

# *Hiawassee, Georgia*

Downtown Strategic Plan | 2018



Carl Vinson  
Institute of Government  
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA



# Table of Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	6
<b>PRIORITY AREAS</b>	9
<b>THE PROCESS</b>	11
<b>PRIORITY AREA ONE</b> <i>Quality of Life</i>	16
<b>PRIORITY AREA TWO</b> <i>Community Identity</i>	23
<b>PRIORITY AREA THREE</b> <i>Historic Town Center Revitalization</i>	28
<b>PRIORITY AREA FOUR</b> <i>Town Square</i>	38
<b>PRIORITY AREA FIVE</b> <i>Economic &amp; Workforce Development</i>	46
<b>PRIORITY AREA SIX</b> <i>Transportation</i>	50
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	55

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**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** McConnell Memorial Baptist Church | Concert in Town Square  
City Hall | Bell Mountain | The Gazebo in the Town Square



# The Setting

**L**ocated in the north Georgia mountains and housing a population of approximately 900 residents, the City of Hiawassee is situated on the shores of Lake Chatuge, a large Tennessee Valley Authority reservoir recreational area. Approximately 110 miles from Atlanta, and just a few miles south of the North Carolina border, the city serves as the county seat and economic hub of Towns County. The nearby Appalachian Trail, which follows the eastern border of Towns County, has made Hiawassee a stopping point for hikers and nature enthusiasts who come to the area to enjoy the many miles of trails in the Chattahoochee National Forest. Surrounding Hiawassee, major attractions including the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds and Hamilton Gardens bring visitors to the city for shopping, dining, and accommodations. These unique amenities provide countless opportunities for fishing, hiking, and other events, making Hiawassee not only a great place to live but also a tourism destination.



In 1870, the City of Hiawassee was incorporated under its original spelling of “Hiwassee” following Towns County’s creation in 1856. The city’s location at the junction of the Unicoi Native American Trail and other foot trails may have led to the city’s name, which means “meadow” in Cherokee. At the time, Hiawassee had few residents and little economic activity, much like other Georgia mountain towns, due to unfriendly terrain for farming. The turning point for Hiawassee was in 1936 with the creation of the Chattahoochee National Forest, and in 1942 with the damming of the Hiwassee River to create Lake Chatuge, which straddles the border between Georgia and North Carolina. Together these changes brought tourism to the region.

Hiawassee and Young Harris are the only incorporated municipalities in Towns County. Young Harris boasts Young Harris College, and was also home to Zell Miller, a former Georgia governor and U.S. senator. Working together, Hiawassee, Young Harris, and Towns County serve a growing population, one that is projected to more than double by 2050. Moving from a primarily rural area to one supported by services such as Chatuge Regional Hospital, Hiawassee’s economy has been enhanced by population growth throughout the region. However, increasing growth must be met with measures to maintain a small town feel to sustain the area’s attractiveness.



*The Appalachian Mountains overlook every inch of the city, from the courthouse to Lake Chatuge.*



# The Project

**I**n the spring of 2017, the City of Hiawassee was awarded a project grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) for the development of a strategic plan. Through a partnership with the Georgia Office of Planning and Environmental Management, ARC funds projects in Georgia that clearly identify priority projects that address one or more of five ARC goals and demonstrate measurable results. Eligible activities include the development and implementation of a community-based strategic plan as well as activities that help build a community's capacity to mobilize resources, gain leadership experience, and strengthen community institutions and partnerships. The strategic plan does all of these.

The City of Hiawassee selected the University of Georgia's Carl Vinson Institute of Government to lead it through a year-long process to complete the planning document. The first of its kind for the City, the grant has enabled City leadership to identify priorities and create a work program for the next five years. City leadership recognized the importance of identifying priorities based on limited available resources while

balancing the needs of current residents and visitors. Leadership also understands that visitors are potential future residents, and measures to improve the experience of visitors in turn improve the quality of life for current residents. This plan addresses the needs of both residents and visitors. Leadership in Hiawassee desired clearly defined action items with realistic goals and objectives consistent with achieving identified work priorities, the end result of which is this strategic plan.

From the outset, Hiawassee has emphasized the importance of gathering meaningful public input on what its priorities should be. As the strategic planning process is as important as the plan itself, City of Hiawassee administration engaged a wide spectrum of stakeholders to inform its decision-making. Stakeholder input around the City's greatest needs and prioritization of strategies to achieve those needs make up the core of this plan document.

Through a year-long process, the Steering Committee identified and prioritized issues, conducted stakeholder input, and drafted the plan document around the following six priority areas:

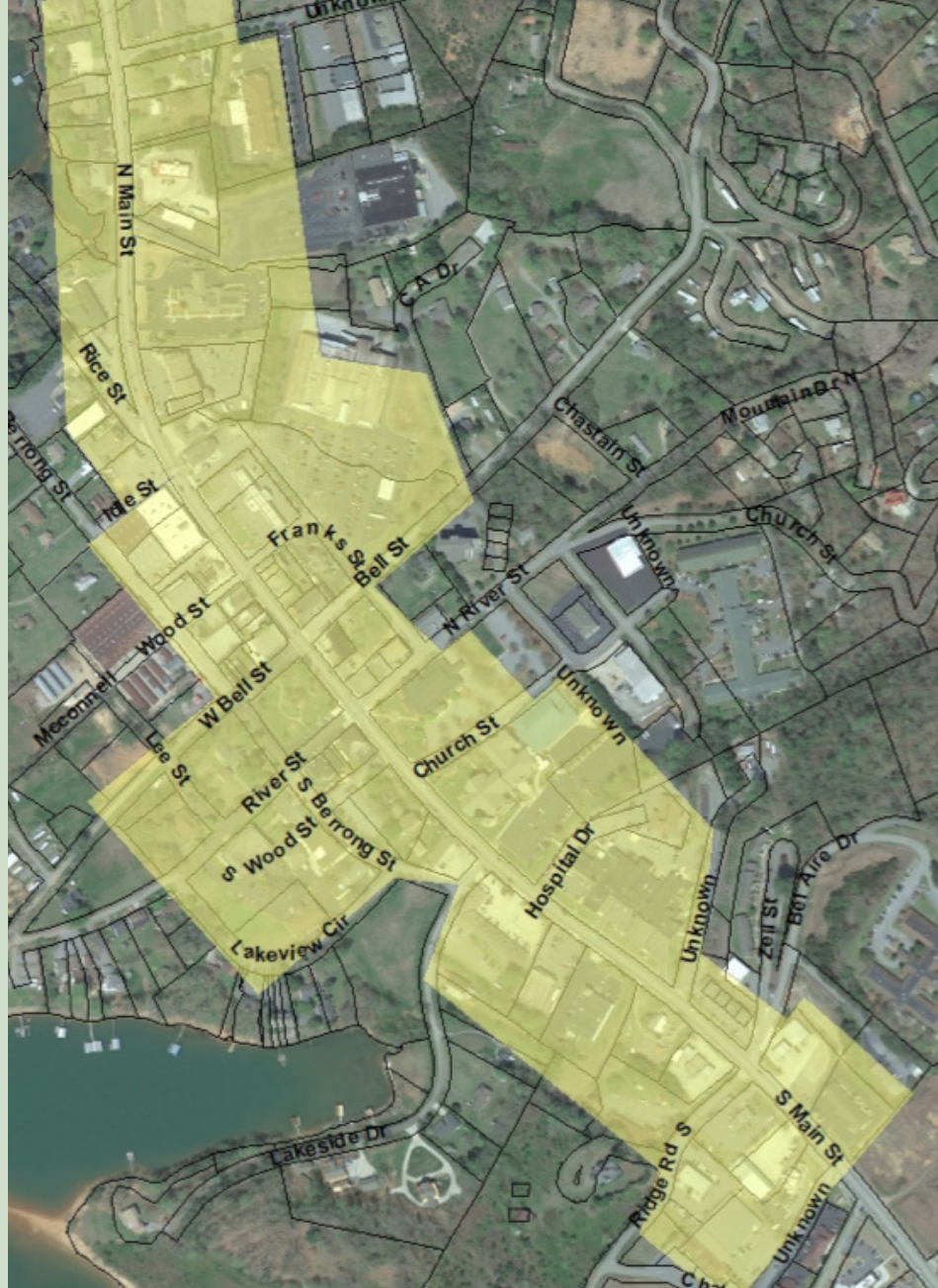


# PRIORITY AREAS



# Study Area

The plan roughly identifies the boundaries of downtown as the intersection of Sims Circle and Main Street at the north end to Chatuge Way in the south. These boundaries provide a more focused area for the design solutions and strategies that will make up the strategic plan.



## DEMOGRAPHIC OVERVIEW

Hiawassee's median home value is considerably higher than statewide values, while the median household income is lower. The median age is higher, indicating the presence of older citizens calling Hiawassee home. This is likely the result of retirees making Hiawassee their home.<sup>1</sup>

As of the 2010 census, 61% of the total housing units were occupied. That means almost 40% were unoccupied by the primary homeowner, which accounts for second-homes and seasonal rentals (since a vacant unit may be one which is entirely occupied by persons who have a usual residence elsewhere). Of those that were occupied, owner and rental occupancy are almost equally split at 53% and 47%, respectively. Data on home values of owner-occupied units indicate homes valued between \$100,000 and \$200,000 make up the majority of the occupied units. This value would be higher if we were to take into account second and seasonal homes.

<sup>1</sup>U.S. Census Bureau estimates for 2016 indicate that household income for the City is \$35,217, place median home value at \$217,900 and indicate a median age of 64.8. Georgia's median household income for that year was \$51,037, median home value was \$152,400, and median age was 36.2.

# The Process



**ABOVE** | Towns County Steering Committee members were selected from across the city and represent many different interests. They met several times and helped determine priority areas for the city.

**S**trategic planning is a collaborative planning and decision-making process that relies on stakeholder input to create a shared plan and implementation strategy. The process helps stakeholders better understand community goals, more clearly identify priorities, carefully inventory available resources, and then use each as a basis for planning. The resulting Hiawassee Strategic Plan provides a detailed look at what City officials and the community want to accomplish in the next five years. The strategic plan is narrow in focus, honing in on downtown and implementable action items that resolve major issues through collaboration with multiple stakeholders.

## Steering Committee Groups

- Downtown business owners
- City of Hiawassee
- Young Harris
- Towns County
- State officials
- Real estate professionals
- Civic groups
- Economic development entities
- Environmental groups

### STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT

Stakeholder involvement is a vital component of strategic planning. In Hiawassee, the Institute of Government held focus groups, conducted one-on-one interviews, held a community town hall, and facilitated a steering committee to garner stakeholder input for the strategic plan. Stakeholders expressed their views about the top issues facing the city and opportunities for improvement.

### STEERING COMMITTEE ENGAGEMENT

The Towns County Strategic Plan Steering Committee was selected by City of Hiawassee leaders to provide input and direction for creating a shared, implementable strategic plan for the city. The members reflect a cross section of city and county officials, tourism and economic development representatives, civic groups, educators, and others who are aware of current initiatives that could inform the strategic planning process. Under the guidance of Institute faculty, the committee met several times over 12 months to identify major priority areas, provide input on whom to interview and include in focus groups, prioritize refined strategies, perform a visual preference survey, and confirm goals, action steps, and timelines for each of the strategic priorities.

### STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

The Institute of Government conducted seven interviews with key stakeholders and five focus groups to garner input on the six priority areas and identify additional key issues and opportunities to be addressed in the plan.



*Focus groups helped inform leaders about Hiawassee residents' top priorities for the city.*

## TOWN HALL

As part of the public input phase, the Institute of Government hosted a Town Hall meeting in the City of Hiawassee to help paint a comprehensive picture of the downtown by the people who live and work there. This included discussing positive features and aspects about Hiawassee and then identifying things that need improvement and issues to be addressed in the future.

## PUBLIC INPUT AND PLAN REVIEW

Institute faculty, with input from the Steering Committee, conducted a plan and ordinance review to understand previous planning efforts in Hiawassee. The following seven plans and ordinances were reviewed:

- 2016 Towns County Joint Comprehensive Plan
- Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy and Regional Plan Annual Update 2015
- Lake Chatuge Watershed Action Plan (March 2007)
- 2017 Hiawassee Planning-Development Ordinance
- 2017 Hiawassee Derelict and Blighted Property Ordinance
- 2017 Hiawassee Sign Ordinance
- 2017 Hiawassee Alcohol Ordinance

***The following themes emerged from the process and were used to guide discussions around developing strategic priorities for the next five years.***



## WHAT'S WORKING WELL

### **STRONG SENSE OF COMMUNITY, SMALL TOWN FEEL**

“Safe,” “friendly,” “peaceful,” and “potential” are ways participants in the Town Hall described Downtown Hiawassee. People love the quaint feel and friendly atmosphere, which is inviting and comforting to visitors, residents, and business owners. The “small town feel” was cited as a favorite thing about the area.

### **TOWN SQUARE**

Those in attendance at the Town Hall meeting expressed an appreciation for Hiawassee’s Town Square and its events. Hiawassee should continue to promote the Town Square as a major focal point, as well as consider ways to pursue improvements that would strengthen its identity and increase the sense of arrival to downtown.

### **LOCATION AND NATURAL AMENITIES**

Citizens enjoy the fact that Hiawassee is located in the north Georgia mountains but only two hours from major centers such as Atlanta, Asheville, and Chattanooga. Town Hall participants repeatedly cited Lake Chatuge and the mountains as major contributors to the high quality of life, including the scenic views, as well as recreational opportunities.

# WHAT NEEDS ATTENTION

## ADDRESS VACANT BUILDINGS AND LOTS

Downtown Hiawassee is suffering from the same disinvestment many small towns are experiencing across Georgia. High sales prices, economic uncertainty, and rapidly changing shopper preferences have made investment in downtowns risky. However, Hiawassee has great potential through measures the City and its partners can take in offering incentives, programming, and code revisions to reduce vacancies and improve the appearance of downtown.

## BEAUTIFICATION

While downtown Hiawassee is known as a charming place, a focus on beautification would improve the attractiveness of the area. Focusing on cleanliness and improving the physical environment sends the signal that Hiawassee is cared for. Short-term investment in beautification such as flowers, benches, façade improvements, and simple updates can improve the overall quality of life for residents. Town Hall participants also expressed a need for gateway signage upon entering Hiawassee from the south.

## TRAFFIC AND TRANSPORTATION

Better traffic flow downtown through the creation of medians, improved streetscapes, turning lanes, more sidewalks, and bike lanes were cited as desired improvements. Many of these improvements are reliant upon work of partners such as the Georgia Department of Transportation, but beginning to address issues through the strategic planning process will enable plans to be developed for improved traffic flow and pedestrian movement. Town Hall participants also expressed a need for improved parking downtown.

## BUSINESS MIX AND BUSINESS PROMOTION

Residents want Downtown Hiawassee to be a destination for leisurely dining and shopping. People appreciate the current business mix but would like to see additional dining and local business investment. A wider variety of businesses will attract a wider variety of patrons. Residents would like to see an overall organized and coordinated approach to business recruitment and promotion, as well as downtown activities, events, and development.



PRIORITY AREA 1

*Quality of Life*





Q

uality of life goes beyond the core set of services residents expect from their community, such as health care, education, and a healthy economy. It also involves a clean and healthy environment, recreational opportunities, and opportunities for social interaction. Thus, Hiawassee prioritizes improved water quality, expanded recreational opportunities in the city, and downtown events for residents and visitors.



Flicks on the Square (above) and Scarecrow Invasion (below) are just two of several events that the city hosts.

EVENTS	
Goal <b>1</b>	<p>&gt; Balance needs of tourists with year-round residents by pursuing activities and events that serve both groups by planning and hosting more events in town</p>
<p><b>Timeline:</b> Short Term, 2019-2020</p>	<p><b>Lead:</b> City Economic Development Director</p>
<p><b>Partners:</b> Chamber, Georgia Mountain Fair Grounds, County, Business Owners, Civic Organizations (Rotary, Lions Club)</p>	<p><b>Funding:</b> Local businesses, self funding, user fees</p>
<p><b>Steps</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Host Fall Affair on the Square (mid-September)</li> <li>• Continue to host Light Up Hiawassee (December 1)</li> <li>• Explore possibilities of more events in October</li> <li>• Market events through Chamber of Commerce</li> </ul>	



<b>Goal</b> <b>2</b>	<b>MAYOR'S PARK</b>	
	> Create trails at Mayor's Park along lake front	
<b>Timeline:</b> Short Term, 2019-2020	<b>Lead:</b> City Economic Development Director	
<b>Partners:</b> TVA, Watershed Coalition	<b>Funding:</b> Land and Water Conservation Fund grants, Georgia DNR grants	
<b>Steps</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Secure funding</li> <li>• Identify contractors to develop and build trails</li> <li>• Implement plan</li> </ul>		



Mayor's Park and Lloyd's Landing are two recreation areas that serve as water access points for the area.

<b>Goal</b> <b>3</b>	<b>LLOYD'S LANDING + MAYOR'S PARK</b>	
	> Connect Lloyd's Landing with Mayor's Park	
<b>Timeline:</b> Long Term, 2020-2023	<b>Lead:</b> City Economic Development Director	
<b>Partners:</b> DOT, TVA, DNR	<b>Funding:</b> Land and Water Conservation Fund grants, Georgia DNR grants	
<b>Steps</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initiate process</li> <li>• Talk to DOT</li> <li>• Identify financing</li> </ul>		

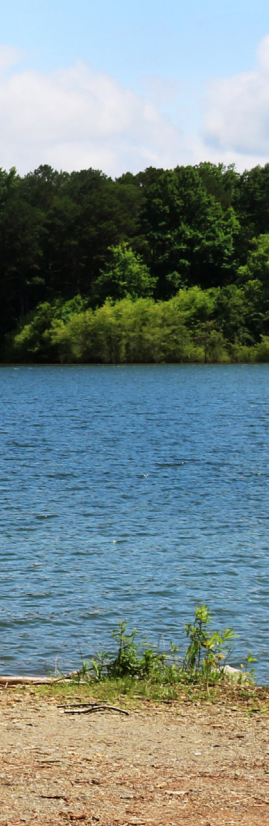


**LLOYD'S LANDING**

LLOYD'S LANDING	
Goal <b>4</b>	<p>&gt; Create a children's water feature at Lloyd's Landing, such as a splash pad</p>
<p>Timeline: Long term, 2019-2021</p>	<p>Lead: City Economic Development Director</p>
<p>Partners: Watershed Coalition, TVA, DNR</p>	<p>Funding: Land and Water Conservation Fund grants, Georgia DNR grants</p>
<p>Steps</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initiate process</li> <li>• Secure funding</li> </ul>	



**ABOVE |** Splash pad examples from Macon, Georgia, and Little Elm, Texas. Splash pads would add a family-friendly environment and another water recreation option to Lloyd's Landing.



Allowing a water access point at Fire Station 1 to Lake Chatuge would create an entry that is convenient to downtown and increase overall usage.

FIRE STATION 1	
Goal <b>5</b>	> Create water access point to the city at property adjacent to Fire Station 1
Timeline: Long Term, 2020-2023	Lead: City Economic Development Director
Partners: County, TVA, DNR	Funding: Land and Water Conservation Fund grants, Georgia DNR and TVA grants
<b>Steps</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assign project manager</li> <li>• Acquire land at Fire Station</li> <li>• Identify funding sources</li> <li>• Identify potential contractors to install ramp</li> </ul>	

WATER QUALITY	
Goal <b>6</b>	> Build support for improved water quality in Lake Chatuge by considering adoption of storm water standards
Timeline: Short Term, begin and complete within one year, ongoing	Lead: City Administration
Partners: Watershed Coalition, EPD, TVA, DNR	Funding: Land and Water Conservation Fund grants, trail funds (TBD)
<b>Steps</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• City engineers conduct additional samplings throughout watershed</li> <li>• Watershed continues to conduct monthly samplings</li> <li>• City's building inspector also licensed as local issuing authority for soil erosion permits</li> <li>• Continue to revise Watershed Protection Plan as needed</li> </ul>	