

# Compelling Place to Live (CPTL) Greater Aiken Chamber of Commerce



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**aiiken**  
CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

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## Executive Summary

Aiken is an excellent place to live, work and play, but to remain vibrant, it must become more attractive to new workers, families with children and early career professionals. People are needed to fill jobs created by turnover and retirement and to fill new jobs coming to the region. The current growth rate in Aiken is unable to satisfy the workforce demand that is expected. Aiken must position itself to appeal to a younger demographic. This is not to say that Aiken should ignore its current assets and its valuable retirement community, but there must be recognition and preparation for the changes ahead.

Aiken Chamber Chair Charlie Hartz and Chamber President/CEO J. David Jameson appointed the Compelling Place to Live (CPTL) Task Force in February 2017 to address the importance of planning for Aiken's future and presented the members with their charge.

The Task Force was chaired by Dr. Sandra Jordan, Chamber Board member and Chancellor of USC Aiken, and the vice-chair was Rick McLeod, President/CEO of Savannah River Site Community Reuse Organization. A diverse group of business and community leaders were asked to be a part of the group and are listed in the appendix. The task force met twice a month for four months and during those meetings reviewed research; discussed assigned readings; and waded through articles and studies related to trends, preferences, and habits of young families with children and young professionals. The committee invited local experts on education, housing trends, and entrepreneurship to provide information on how those trends relate to Aiken. Additionally, the committee invited a panel of human resources officers at local businesses and industry to share their experiences in hiring and retaining employees. Based on this work, the committee determined those characteristics of Aiken that are benefits or hindrances to age diversification and developed strategies and recommendations to effectively develop, attract and retain young professionals.

The Task Force focused on seven areas: (1) Quality of Life; (2) Work and Entrepreneurship; (3) Arts and Special Events; (4) Child Care and After-School Activities; (5) Transportation and Regional Connectivity; (6) Housing; and (7) Education.

The CPTL Task Force makes two overarching recommendations:

1. Create an aggressive image and marketing strategy to recruit and retain the future workforce of Aiken.
2. Utilize digital tools to market Aiken and share Aiken resources with community members.

Short Term Actions that can begin immediately are:



- Establish a Recruiters Roundtable where critical talent recruitment/retention information can be shared between employers and Chamber/City officials.
- Develop a comprehensive talent recruitment resource to be shared with employers where the benefits of living, working, and playing in Aiken are profiled.
- Initiate a series of venues for purposeful dialogue between seniors in the community and younger families and youth with a focus on exploring and determining what an ideal multigenerational community might look like.
- Create clearly visible website links to organizations and community agencies through which prospective and existing residents can gain easy access to information about the City of Aiken and the surrounding communities, including quality of life, arts, entertainment, child care and after school activities, and transportation information.

Longer Term Actions are:

- Develop a comprehensive inventory of available housing along with a clear explanation of available entry points to rental and purchase for prospective families. To further encourage the in-migration of young families and multigenerational balance, create an Aiken housing profile attractive to prospective families offering a clear progression of family housing options, ranging from rental suites, proposed townhouses or shared housing structures, to modestly priced lots and affordable housing alternatives.
- Advocate as a community for increased funding for early literacy programs in the Aiken School system and form business and industry support for Aiken Technical College and USC Aiken with letters and personal visits to state legislators for financial support on par with other institutions in the state.



## Introduction

“If you are lucky enough to live in Aiken, you are lucky enough!” That phrase has become the unofficial slogan of the Greater Aiken Chamber of Commerce. And in so many ways, it is true. Aiken possesses downhome southern charm and caring citizens. Blessed with moderate weather, an attractive and quaint downtown, tree-lined streets, neighborhoods with homes that reflect pride of ownership, acres of natural forest and green spaces, enviable recreational options, a breadth of educational opportunities, and flourishing business and industry, those living in Aiken are fortunate, indeed.

However, there are two eternal facts of life that cannot be denied: 1) ‘time marches on’ and 2) ‘change is inevitable.’ The Regional Economic Benchmark Reports for Aiken, commissioned by the Greater Aiken Chamber of Commerce and the Economic Development Partnership since 2014, clearly indicate that, like most cities and towns in America, there are changes ahead for Aiken. The work of the committee producing this report is based on the recognition that change is occurring in Aiken and the belief that we can act now to shape the results of time and change into a compelling future for our community. One of the most important changes is demographic. Aiken’s retirement age population is growing, but Aiken is not retaining, nor attracting young people in large enough numbers. Every study on community vitality indicates that it is critical for communities to attract and retain young families and a younger working-age population to prevent a crippling declining population. Depopulation of working-aged individuals and young families creates steadily decreasing tax revenues/financial resources, while a growing incidence of “brain drain” erodes the city’s ability to retain and attract new business and industry. This triggers the “domino-effect” resulting in a crisis in the tax base that supports health care, city services and our schools.

According to the 2015 Regional Workforce Study conducted by the Savannah River Site Community Reuse Organization (SRSCRO), Aiken, Allendale and Barnwell counties in South Carolina and Columbia and Richmond counties in Georgia are expected to average about 7,500 job openings annually between 2014 and 2019. These jobs are both new jobs and replacement jobs due to turnover and retirement. Finding competent skilled workers is imperative to the success of the area’s economy. Many occupations in the region have a large percentage of workers that are age 55 and older, and in some occupations, more than 10 percent of the workers are estimated to already be 65. Currently, Aiken is woefully unprepared to meet the workforce needs created by retirements and job growth.

The approaching wave of retiring workers poses a significant challenge for regional employers, but, the challenge does not solely rest with the regional employers. The replacement and growth of our resident populations is extremely important for economic revitalization and sustainable growth for the long term. And as Aiken goes, so goes the county and the smaller communities in the region. The failure to effectively attract and retain young families and working adults could well result in population decline as it has in so many small towns and cities nationwide. For all of us who live in



and love this community, this would be a tragedy. Perhaps a more realistic slogan for Aiken is, “If you are lucky enough to live in Aiken, you are lucky enough...for NOW.”

Stepping into a bright and prosperous future will require bold and sustainable leadership and community cooperation and support. Letting go of the old that no longer works, and taking up the new and less familiar, requires citizens to be patient and collaborative. It also requires bringing together people who have a stake in the enduring success of this community with those who are willing to be part of the transformation.

## Purpose/Charge

The Greater Aiken Chamber of Commerce formed the Compelling Place to Live Taskforce in February 2017 and presented the members with the following charge:

“Develop strategies and recommendations to effectively develop, attract, and retain young professionals with and without families to the local Aiken area to meet the workforce needs of business and industry.”

The benefits of growth are clear and the chart below outlines some of the most significant ways population diversification and growth impacts a community. The work of this committee is to focus on identifying those qualities and characteristics that will retain and attract a younger population to Aiken.

THE BENEFITS OF GROWTH	
Short-Term Benefits	Long-Term Benefits
Increases citizen pride in and connectivity to the community	Lowers the costs of goods and services through greater economies of scale in production
Provides a stable or growing tax base to maintain/increase amenities and standard of living in our community.	Allows businesses and people to share resources more efficiently through greater economies of scale from geo clustering
Provides additional choices of where to live and work	Provides more consumer choices, employment options and social diversity
Generates new jobs, new income, new tax revenue and higher property values	Stimulates greater opportunities for the revitalization of urban areas
Source Adapted from Robert Wassmer and Marlon Boarnet Institute, “The Benefits of Growth” Urban Land 2002	



## **Compelling Place to Live (CPTL) Task Force and Methodology**

The Compelling Place to Live Task Force met twice a month for four months and during those meetings reviewed research; discussed assigned readings; and waded through articles and studies related to trends, preferences, and habits of young families and professionals. The committee also invited local experts on education, housing trends, and entrepreneurship to provide information on young professionals and families and how those trends relate to Aiken. Additionally, the committee invited a panel of human resources officers at local businesses and industry to share the hiring, retention and retirement rates. Based on this work, the committee determined those characteristics of Aiken that are benefits or hindrances to population diversification and developed strategies and recommendations to effectively develop, attract, and retain early career professionals and families with children.

## **The Priorities and Lifestyle Preferences of Millennials and Young Families**

As with villages, towns and smaller cities worldwide, Aiken struggles with attracting young people and young families with children, also called the Millennial generation, to live and work in the area. Many communities in South Carolina have suffered from significant depopulation problems for the past 20-years or more, and have worried over shrinking human and financial resources as a result. We travel through those communities when we leave the Aiken city limits on our way to the Capital, the coast, or to the upstate region of the state, and we see with our own eyes the devastating results to the quality of life brought on by economic stagnation. The hope of many communities is that young people will return to their small towns upon completion of college, but smaller towns and more rural areas can be seemingly unattractive to those who grew up there or to those young people who would be new to small town life.

The millennials are a sub-section of the workforce of young individuals, couples, and families that this community needs to recruit and retain to remain vibrant. While demographers do not agree completely with the time span associated with the millennials, an accepted generality is that they were born between 1980 and 2000, and like each generation, they have their own unique characteristics and ideologies. One thing is agreed upon, millennials surpassed baby boomers to become the largest living generation in the United States, totaling between 75 and 83 million individuals, depending on the span of birth dates used to define this generation. In general, they are the children of baby boomers and older Gen Xers, and are sometimes called the “Echo Boomers” due to a major surge in birthrates in the 1980s and early 1990s. The millennials are the young couples, individuals, and parents currently 18 to 38 years old that the community should try to reach. Understanding how millennials and young families want to live and work is essential to attracting them to Aiken, and thus, to the future of our community. Millennials now constitute the driving



force in the U.S. economy and are shaping our environments, communities and the way we shop, work and seek entertainment. It seems apparent that community investment for this demographic will look very different from previous generations because their motivations and preferences are so distinct from the baby boomers and the slightly older Gen Xers. What does it take to capture their attention and attract them to a community? According to Carol Coletta, Knight Foundation vice president of community and national initiatives, there are several traits communities can focus on that will have the younger workforce sitting up and taking notice:

- ❖ Work that makes a tangible difference.
- ❖ Opportunities to collaborate with other community members.
- ❖ Use of technology and gathering spaces to build a sense of belonging.
- ❖ Creating an atmosphere that's fun.

Millennials are the best-educated group of young adults in American history. While making a good living is important to them, they are driven by work that is meaningful, makes a difference and has impact. They also seek and value belonging. While their definition of belonging may be different from their parent's definition (they have been described as serial participants rather than permanent joiners), they crave a sense of belonging where they work and live. Interestingly, millennials are less likely than older generations to regularly attend a church or synagogue or to even claim an affiliation with any religion. Where the church family provided a sense of belonging to earlier generations, millennials seek that association where they work, live and play. This translates to a desire to find fun ways to collaborate with others and the means to expand social interactions in a variety of settings. While there is some debate about the extent to which millennials are seeking an "urban" environment, the concept of neighborhoods that engage them in decision-making, volunteering, and gathering together for leisure and fun is attractive. Contrary to many popular opinions, millennials do want to connect with their community and their fellow community members, but they will do so in new and unique ways.





## Characteristics of a Compelling Place to Live

Americans across demographic groups consider the following important, attractive community traits:

- ✓ Walkable neighborhoods
- ✓ Ease of mobility with multimodal transportation systems
- ✓ Live-work-play communities
- ✓ Proximity to well-paying work
- ✓ Community that encourages healthy living, not simple medical care
- ✓ Vibrant third spaces like cafes, patio bars, interactive public spaces, community events and festivals
- ✓ Proximity to arts and culture
- ✓ Revitalized urban and industrial spaces
- ✓ Strong, local independent business base
- ✓ Safe communities and schools

Providing these amenities is crucial to compete in the modern economy and maintain a high quality of life in Aiken.

Millennials, like every generation before them, strive for a life well-lived. But, in particular they want to have high levels of well-being, which means more than being healthy and wealthy, it means finding connections. Young professionals are seeking towns where interactions are made easily through spaces that connect people. While there is a lot of “buzz” around millennials seeking cool urban areas, the fact of the matter is that most people, including the millennials want to live relatively close to where they grew up and near families. Affordable, interesting, mixed-use areas that offer hubs for gathering and proximity to good jobs will be equally attractive. Since the quality of life is so important to this younger generation, they are often selecting their place to live, THEN finding jobs. Thus, to address the economic needs of this region, cities, towns and communities should be thinking strategically and together about how to attract these individuals.

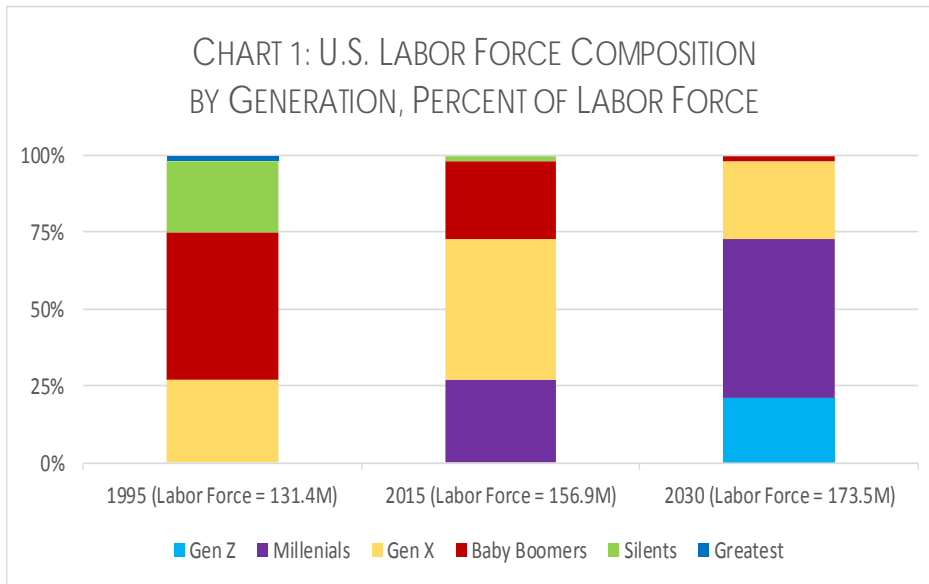
## Overarching Recommendations

Aiken has traditionally focused most of its “outward” marketing as a retirement community – which, of course, has been very successful. Now, a sustained marketing effort is needed to highlight the many positive features that make Aiken not only a great place for those of retirement age and empty nesters, but also a great place to live, work, play and do business as an early career professional or for a family with children at home.

Nurturing and attracting talent is perhaps the most fundamental issue for creating long-term, sustainable economic vitality for Aiken. Much of this is due to the changing needs of the local employers as the workforce transitions from retirement age workers to younger professionals. But



this “talent” goal implies more than the typical workforce development and training issue. It also encompasses the idea of recruiting people, not just to the careers but also to the community.



Pew Research Center, Department of Labor, WSJ.com and Pegasus Planning & Development

The concept of talent means more than a skilled workforce. It means recruiting talented people as well as cultivating the talent pool represented by groups as diverse as students, retirees and entrepreneurs. It also means ensuring that the employees and companies that have been responsible for a community’s growth continue to see a reason to remain in the area. National demographic trends, most notably the aging of the baby boomers, suggest that demand for workers may soon outstrip supply. As a result, competition for labor is expected to increase among companies as well as communities. Focusing on the development, attraction and retention of talent should, therefore, be an important part of any economy.

People are the fuel of economic growth in any industry; without a growing, appropriately skilled and educated labor pool that meets the needs of businesses, an economy can stagnate. However, growing and attracting the human capital to keep the labor pool full is a challenge for communities. No longer are jobs the pre-eminent factor for workers when choosing where to stay or move. Today’s labor force is more mobile than any other in our nation’s history. Despite some skill shortages in highly specialized areas, the job market is heating up and people are voting with their feet when it comes to choosing where to start a career.

In today’s world of instant communication, anyone can transmit to others an impression of an interaction or a place. That perception can then be uploaded, shared and retweeted thousands of times in just seconds. Cities and communities do not always have the opportunity to influence the message. Developing a marketing plan is one way for Aiken to manage its reputation and compete for the younger talent pool. It is an opportunity to proactively promote Aiken and tell stories and



show images that express what many Aiken residents already know: that Aiken is a friendly and active community with a responsible government; it's the perfect place to raise a family or a company; a great place to call home.

Marketing cities and communities is different from marketing products that consumers purchase, where sellers are just encouraging customers to buy a product or service. When marketing a city/community, the “seller” (the Aiken community) is selling a concept — the image of what the city is and can become. Any city's image can be multifaceted: in Aiken's case, the image incorporates the seven traits or focus areas researched in this study.

To reach the intended audiences, Aiken's message must be simple and plentiful. The way people get their information is changing constantly. Traditional methods — e.g., the newspaper and television news broadcasts — are still viable tools, but aren't as effective as they have been in the past: fewer days, fewer pages and fewer readers. Multiple methods of communicating the same message must be employed to increase the chances of the message being received. The city/community must be willing to try new approaches, and change course if the desired audience isn't being reached.

The Task Force focused on seven areas: (1) Quality of Life; (2) Work and Entrepreneurship; (3) Arts and Special Events; (4) Child Care and After-School Activities; (5) Transportation and Regional Connectivity; (6) Housing; and (7) Education.



## Overarching Recommendations

### Recommendations that Resonated in Each Focus Area

1. Create an aggressive image and marketing strategy to recruit and retain the future workforce of Aiken.
2. Utilize digital tools to market Aiken and share Aiken resources with community members.

#### Short Term Actions

- Establish a Recruiters Roundtable where critical talent recruitment/retention information can be shared between employers and Chamber/City officials.
- Develop a comprehensive talent recruitment resource to be shared with employers where the benefits of living, working, and playing in Aiken are profiled.
- Initiate a series of venues for purposeful dialogue between seniors in the community and younger families and youth with a focus on exploring and determining what an ideal multigenerational community might look like.
- Create clearly visible website links to organizations and community agencies through which prospective and existing residents can gain easy access to information about the City of Aiken and the surrounding communities, including quality of life, arts, entertainment, child care and after school activities, and transportation information.

#### Longer Term Actions

- Develop a comprehensive inventory of available housing along with a clear explanation of available entry points to rental and purchase for prospective families. To further encourage the in-migration of young families and multigenerational balance, create an Aiken housing profile attractive to prospective families offering a clear progression of family housing options, ranging from rental suites, proposed townhouses, or shared housing structures, to modestly priced lots and affordable housing alternatives.
- Advocate as a community for increased funding for early literacy programs in the Aiken School system and form business and industry support for Aiken's colleges and universities with letters and personal visits to state legislators for financial support on par with other institutions in the state.

The following report outlines the discussion points and distinct recommendations for each area.



## Focus Area 1: Quality of Life

### *Findings:*

Aiken has a superior quality of life; however, the messaging is not reaching the talent pool we need to attract. There needs to be a strategic and specific targeted marketing plan for the retention and recruitment of early career professionals and families with children and this information needs to be shared with employers in the region. The establishment of a Recruitment Committee or “Recruitment Roundtable” was discussed to keep the message on target. Quality of life improvement suggestions included the need to bring more residential opportunities to downtown Aiken. The hours of operation of existing downtown businesses and the possibility of incentivizing business owners to stay open later was suggested. Young professionals and people in general would like to see a mix of local specialty shops and national name/chain stores in the downtown area. The downtown area needs more impromptu music events and activities like “Amp the Alley” and Oktoberfest. Events like the Aiken Music Fest and the Woodside Food Truck Rally outside of downtown are also important. All of these events need more advertising in areas where younger people can be reached. Targeted Google Ads and advertising on Pandora are examples of avenues to be explored.

There is a strong desire for better designed walkways and bike-paths that connect the city and encourage people to live or visit downtown. Landscaping the parkways was discussed with the desire for incorporating functional art in these areas and converting one or two into a dog park. One big hairy audacious idea was to build a multiuse path/trail around the exterior of Hitchcock Woods and a less hairy idea of adding electric friendly parking and charging stations to downtown.

It is important to note that millennials are the most racially diverse generation in American history. This is driven by the large number of immigrants who have been coming to the U.S. for the past half-century whose U.S.-born children are now aging into adulthood. One in 12 households are multiracial. Thus, communities that value diversity and inclusion and both articulate and demonstrate that value will fare well in attracting this generation.

Millennials are no different from other generations, they yearn for connection and belonging. What is significantly different from previous generations is how they wish to gather and connect. Creating specific and intentional connection points, both physical and technological is critical to a community seeking to recruit and retain young families with children and early career professionals. Additionally, creating places for collaboration and connectivity is a positive way to encourage communication and interaction. Spaces for creative activity, entrepreneurial pursuits and community building are indispensable. Makerspaces have become popular spaces for the creation of interaction. These are community centers with tools. Makerspaces combine manufacturing equipment, community and education for the purposes of supporting and facilitating community members to design and fabricate goods using tools and equipment that they probably don't have at home.



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## Recommendations for Focus Area 1

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### Short Term Actions

- Establish a Recruitment Committee or “Recruitment Roundtable” to keep the city's message on target.
- Encourage a culture of innovation by seeking out quality of life improvement suggestions focused on downtown Aiken.
- Incentivize longer hours of operation of existing downtown businesses.
- Develop a plan to recruit a mix of local specialty shops and national name/chain stores in the downtown area.
- Review city ordinances and eliminate those that discourage activity in the downtown area.
- Provide more impromptu music events, sidewalk art shows and street artists to attract people to downtown frequently. Events like the Aiken Music Fest and the Woodside Food Truck Rally outside of downtown are also important. All of these events need more advertising in areas where younger people can be reached.

### Longer Term Actions

- Create better community connectivity through a comprehensive system of walking paths, sidewalks, and bicycle designated lanes.
- Make a concerted effort to be inclusive by creating a sense of belonging.
- Consider linking the community through a bicycle/walking path running around the outside perimeter of Hitchcock Woods.
- Create Maker Spaces or other spaces that entice citizens to gather, mix, and make connections.



## Focus Area 2: Work and Entrepreneurship Opportunities

### *Findings:*

Much has been written about the workplace expectations and desires of younger adults. Research and surveys have found interesting trends among that population, including the preference for a collaborative work-culture rather than a competitive one, the desire for bosses to act as career coaches and for flexible work schedules, and the inclination to seek jobs that provide work-life integration. The Intelligence Group, a forecasting company for business and industry, calls young professionals “venture consumers,” stating that “They’re not looking to fill a slot in a faceless company, any more than a good venture capitalist is looking to toss money at a faceless startup. They’re looking strategically at opportunities to invest in a place where they can make a difference, preferably a place that itself makes a difference.” The preferences and desires of the youngest generations entering the workforce may explain why, in larger numbers than any other generation, they are attracted to being self-employed. While cities may not be able to impact the preferences of young professionals, they can attract them by capitalizing on their entrepreneurial spirit.

Entrepreneurial Centers, such as those visited on the Chamber’s Aspirational Cities Tours in Winston Salem at the Innovation Quarter and in Raleigh at HQ Raleigh, are hubs to assist entrepreneurs with the development, launching, and growth of a business idea. These centers create an environment of collaboration, provide the expertise, connectivity, and tools to foster a scalable business. Fun is important as well. So, these centers often host gatherings, integrate television screens, Ping-Pong tables, and coffee bars into the setting to create spaces suitable for work and play.

It seems clear that younger professionals have a different picture in mind of what a successful career looks like. In an often-quoted survey compiled by Bentley University in 2014, a mere 13 percent of survey respondents said their career goals involved climbing the corporate ladder to become a CEO or president. By contrast, almost two-thirds (67 percent) of participants said their goal involves starting their own business. (The Millennial Mind Goes to Work: How Millennial Preferences will Shape the Future of the Modern Workplace, Bentley.com, October 2014). Thus, the concept of entrepreneurship is particularly important to millennials. Forbes Magazine calls millennials the “True Entrepreneur Generation” (Forbes.com, Robert Asghar, Study: Millennials Are the True Entrepreneur Generation, Nov. 11, 2014). It is understandable why entrepreneurship is of interest to individuals under the age of 40. As a group, they were coming of age or seeking their first jobs just as the U.S. entered the greatest recession in history. Throughout their formative years they watched the impact of down-sizing and layoffs, and were fed on a steady diet of breeches of business ethics and fiscal or environmental malfeasance. Unlike the baby boomers, the experiences of the millennials taught them to be distrustful of big business and large industry. Surveys suggests that millennials believe that career success and personal financial security will require them to be more nimble and entrepreneurial than past generations. Additionally, correctly or not, young



people see entrepreneurship and self-employment as a way to balance work and life, and to have more control over their own lives through flexible work hours. Communities that are poised to help young people explore their entrepreneurial urges and industries that rethink their approach to work hours, compensation, and reward systems to better address the needs and concerns of early career professionals will be ahead of the game. The committee recommended that to address a portion of the workforce needs by concentrating on “growing its own” workforce by thinking about how to incentivize schools, colleges, and the university in the area to develop programs that address community workforce needs, and to develop programs in the schools to motivate and support students entering those fields.

One of the misconceptions about early career professionals is that they do not engage in community-minded efforts. Recent research indicates that they do desire to be involved, but they will be involved on their own terms. Volunteering may be more episodic, less structured and more combined with fun. Smart cities are expanding social interactions by intentionally mixing “purposeful” work with connection building and amusement. Communities must make it easy for early career professionals to participate and be conscientious about inviting participation. One successful method to invite engagement is to develop formal Community Ambassador programs for young families and individuals. These programs build capacity by encouraging communication and interaction by serving their communities in their own unique language, within their own cultural norms, and where they live. The Ambassadors would serve as a connector between the formal network of social and governmental services and the young community.





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## Recommendations for Focus Area 2

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### Short Term Actions

- Establish a Recruiters Roundtable where critical talent recruitment/retention information can be shared between employers and Chamber/City officials.
- Develop a comprehensive talent recruitment resource to be shared with employers where the benefits of living, working, and playing in Aiken are profiled.
- Develop new community-oriented workforce talent marketing materials for Aiken and create marketing packets to be shared with employers in their talent recruitment efforts
- Create a virtual "young professional welcoming package" that includes Aiken's vision and commitment to a multigenerational community, with identification of assets specific to the interests of young professionals and young families.

### Longer Term Actions

- Create Entrepreneurial hubs to assist entrepreneurs of all ages to develop, launch, and grow a business idea.
- Convene and facilitate the sharing of best practices between businesses and industry around the topic of retaining talent.
- Consider developing Community Ambassador Programs.

## Focus Area 3: Arts and Special Events

### Findings:

There are numerous festivals and events in Aiken, but there is no coordinated effort to market them. Individuals must search in numerous places to identify the event nearest to their particular interests. There is a strong need to adjust the marketing of these events (e.g., Eventbrite, an Aiken app, Instagram, Snapchat, advertisements on Pandora Radio) with an emphasis on mobile marketing. All the local events should designate individuals to tweet or post on social media before, live, and after each event to build local interest with young professionals. The consensus of the CPTL Task Force is that the city does a good job of offering an impressive number and variety of arts and special events. The problem is that individuals do not have a reliable place to find up to date information about events. There needs to be a central source of information - a full community calendar of events integrating what is going on between agencies. This exists in VisitAikenSC.com but is greatly underutilized by the various agencies and by the public.

While no small community “has it all,” the City of Aiken can easily expand upon what it does possess



by thinking and marketing regionally. Aiken would be well-served to market the region rather than limit arts and special event marketing to the City of Aiken. Regionally, Aiken does have “it all”...nearly. Regional cooperation rather than regional competition will expand the perception that the Aiken area has endless arts and special events, offered over more days in the year, and targeting more age groups through greater variety, than those events offered in the city.

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### *Recommendations for Focus Area 3*

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#### Short Term Actions

- Create coordinated marketing plan
- Utilize social media to highlight the events
- Utilize a "One Stop" community calendar of arts and events

#### Longer Term Actions

- Implement the marketing plan
- Market the community calendar of arts and events at [visitaikensc.com](http://visitaikensc.com)
- Market the region, not just the City of Aiken. Between all the communities in the region, "we have it all!"

### **Focus Area 4: Child Care and After School Programs**

#### *Findings:*

Child care responsibilities, including after school programs have a heavy impact on a parent’s career decision. Sometimes meeting the child care needs for middle school aged children can be one of the biggest challenges. Costs across the board for child care and other programs are significant, ranging from \$1,000 per month for pre-school aged children to over \$600 per month for elementary and middle school children. Summer camps can easily reach \$3,000 per child. For the most part, the availability of child care at “high quality” facilities is limited in Aiken and the availability and access is conducted by word-of-mouth. A centralized database specific to child care and afterschool programs is urgently needed in the Aiken area, as well as transportation options. Operators of such facilities need to understand the need for flexible hours to accommodate the needs of a working family. However, child care services are heavily regulated which could prevent this from occurring and the regulations also may present a barrier to new business startups. State legislation should be examined to alleviate or reduce such impact. Ideas from the group questioned if corporations in the local area could pursue child care cooperatives, developing large scale profit centers sponsored by multiple employers and if opportunities exist to have retirement homes and child care facilities at one place or if the retirement community could play a role in the local child care and after school programs.



The lack of affordable day care options is out of step with 21st century trends. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, 92.8 percent of fathers and 70 percent of mothers with children under the age of 18 are participating in the workforce. Women, the traditional caregivers for younger children, constitute 57 percent of the total labor force. The need for high quality child care and after school programs is heightened when looking at the millennials. Of all past generations, millennials lead in out-of-wedlock births. In 2012, 47 percent of births to women in the millennial generation were non-marital. Concurrently, two-parent households are in decline. In 1960, 87 percent of households included two parents. Today that measure is 69 percent. Thus, more than ever, communities that can establish high quality day care options will be more attractive as young families seek a place to call home. This could be a great opportunity for a new business or for the growth of one of the current businesses. There are additional benefits to the community for incentivizing high quality, accredited day care facilities as studies show that children who are in day care early and provided opportunities for observation, parallel play and socialization, possess higher intellectual abilities and are better socialized. This may translate into fewer discipline issues when the child enters school.

Equal emphasis is needed to offer and market high quality after school and summer programs. Experts in child advancement suggest that participation in extracurricular activities on a regular basis is the best way to help children become physically fit, avoid obesity, boost school performance, develop their individual personality, cut down on emotional stress, and develop positive social skills. Every leading study regarding the impact of extracurricular activities on child development indicates that academic grades, study habits and school-based behavior all improve when children attend regular after school clubs and team sports. To attract young families with children and a younger labor force to Aiken, the community can take steps to inventory, market, and incentivize high quality day care facilities and after school/summer break programs.

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### *Recommendations for Focus Area 4.*

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#### Short Term Actions

- Inventory Aiken's current day care and after school programs offered.
- Determine the % of current day care programs accredited

#### Longer Term Actions

- Create a place where organizations can provide quarterly updates and information about after school and summer opportunities.
- Consider loans or incentives to help organizations to open new accredited day care options.



## Focus Area 5: Transportation and Regional Connectivity

### *Findings:*

Rural communities face many challenges in providing the transportation connections between community members and services, health care, education, entertainment and work that enhances livability, a characteristic of a compelling community. For many rural and small cities, changing demographics will require new approaches to increasing available travel options. According to a White Paper from the organization, Transportation for America, non-urban areas have higher proportions of older and lower-income citizens who could directly benefit from increasing the availability of viable transportation options. These groups, including persons with disabilities, often remain isolated, with few options for getting around.

Connectivity is seriously hampered for those individuals in the Aiken community who either don't have a car, can't drive a car, or are part of a household that only has one car. The relevance to the Compelling Place to Live report is that connectivity can be a challenge for young professionals and families with restricted incomes, individuals whose health or physical challenges prevent the operation of a motorized vehicle and for university students (including international students) who arrive in our community without a car. As important as it is to ensure good road conditions for motorists, it is equally critical to ensure the safety and comfort of those who walk or bicycle.

City-funded alternatives to driving, such as a bus, subway, or trolley system that are found in more urban areas are not alternatives in smaller towns, nor is it reasonable or feasible to think Aiken could support a mass transit system like a big city. But, Aiken can proactively look at options that fit our community. For example, some type of limited transportation or shuttle to and between identified "key areas" would be beneficial. Identified locales might include connecting Downtown, USCA, Northside Park and Aiken Mall, as well as transportation to the North Augusta Riverfront Park when it is complete. This type of limited shuttle service connecting points along a fixed route can be a critical element that allows residents access to a larger segment of the community. Perhaps the retirement community buses or shuttles, or the city trolley could be incentivized to perform this function when not in use.

Transportation planning should integrate considerations around various modes of transport (car use, walking, bicycling, transit), while also providing a forum for coordinating interests and activities in the surrounding county, adjacent cities and towns. With equestrian events, numerous beautiful golf courses, and a charming downtown core, Aiken is a destination community and could enhance this designation by using transportation to ramp-up regional connectivity by bringing tourists and visitors to Aiken's events.

Additionally, thinking about transportation while planning to maintain and expand the traditional, town-centered or mixed-use development pattern, which was designed to put homes, businesses, churches and civic life in close proximity to one another, can be another way Aiken can reduce the need for citizens to be on the road while preserving those qualities that make Aiken an aesthetically pleasing and unique community. Additionally, Aiken might consider adding "pay for use" bicycle services and "pay for use" car programs. Car sharing (like Zip Car) is a popular alternative to the



costs and hassles of owning or renting a car, while bike sharing is attractive to residents and tourists alike.

Finally, there needs to be continued emphasis placed on road maintenance and expansion in Aiken. For travelers just passing by Aiken along Interstate-20, there needs to be visual ads or promotions enticing them to drive the 15 minutes to see Aiken. Aiken needs to be strategically marketed as “close to everywhere” (a few hours to/from coast, mountains, Savannah, Charleston, Greenville, Atlanta and Charlotte). Finally, providing a local transportation database would help in Aiken’s recruitment and retention of early career professionals and families with children.

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### *Recommendations for Focus Area 5*

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#### Short Term Actions

- Market Aiken as "close to everything" and market the downtown area on I-20.
- Expand connectivity through the addition of sidewalks and bicycle lanes.
- Add Car Share and Bike Share programs around the greater Aiken area.
- Adopt a regional approach to transportation and consider how to bring tourists to Aiken during special events.

#### Longer Term Actions

- Integrate transportation into all city planning.
- Establish key gathering areas and design a shuttle route to provide limited, reliable transit.
- Leverage state funding by adopting a "fix-it-first" approach to roads; patching, and upgrading what currently exists first, before adding new roads.
- Create a database that provides information on transportation options.

## **Focus Area 6: Housing**

### *Findings:*

As the millennials are growing up, settling down, diving into home ownership, and powering the housing market. According to Ellie Mae, the software company that analyzes mortgage data, millennials are the largest group of homebuyers in America. In 2017, young families and individuals under 40 years of age represented around 45 percent of all purchase loans, up from 42 percent the same month in 2016. And many expect more millennial house hunters are expected to jump into the market before the end of the year. The comparative numbers tell the story: millennials were the largest group of homebuyers (34 percent), nudging the baby boomers to second place (30 percent). Like other age groups, these young homeowners are buying to increase their living space and for the investment opportunity.



While the desire to be a homeowner is palpable, millennials are mostly first-time buyers and they are competing against repeat buyers who have more buying leverage and experience. Additionally, as a group, millennials are just now earning the kind of salaries their predecessors earned before the recession. Thus, homeownership may be a financial stretch for many younger professionals, especially if the market trends toward expensive homes.

To be a compelling place to live, Aiken must ensure that young families with children at home perceive that attaining accommodation in Aiken is viable. That includes defining what we mean by affordable housing and identify ways that other communities have been able to communicate the availability of affordable housing. It also requires that the community presents a full range of housing options to potential buyers. To consider moving into Aiken, young families need to see a clearly defined range of entry points; affordable rentals and entry level houses or town homes that are viable for purchase. Eliminating restrictive policies on rentals will make the community more attractive to first time buyers. As mentioned in the section on transportation, the community will benefit from thinking about town homes and higher density living options nearer to the city's core. Expanding the downtown area by revisiting the availability of the land bordering the central downtown could provide more viable options. The CPTL Task Force is pleased to see Carbon Properties show interest in adding downtown housing as part of the Downtown Revitalization project.

To attract young people to downtown, Aiken may need to borrow from the creative methods used by other communities to draw new people to the community. One such example is Paducah, Kentucky's solution to abandoned homes and blighted blocks adjacent to the downtown. The Artist Relocation Program (ARP) was developed in Paducah to attract artists to the Lower Town area by offering them finance and loan incentives to purchase, renovate, and build properties in the area. Along with these incentives, the low cost of living in Paducah allows artists the possibility of owning their own home, work and gallery space. Since its beginning in late 2000, Paducah's ARP has dramatically revitalized the Lower Town area into a thriving artist's colony, tourist destination and economic development center, attracting young professionals as well as artists into a formerly blighted area of their small town. Aiken could consider something similar, if not for artists, then for young professionals. Paducah's unique solution required a unique partnership between community members, lending institutions, local government and artists. For most communities, it takes a shared vision and leadership to sustain a revitalization or improvement effort. To engender support for more housing options downtown, the community must be engaged in the planning process and become an informed participant in the dialogue.



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## Recommendations for Focus Area 6.

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### Short Term Actions

- Prepare an inventory of the range and types of housing available in Aiken.

### Longer Term Actions

- Convene a group to engage in a dynamic and creative discussion of how to attract more millennials to live in downtown Aiken.
- Create incentives for purchasing and upgrading underdeveloped properties near the downtown core.
- Encourage investors and contractors to build higher density and more affordable housing options.

## Focus Area 7: Education

### Findings:

It will come as no surprise that good schools are a central factor among homebuyers nationwide. As individuals begin to consider a new job or new home, they are looking closely to make certain that they will have access to high-performing schools. According to a 2015 study by the National Association of Realtors Homebuyer and Sellers, the “quality of the school district” was the sixth-most-important factor influencing the neighborhood choice of homebuyers around the country, but for buyers 35 to 49, the school district was the fourth-most-important factor. A recent Trulia survey found that 46 percent of millennials and 28 percent of Gen Xers with children said their dream home would be in a great school district. A poll released by EdChoice (October 2016) showed 38 percent of millennials said they would choose a private school, while 12 percent would homeschool, and 11 percent would enroll their child in a charter school. It seems clear that GenX and millennial parents of school-age children support and desire school choice. The same survey indicates that, “Millennial parents have made great sacrifices to support their children’s schooling. They have changed jobs (18 percent vs. national average 14 percent), moved closer to school (26 percent vs. national average 17 percent) and taken other jobs for additional income (32 percent vs. national average 21 percent) specifically to support their children’s K–12 education.” The poll indicates the willingness of this generation of parents to relocate in order to enroll their children in schools that are perceived to be better. This trend is reflected in a negative way in the 2017 Regional Economic Benchmarking Report for Aiken County. The aging of the Aiken community suggests that young families are not remaining in the area, but are relocating to place their children in schools that they perceive are of higher quality than the private and public schools in our community.

Because it is both unethical and a violation of Fair Housing Law for a Realtor to make a judgment call about a school, individuals who are considering a move must do their own research and make their own judgment about what type of school is best for their child and the school’s quality.



Sometimes that research is literally, “only skin deep” as judgments are formed based on a “drive-by” the school buildings. Families considering moving to Aiken need to be better informed about the sustained quality of educational programs. The public and private schools in the Aiken area can capitalize on marketing their institutions through technological formats. According to Education and Technology (March 7, 2016), “Millennial parents have different expectations about how schools will inform them and collaborate with them. Instead of a note sent home, a millennial parent may prefer to get behavioral notes through an app.” Millennial parents want convenience and they will insist on being a part of the education process, rather than a bystander. Thus, those schools that are proficient in the use of mobile apps, learning management systems, and other classroom and school technology can help bridge the gap with parents. Aiken has educational options and high-quality schools. There has been tremendous momentum building within the Aiken County Public Schools with new educational initiatives underway and more on the horizon. But, the community needs to do a better job advocating for education in the Aiken area. One such area was identified in the Task Force discussion; the need for an increase in funding for early literacy programs in the Aiken County Public Schools. The benefits of this limited program to date attest to its value.

For both millennials and young families with children, living, learning and working in a safe environment is paramount. To attract millennials to Aiken, a priority on physical safety in schools is a must. Schools should highlight their safety records, adopt and publish anti-bullying strategies, and seek continuous improvement in safety throughout the schools.

As the Regional Economic Benchmarking Report for Aiken County – 2017 Update highlighted, “A higher level of educational attainment is a strong indicator of the economic vitality of a region. The percent of adults with associate degree, bachelor degree, and higher continued to rise in 2016. The City of Aiken continues to lead with the percentage of adults with graduate degrees (19.2 percent); a high concentration of adults with advanced degree represents a tremendous potential for the local economy.” The community will want to determine appropriate ways to support and expand upon the intellectual capital already in place and ensure that this continues to be a resource for the area. Aiken is fortunate to have a technical college and a comprehensive university in or near the city limits. Research shows that those towns and cities with access to higher education, continuing education, and collegiate activities are more successful in attracting early career professionals. Aiken can leverage the fact that they have a university and a college in the area by marketing the presence of both when individuals are considering relocating to this area. However, a challenge for higher education in the community is the way funding is applied through South Carolina legislation. There needs to be a concerted effort to provide local support including letter writing and one-on-one visits to help make funding changes that benefit our Aiken Technical College and USC Aiken.





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## Recommendations for Focus Area 7

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### Short Term Actions

- Provide information on the types of schools available and the quality of each in an easy to locate, easy to read/use website.
- Market the local college and university and the workforce and quality of life contributions they make to life in Aiken.
- Advocate for increased funding for early literacy programs

### Longer Term Actions

- Continue to support school improvements through the 1 penny tax.
- Provide employers information about the schools to share with employees and prospective employees.
- Highlight Aiken's schools in marketing pieces to be used in the newspaper, on social media and in relocation information.
- Support the use of technology in the classroom to connect parents to the educational enterprise.

## Concluding Statement

More than any other single trait, millennials like things that are designed just for them. Keep that front and center in your mind as you intentionally create an environment built around what is important to them. Instead of trying to overhaul an entire community, Aiken needs to be thoughtful about creating two or three “youth-centric” neighborhoods that contain a key number of the traits desired by early career professionals and families with children.

The reward will be a vibrant economy and a community driven by a diversified population, including a significantly younger population, that is active and engaged where they work, play and live, and who want to make Aiken their hometown.



## Appendix

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### *Compelling Place to Live Task Force Members*

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Chair: Dr. Sandra Jordan – USC Aiken

Vice-Chair: Rick McLeod - Savannah River Site  
Community Reuse Organization

Dr. Thom Akins - Kitfox Pediatric Dentistry

Shane Bagby - Security Federal Bank

Elizabeth Cahill - RSI, Inc.

Mike Farmer – Greater Aiken SCORE

Shawn Foster - Aiken County Public Schools

Jennifer Hart - Goodwill Industries

Dr. Katie Heroux - Savannah River National Lab

Dr. Forest Mahan - Aiken Technical College

Lisa Murphy - Aiken Dry Goods

Dr. E.J. Nwoga, D.C. - Vageo Chiropractic Clinic

Felicia Pontoo - Mead Hall Episcopal School

Keyatta Priester - Aiken Electric Cooperative, Inc.

Vance Reynolds - Aiken Regional Medical Centers

Braxton Sisco - Braxton Consulting LLC

Avery Spears-Mahoney - Aiken Downtown  
Development Association

Grant Summerford - TD Bank

Mike Thomas - Alison South Marketing Group

Julie Whitesell - Meybohm, REALTORS ®

ExOfficio Members:

Mandy Collins – Aiken Chamber of  
Commerce

Charlie Hartz – Dunkin’ Donuts of  
Aiken

J. David Jameson – Aiken Chamber of  
Commerce