CASE STUDY:

TAKING INVENTORY TO CREATE ECONOMIC PROSPERITY:

NORTHWEST GEORGIA REGIONAL COMMISSION'S REGIONAL RESOURCES PLAN

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Cover Image: *Lake Conasauga - Chattahoochee National Forest, image credit Phuc Dao, via Georgia Conservancy*

At Left: *Jack's River Trail, Cohutta Wilderness, Image Credit Atlanta Trails*

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EDD CoP
Economic Development District Community of Practice

NADO Research Foundation

A community's cultural and natural resources are powerful economic drivers as well as essential contributors to residents' physical health and well-being. They can also be core sources of local identity. Economic Development Districts (EDDs) can play a valuable role in convening local stakeholders to imagine how the parks, trails, rivers, and historic places that define their region can create new economic opportunities. EDDs' expertise can be especially effective in tackling multi-jurisdictional challenges around these place-based resources, including efforts to protect and promote them.

This case study explores how the Northwest Georgia Regional Commission (NWGRC) updated its Regional Resources Plan (RRP), from the plan's origins in the Georgia Planning Act to its most recent iteration published in 2024. The plan, which catalogues important natural and cultural resources within the region, is a unique and effective tool that NWGRC and its partners use to educate residents and visitors about the area's rich history, to secure funding and other opportunities for related work, and to help developers protect significant sites during construction.

Cultural and Natural Resources in Northwest Georgia

NWGRC serves an area containing 15 counties and 48 municipalities. The region has numerous protected natural areas and is home to the southern end of the Appalachian Trail, located in Fannin County. The area is also home to a multitude of historically significant sites, many of which are on the National Register of Historic Places. Sites commemorating Native American culture and events are found throughout Northwest Georgia. The Civil War's path through the region is marked by battlefields and historic houses serving as hospitals and headquarters that are now open to visitors. Tourism and the outdoor industry are substantial economic drivers for Georgia overall, bringing in over $43 billion and $27 billion into the state each year, respectively.

The Northwest Georgia region was strategically valuable during the Civil War era due to the handful of its counties located between the Chattanooga and Atlanta rail hubs. Three important military campaigns took place there and the area was also formerly home to Native American tribes including the Mississippian and Cherokee peoples.

What was once the capital of the Cherokee Nation, New Echota, is located in Gordon County; the homes of multiple Cherokee leaders, including the Chief Vann House in Murray County, have been preserved and are open to the public. Additionally, the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail runs through the Northwest corner of the state. The multiple paths the Cherokee and other Native American tribes took as a part of their forcible removal to Oklahoma are marked by road signs, monuments, and historic sites, and are navigable by car.

The Vann House State Historic Site, located in the National Register historic district of Spring Place, page 48 of the Northwest Georgia Regional Resources Plan

The region also features nature destinations like the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest which contains the Cohutta Wilderness Area, the largest national wilderness area east of the Mississippi River. The Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest is visited by nearly 3 million people a year which generates an estimated over $100 million annually.

State Support to Identify Regionally Important Resources

The Northwest Georgia Regional Commission began the process of compiling and maintaining lists of regionally important resources following the passage of The Georgia Planning Act in 1989. The Act tasks all twelve of the state's regional commissions with identifying and managing their area's "Regionally Important Resources," or RIRs. The state defines a regionally important resource as "a natural or historic resource that is of sufficient size or importance to warrant special consideration by the local governments having jurisdiction over that resource."

A RIR designation is bestowed at the discretion of the regional commissions and subject to review by the by Georgia Department of Community Affairs (DCA), with the exception of

resources designated as State Vital Areas (also referred to as Environmentally Sensitive Areas in NWGRC's plan). State Vital Areas are resources meriting additional protections due to their role in the region's ecosystem – these are things like groundwater recharge areas that provide spring and well water to residents and wetlands that serve as barriers to flooding. The Georgia Department of Natural Resources encourages local governments to protect these resources using Environmental Planning Criteria.

The first time this information was published as a comprehensive plan was in 2012. NWGRC's most recent effort to update the plan, which was supported by DCA funds, began in 2019 and concluded with the publishing of the 2024 Northwest Georgia Regional Resources Plan.

The most current regional resources plans for each of Georgia's twelve commissions can be found here.

The Updating Process: Collaboration and Data Collection

In 2019, NWGRC proactively solicited nominations for new resources from local governments as well as independent groups focused on conservation and history. Staff collaborated with groups like county historical societies, state agencies, the U.S. Forest Service, and individuals active in the historic preservation and conservation fields. Over the years, NWGRC has sustained relationships with these groups and individuals by maintaining consistent communication and sharing knowledge and assistance when they were able. These partnerships were essential to the successful update of NWGRC's plan. "Just be[ing] polite, friendly, and supportive," and "show[ing] that you care about these resources" can go a long way, says Gretchen Lugthart, Senior Planner at NWGRC.

Cooper's Iron Works, or Cooper's Furnace, only surviving remnant of the industrial town of Etowah, located in Cartersville, GA Page 56

NWGRC staff did a great deal of hard work to ensure that they included as many significant resources as possible in the updated RRP. "We didn't include every building or even every district that's on the National Register, just because there are so many," said Lugthart, but they did make sure they had the most up-to-date information they could about the sites that were incorporated. They held on-site meetings with partners and traveled to locations to capture photos and talk to experts. For example, one of Lugthart's many trips taken as part of updating the report was to Cartersville, whose downtown is a local historic district listed on the National Register of

Historic Places, to connect with the visitors center staff and document the status of the city's numerous architectural sites, museums, and historic places.

The 2012 version of the plan contained 40 natural resources and 161 cultural and historic resources. The 2024 version of the plan contains an additional 11 natural resources and an additional 33 cultural/historic resources. NWGRC removed references to resources that since 2012 had been demolished or otherwise lost.

Putting the Plan into Action: Uses and Outcomes

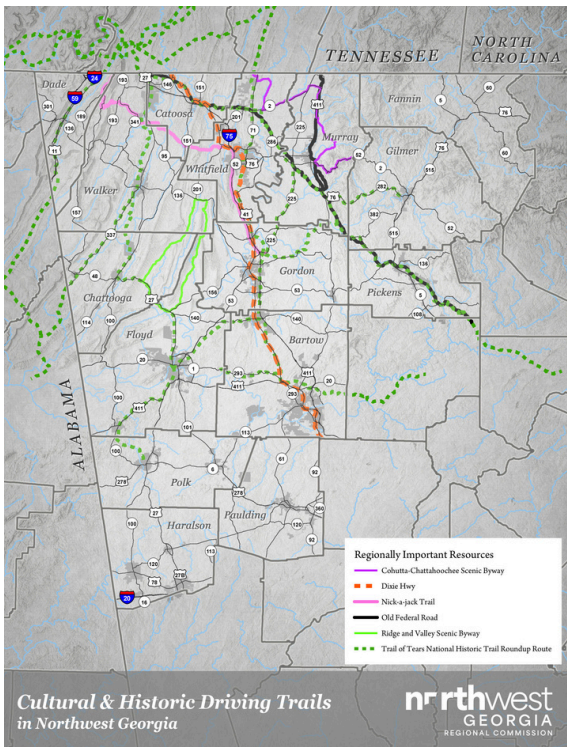
Writing and maintaining a Regional Resources Plan is a requirement for Georgia's regional commissions, all of which are also EDDs. However, developing a regional or area-specific resource plan like NWGRC's can be a valuable undertaking for EDDs anywhere.

EDDs can note a site's designation as a regionally important resource when applying for project-based funding. Calling out references to resources included in, related to, or near a project for which they are seeking funding can help demonstrate the significance and impact of the work. For example, NWGRC referred to its Regional Resources Plan as a part of an application to the Appalachian Regional Commission for federal funding to support the renovation of the Fairview School, a historic African-American Rosenwald School in Cave Spring, to help demonstrate the site's importance to the region and to help underscore its historical value. NWGRC also anticipates that the plan can be helpful in land acquisition efforts; information in the plan was useful in making a successful grant application to the Open Space Institute to preserve additional earthworks near Rocky Face Ridge Park, site of a Civil War battle.

The process of taking stock of an area's natural and cultural resources may also help EDDs and the communities they serve develop a comprehensive understanding of their region's non-financial assets. For localities in the Northwest Georgia region, consulting the RRP can be "a way for a county or city to understand what resources they have" when undertaking longer term planning efforts at the local level, NWGRC's Lugthart noted. This plan also aligns with and helps contribute to the implementation of goals outlined in the region's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) by promoting tourism opportunities, protecting the cultural and natural resources that enhance quality of life for residents, and providing guidance and information that can help guide and foster historic and environmental preservation.

A discussion of a variety of assets offers a foundation on which to build economic development strategies, and in the case of NWGRC, the plan itself also serves as a direct mechanism through which it can further those goals.

The plan includes a number of maps geared towards public use; One of these maps features cultural and historic driving trails in the region and is designed to educate and inform residents and stakeholders about the area's history. NWGRC also provides guidance in its report on how to approach development projects that are adjacent to natural or historic sites, ensuring that they remain intact and protected throughout the course of the work. For example, for certain environmental resources, like drinking supply watersheds and wetlands, NWGRC identifies vulnerabilities unique to individual locations. The commission also provides tailored guidance for how to avoid site-specific risks ranging from the potential worsening of floods to reduced eligibility for rehabilitation tax incentives that come from damage to the structural integrity of historic structures or agricultural landscapes.



Map of Cultural and Historic Driving Trails, page 127

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Prioritize breadth and depth of assets. Being open to including a wide variety of resources when developing a plan can increase the number of stakeholders/beneficiaries that the final product can serve and the ways it can be of service. NWGRC's plan doesn't just include nationally-recognized attractions like the Appalachian Trail and Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest, it also includes individual trails, blueways, and greenways – highlighting access points and other unique features that set apart each individual site and really underscoring the wealth of things to do and places to visit in the Northwest Georgia region.

Engage in person. Getting out into the community and visiting the sites in person, if possible, can also assist EDDs in determining for themselves what remains of historic or cultural locations. Similarly, keeping good records over time can ensure an EDD has valuable references when it comes time to update its plan. NWGRC worked on the ground with local experts, like municipal leaders and historians, to locate hard-to-find sites and ensure their information was accurate and up to date.

Invest in building and maintaining relationships (social capital). The multi-year process that NWGRC underwent to update its Regional Resources Plan involved extensive outreach and coordination with local stakeholders. The fact that it had strong existing relationships with many groups meant that NWGRC could hit the ground running when staff began sourcing nominations for new resources to add to the plan.

Chattahoochee National Forest, image credit Jeff Gun, via The Nature Conservancy