

# Aiken: A Compelling Place to Live

Task Force Report — August 30, 2017

## 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.

## 7 AREAS OF FOCUS

1. Quality of Life
2. Work & Entrepreneurship
3. Arts & Special Events
4. Child Care & After School Activities
5. Transportation & Regional Connectivity
6. Housing
7. Education

## CHARACTERISTICS OF A COMPELLING PLACE TO LIVE

- 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

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 Re-use Organization. A diverse group of business and community leaders were asked to be a part of the group. 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.

## 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.

# AREA RECOMMENDATIONS

## Quality of Life

### 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.

## Work & Entrepreneurship Opportunities

### 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.

## Arts & Special Events

### 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 [visitaikense.com](http://visitaikense.com)
- Market the region, not just the City of Aiken. Between all the communities in the region, "we have it all!"

## Child Care & After School Programs

### 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.

## Transportation & Regional Connectivity

### 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.

## Housing

### 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.

## Education

### 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.