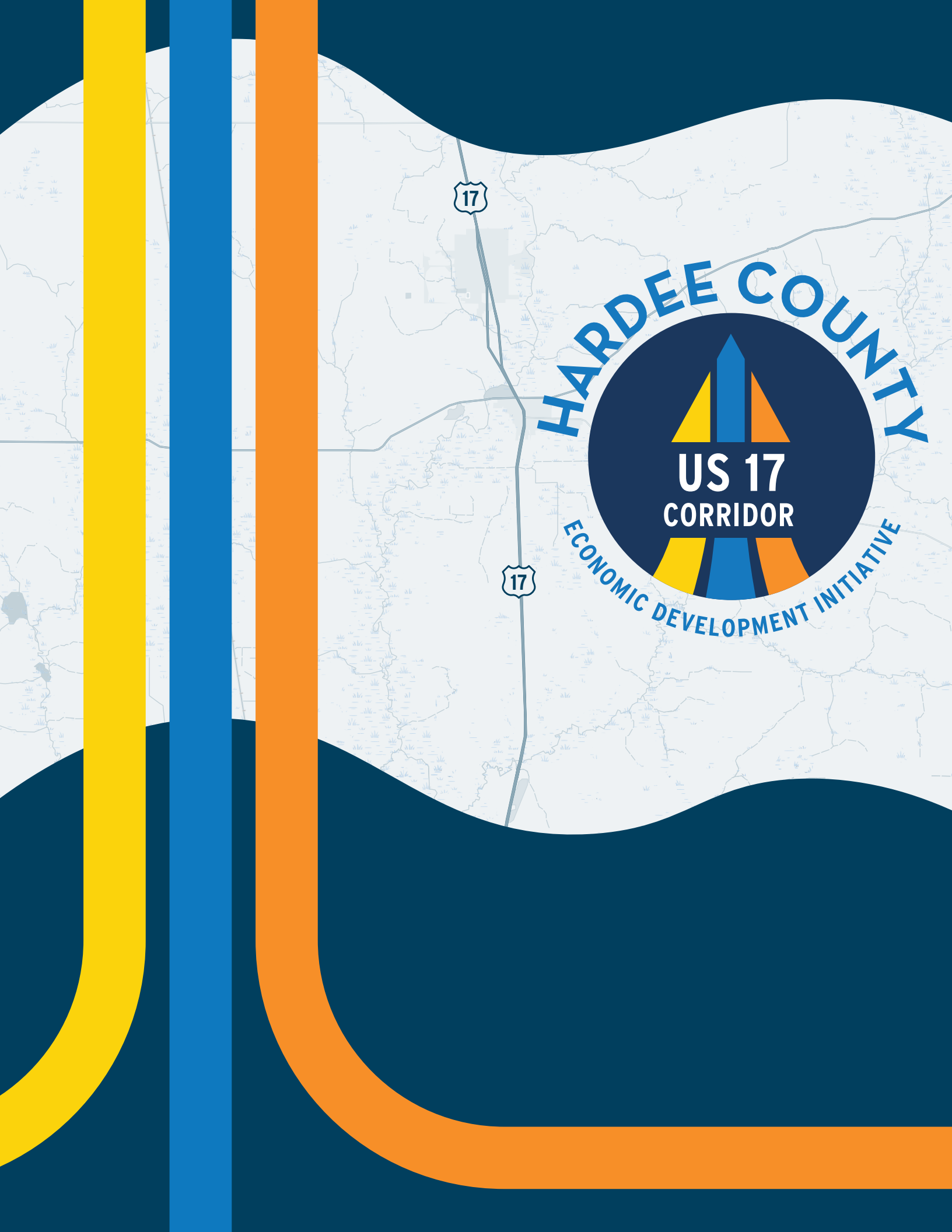
MINING LAND USES



Source: UF Geoplan Center

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 critical corridor for transporting materials and supporting mining-related operations.




17
17
HARDEE COUNTY
US 17
CORRIDOR
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE