



# ADVANCING ROCKDALE

ROCKDALE COUNTY—CITY OF CONYERS  
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY 2021–2025



Carl Vinson  
Institute of Government  
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA



# ADVANCING ROCKDALE

ROCKDALE COUNTY–CITY OF CONYERS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY 2021–2025

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 4     **Introduction**
- 5     **Process Overview**
- 7     **Major Themes and Findings**
- 10    **Vision for Economic Development**
- 10    **Target Industries**
- 12    **Priority 1**  
          Growing and Supporting the Business Community
- 14    **Priority 2**  
          Telling the Rockdale Story
- 16    **Priority 3**  
          Building a Strong Workforce
- 18    **Additional Supporting Elements for Economic Development**
- 18    **Conclusion**
- 19    **Data Appendix**

Project facilitation, data analysis, documentation, and strategic guidance were provided by the Carl Vinson Institute of Government at the University of Georgia: Greg Wilson, Rebecca McIver, Holly Lynde, and Kira Crowe. Editing and graphic design assistance were provided by Karen DeVivo and Jake Brower.

Project management provided by Will Barkley, Jennifer Rutledge, and Teresa Jacobs of Rockdale County Government and Marty Jones and Gina Hartsell of the Conyers-Rockdale Economic Development Council.

# INTRODUCTION

Economic development plays an important role in strengthening communities, creating new jobs, supporting existing employers, and promoting shared prosperity. Rockdale County and the City of Conyers have a strong history of investing in and promoting economic development through a shared partnership. This economic development partnership includes the business community, residents, elected officials, educational organizations, the Conyers-Rockdale Economic Development Council (CREDC), and the Conyers-Rockdale Chamber of Commerce. Recent industry expansions and investments in the community demonstrate the impact of the community's shared economic development efforts.

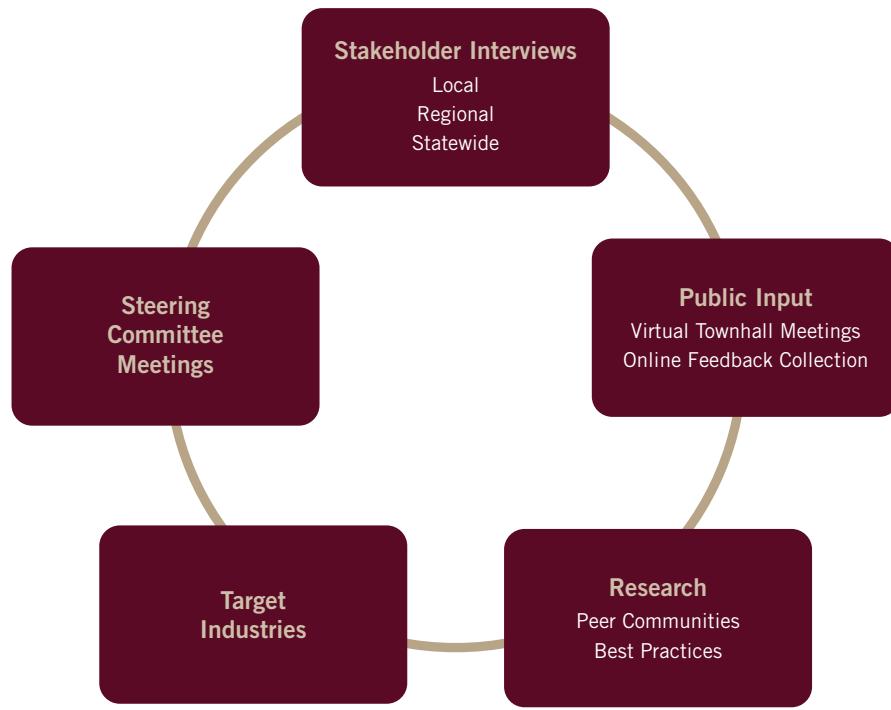
Over the past two years, leaders in Rockdale County and the City of Conyers have taken active steps to chart a new vision and strategy for economic development in the community. This effort seeks to build on the strong economic development foundation in the community and position Rockdale-Conyers for more success in future years. Specifically, in December 2018, Rockdale County Commission Chairman Oz Nesbitt created an Economic Development Task Force. The group was charged with evaluating current economic development efforts, enhancing communication between various partners in economic development, and devising strategies to boost economic development efforts in Rockdale County. The task force is composed of leaders from the county government, the Rockdale County Development Authority, City of Conyers, and the CREDC.

In early 2020, Rockdale County, in partnership with the City of Conyers and the CREDC, launched a formal effort to develop a new economic development strategy for the community. The group engaged the University of Georgia's Carl Vinson Institute of Government to support the project and developed a steering committee of local leaders to oversee the project. This report summarizes the findings of the steering committee and details the new strategy for advancing economic development efforts in Rockdale County.



## PROCESS OVERVIEW

Over the course of this yearlong project, a number of activities and approaches were undertaken to ensure a comprehensive economic development planning process. The process included interviewing stakeholders; providing multiple opportunities for public input; analyzing target industries; conducting in-depth research on peer communities and best practices; and, most importantly, holding four virtual steering committee meetings to synthesize the information and develop a final plan. The sections that follows detail each of these activities.



### Stakeholder Interviews

To better understand the community, the Institute of Government team interviewed a variety of local, regional, and statewide stakeholders with knowledge of or interest in economic development. Locally, the team spoke with local employers, developers, and representatives from organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce and local governments who play a vital role in attracting and retaining companies in the area. Regionally, the team spoke with representatives from regional organizations who serve both Rockdale and the surrounding counties and act as liaisons to broader resources. Finally, the team spoke with economic development professionals at the state level who could provide context and comparative information valuable to helping Rockdale succeed in a competitive economic development environment in Georgia and nationally. These feedback from the interviews were distilled into major themes and key takeaways that the Institute of Government team and the steering committee used as they developed priorities and strategies for Rockdale County and the City of Conyers.

### Additional Public Input

Feedback from community stakeholders provides valuable input as a community works to define its goals and aspirations for economic development. The Rockdale County and City of Conyers Economic Development Strategy project was shared with the public at a town hall meeting in February 2020. Participants were then asked to provide feedback virtually in July. Collecting this input during an international pandemic was challenging, but the Institute of Government accomplished this task by hosting two virtual town hall meetings and fielding an online feedback form. All three of these public input opportunities were widely advertised within the community through local government social media, press engagement, and email outreach. Citizens were asked about community assets, challenges, and what they would like to see to enhance prosperity and create more jobs. Much like the stakeholder interviews, the public input was distilled into important topics and provided to the steering committee as part of the larger process.

## Target Industry Review and Analysis

One traditional way to look at economic development planning is to assess a community's target industries. These are industries that best fit a community and are the focus of local recruitment, retention, and expansion efforts. The Institute of Government reviewed and analyzed the community's existing target industries using a variety of quantitative and qualitative data measures. The review recommended that Rockdale County focus its economic development efforts on three key target industries (advanced manufacturing, logistics, and film and television production). Focusing the recruitment efforts on three target industries that best fit the community will allow Rockdale to be strategic with its resources, ultimately leading to sustainable growth. Limiting the community's target industries does not exclude recruitment or retention of other sectors, but rather focuses outreach and recruitment efforts on industries where they have the highest probability of success. Moving forward, Rockdale County and the City of Conyers will be equipped with information to effectively and efficiently recruit businesses to the community in a highly competitive market. See page 10 for more information on these target industries.

## Peer Community and Best Practices Research

Another way to assess a community's economic development efforts is to conduct a peer community analysis. This analysis seeks to compare Rockdale County and the City of Conyers to several similar communities on a variety of economic development aspects. The Institute of Government selected a group of six peer communities from across Georgia and the South that are of similar size and demographic makeup as well as with a similar metropolitan context (a suburban community that is part of a larger MSA with an interstate cutting through it). Once this list was established, the communities were compared on factors such as their target industries, social media usage, community data, available product, and their existing economic development structure including local organizations, budgets, and incentives. This analysis provoked fruitful discussion about the future of Rockdale County and the City of Conyers. Additionally, it brought to light some best practices that the CREDC and the community could undertake to bolster their economic development practices.

## Steering Committee Meetings

The project was led by a group of 26 local stakeholders ranging from educators and local government officials to community employers and nonprofit representatives. These community stakeholders comprised the Rockdale-Conyers Economic Development Steering Committee, which met virtually four times during the process. The first meeting, in March 2020, was designed to bring the group together and orient them to economic development and the process. The second meeting, held in April, focused on data. The group analyzed a variety of data points including key metrics of education (graduation rate, high school progression, opportunity youth), economy (occupational and industry trends, unemployment, etc.), and quality of life (housing, healthcare, crime, and more). They also heard from local experts on economic development, tourism, and film initiatives during the second meeting. In June, the group met for a third time to identify community strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and risks, as well as to set a vision for economic development in Rockdale County and the City of Conyers. Finally, in September, the group met a final time to establish priorities and suggest potential strategies. This group was pivotal to synthesizing all of the research and information gathered throughout the process and turning it into a draft plan for the community.

During the first steering committee meeting the group established a list of values that they wanted to uphold throughout the process. Those values included:



Participatory



Built on Success



Data-Driven



Best Practice-Based



Implementable

# MAJOR THEMES AND FINDINGS

As detailed in the Process Overview section, the Rockdale County–City of Conyers economic development process relied heavily on data collection and analysis through many methods and approaches. This section summarizes the major themes and findings that emerged during the process.



## STRENGTHS

### Economic Development Efforts are Well Regarded and Responsive

Business and economic development stakeholders, especially those from outside of Rockdale County and the City of Conyers, reported a positive view of the community. Many were aware of the community's assets, strengths, and recent economic development wins. Economic development success involves numerous external stakeholders (e.g., site selection consultants, brokers, regional leaders, state project managers), so perception and awareness are critical.

Additionally, another common refrain in interviews was the responsiveness of the various entities involved in economic development efforts in Rockdale County and the City of Conyers. County and city offices were cited as being responsive to needs involving development, permitting, filming, and other requests for support. Some interview participants reported quicker access and support compared to other communities. Many interviewees lauded the Conyers-Rockdale Economic Development Council (CREDC). Specifically, they reported that the CREDC is highly responsive and always available to meet their needs.

### Location Factors

Many stakeholders highlighted Rockdale County's location as a key asset. Specifically, they mentioned the proximity to the airport and downtown Atlanta as well as easy highway access. The community has capitalized on this advantageous location as evidenced by the increase in warehousing and distribution firms. Another location factor is the relatively low cost of living and doing business in Rockdale County compared to metro Atlanta, Georgia as a whole, and other parts of the United States. See Page 24 in the data appendix for additional cost-of-living data.



## **Strong Existing Industry Base**

Rockdale County is home to many companies that produce products that are found in households across America. Many have long histories in the community and play an important role in the local economy. Their positive experiences can help foster future business retention and expansion decisions. A large portion of new jobs generated through economic development support come from the existing industry base. Additionally, prospective firms exploring business location options will seek candid feedback from the existing industry base about their experiences and level of community support.

## **Engaged and Caring Community**

Another intangible strength highlighted in several interviews, by the strong participation in public engagement opportunities, and by the project steering committee is that Rockdale County and the City of Conyers are caring and active communities. One stakeholder described the community as having a small-town feel but the access and resources of a larger community. Citizens are interested in the future of the community and actively participate in meetings, events, and planning processes. This strength is critical as the community seeks to continue implementing economic development action items.



## **CHALLENGES**

### **Limited Product and Land for Development**

As the second-smallest county in the state and with bedrock hindering land use in some portions of the county, Rockdale County has a limited amount of land available for economic development purposes and limited available product (e.g., sites, buildings, redevelopment projects). Given these challenges, the community should explore how to best utilize developable land and potential redevelopment projects. Availability of product is a key ingredient for future economic development success. Related to product is transportation. Stakeholders reported that traffic congestion poses a challenge at times.

### **Strong Competition in Economic Development**

Economic development is becoming increasingly competitive with more communities actively competing for a limited number of expansion opportunities and new location projects. This competition spans metro Atlanta, Georgia, and the United States as a whole. Many communities in metro Atlanta have increased their economic development investment and outreach programs. This increased competition will require new strategies, investments, and supports to ensure continued success.

### **Workforce**

In recent years, workforce development has emerged as a key issue in business recruitment, retention, and expansion. The availability of a skilled workforce is a top factor in expansion and new location decisions. Future economic development success in Rockdale County will be closely tied to workforce development efforts. Rockdale County has several workforce development assets, including Georgia Piedmont Technical College and the Rockdale Career Academy. Stakeholders shared that while workforce development is something that the community does well, it is also an area for future investment and focus.



## OPPORTUNITIES

### Marketing and Outreach

Marketing plays a critical role in the economic development process. External marketing includes outreach to site selection consultants, state project managers, prospective businesses, and other influencers involved in the expansion and location processes. Internal marketing focuses on keeping local community leaders, stakeholders, and residents informed about the work, progress, and success of the local economic development effort. Stakeholders reported a need for enhanced marketing and outreach efforts to support future economic development success.



### Growth Industries

Economic development experts in metro Atlanta and Georgia indicated that Rockdale County is positioned for future growth due to its location and historical success with growing industries (manufacturing, warehousing and logistics, and film and television). Additionally, some interviewees predicted that COVID-19 will encourage companies to shorten their supply chains and locate production facilities and warehouses closer to large population centers. They believe that Rockdale County may be able to take advantage of this trend with its close proximity to major markets and transportation hubs.



### Live–Work–Play

A common refrain during the public input and steering committee discussions was the important role that placemaking will play in attracting talent to the community. The ability to attract and retain talent will be critical in the coming years. Interviewees, public engagement participants, and the steering committee discussed the importance of taking steps to attract Millennials and Generation Z to Conyers and Rockdale County. To attract and retain talent, stakeholders stressed the importance of building out opportunities to live, work, and play in the community. Additionally, with the rise of remote work and work-from-anywhere with COVID-19, placemaking will be especially important to attracting remote workers to the community.



### Commuting Workforce

The labor market data analysis identified that 80% of Rockdale County residents leave the county each day for work. Most Rockdale County residents commute to Fulton, DeKalb, Gwinnett, Newton, Cobb, Henry, and Clayton counties for work. While it is common for residents to travel to other communities for work, this significant out-commute from Rockdale represents an opportunity. The out-commute indicates a workforce that may desire to work closer to home and help fulfill the talent needs of Rockdale companies. See the map on page 23 in the data appendix for additional information.

# VISION FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

In 2019, Rockdale County launched a comprehensive community strategic plan, Envision Rockdale. One of the plan's five focus areas is economic development. This project was launched to support a key piece of the Envision Rockdale plan implementation.

## ENVISION ROCKDALE VISION STATEMENT

***To create a vibrant, growing community where a high quality of life is supported by robust commercial growth and an educated workforce.***

### ROCKDALE COUNTY AND CITY OF CONYERS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT SHARED VISION

***Rockdale County will be recognized as the East Metro Atlanta leader for economic development by embracing collaboration, innovation, workforce development, and a sense of place.***

## TARGET INDUSTRIES

Researchers from the Institute of Government reviewed and analyzed the existing target industries and provided recommendations related to future target industry efforts. The research team used several quantitative approaches to identify existing and target industries, including an analysis of location quotients (a measure of how specialized an industry is in a community), a historical trend analysis of industries in Rockdale County, a workforce analysis, and an economic impact review of target industries. The Institute researchers also employed numerous qualitative methods to guide the target industry process, including steering committee input, expert advice, and a review of regional, state, and national economic trends.



ADVANCED  
MANUFACTURING



LOGISTICS



FILM AND TELEVISION  
PRODUCTION



## ADVANCED MANUFACTURING

Between 2010 and 2019, Rockdale County added 725 new manufacturing jobs, a nearly 20% increase, for a total of 4,366 manufacturing jobs in 2019. Those new jobs in manufacturing make up nearly a quarter of the total 3,085 new jobs in Rockdale County over the past 10 years.

Manufacturing in the United States is large and diverse, comprising 360 specific industries according to the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS). Over the past 10 years, Rockdale County has supported several specific manufacturing industries, including paper, machinery, chemical, and food. All of these have high location quotients and large employment numbers, as the table below shows. Nearly all of these industries have grown over the past 10 years and are expected to continue on a positive trajectory moving forward.

NAICS	Industry Type	2010 Jobs	2019 Jobs	2010–2019 Change	2010– 2019 % Change	2019 Location Quotient	Avg. Earnings Per Job
322	<b>Paper Manufacturing</b>	897	983	86	10%	12.55	\$74,477
333	<b>Machinery Manufacturing</b>	797	735	(62)	(8%)	3.04	\$79,813
311	<b>Food Manufacturing</b>	442	657	215	49%	1.87	\$81,636
325	<b>Chemical Manufacturing</b>	227	646	419	185%	3.54	\$69,872

Source: EMSI

## LOGISTICS

As a complement to the growth in manufacturing, Rockdale County has also seen an increase in many related and support services that would be considered logistics. While “logistics” is an important driver of business success, this sector can be hard to define because there is not a formal NAICS code for it. For the purposes of the target industry analysis, the Institute of Government used NAICS 48—transportation and warehousing—which includes many logistics-related jobs. Since 2013, the community has seen a 32% increase in transportation and warehousing jobs. This trend is expected to continue if not increase over the next 10 years.

Most of the transportation and warehousing jobs in Rockdale fall under General Freight Trucking—Long Distance, Specialized Freight Trucking—Long Distance, and General Warehousing and Storage. These industries are a good fit for the community given the access to I-20 and are a good target given the growth in the sector and the increased reliance on trucks to maintain fluid supply chains. Recent years have seen a growing demand for e-commerce, a trend exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, which has forced companies to think about strategic locations for distribution to large populations like Atlanta. If Rockdale can capitalize on this trend, then it may be able to land some additional investment from the logistics industry in the coming years.

## FILM AND TELEVISION PRODUCTION

The film and television production industry has been growing across Georgia for more than a decade, and Rockdale has seen its share of that growth. Since 2010, soundstage space (both purpose-built and retrofitted) in Georgia increased from 40,000 square feet to over 2 million square feet in 2018. Rockdale County is now home to 600,000 square feet of that space. In addition to companies investing in production infrastructure, they are continuing to spend money and hire local people to work in their studios. In 2019, the film and entertainment industry brought in over \$24 million in direct spending in Rockdale County via 14 feature films and 20 different television series that filmed on location. Additionally, the two major employers with permanent production sound stages in the community, Warner Bros. and 20th Century Fox, employed 650 full-time workers for seasonal production with a total annual payroll of \$18 million.

While these production companies are spending money in the community through supplies, extras, accommodations, and so forth, there are additional opportunities. Most of the jobs associated with the industry locally are part-time or temporary because very little pre-production or post-production activity happens in the community. Very few communities in Georgia have been able to lure big film and television companies to bring their non-production work to Georgia, but Rockdale can continue supporting existing filming, welcome additional filming opportunities where appropriate, and embrace film tourism as visitors look to follow in the footsteps of their favorite shows or characters.



## PRIORITY 1

# GROWING AND SUPPORTING THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY

Rockdale County and the City of Conyers have a long history of supporting existing and future businesses through various economic development approaches and strategies. These strategies have included pursuing industrial and commercial recruitment and retention, growing and supporting the film industry, encouraging small business and entrepreneurship, and promoting tourism. The community benefits from the numerous companies that have called Rockdale home for decades.

To continue advancing Rockdale, economic development leaders and partners will need to redouble economic development efforts and undertake new strategies to continue progress in a hyper-competitive economic development market. The key focus for economic development in Rockdale County in the coming years will be the need to build product to support growth and expansion. Rockdale County is perfectly positioned in metro Atlanta to support growth in manufacturing, warehousing and logistics, and film/television production, but future progress is hampered by a lack of available sites for development and existing buildings. Advancing economic development in Rockdale will also require new resources.

## ACTION ITEMS

### Conduct an industrial and commercial land use study

Rockdale County's convenient location in metro Atlanta makes it an attractive location for various target industries. As the state's second-smallest county, however, it has limited properties available for economic development. A key action for supporting growth in target industries and positioning Rockdale County for future growth will be to conduct an industrial and commercial land use study. Put simply, the study will identify potential properties that are well suited for future development. These could be parcels currently for sale, properties primed for redevelopment, parcels not currently on the market, and those that are owned by a government entity. Such a survey will help identify and prioritize the sites that are best suited for future development. This study can both help guide future economic development investments and also inform future county-wide land-use planning and comprehensive planning efforts. The study should serve as a roadmap to future development and investment decisions.

### Identify funding sources to support additional economic development activity and investment

Additional investment will be required to support economic development growth in Rockdale County. Generally, the additional investment will be required in two areas: (1) the Conyers-Rockdale Economic Development Council and (2) the purchase and development of industrial and commercial property.

The Conyers-Rockdale Economic Development Council is the community's economic development point of contact. Charged with business recruitment, business retention and expansion, and film industry support, the CREDC works with site selection consultants, state economic development partners, governmental and community partners, and existing industries to lead economic development efforts. The priorities and strategies identified in this report will likely require additional personnel and resources to reach fruition. Increased funds could come from government partners and could be raised through private resources (i.e., capital campaign). Increased funds should be closely tied to the priorities and strategies envisioned in the Advancing Rockdale report.

As noted previously, Rockdale County needs additional product to successfully compete for future economic development projects. This will require either public-sector or private-sector investment, or both. For example, public-sector investment could come from the development and marketing of a development authority-owned site. Private-sector investment could take the form of a private developer purchasing and developing a site or building to market. A public-private partnership could accomplish shared goal. Community leaders should explore how the special-purpose local-option sales tax (SPLOST) could be used to support economic development product development.

## Continue to refine the business retention and expansion program

Your largest economic development prospect is already sitting in your community. A large majority of all new jobs created come from existing industries. While these efforts may not seem as flashy as winning a new economic development project, an existing industry already knows the community, has existing partnerships in place, and has a clear idea of how it can grow. Recent expansion projects in Rockdale County validate this trend. Rockdale County and Conyers should continue to invest in their business retention and expansion program (BREP). Future BREP efforts should focus on connecting businesses with technical assistance resources (e.g., Georgia Centers of Innovation, Georgia Tech Manufacturing Extension Partnership, university research connections), identifying barriers to success and expansion, and serving as a workforce development connector. The BREP program should also seek to connect companies with local suppliers and potentially identify supply chain recruitment opportunities.

## Grow the film and television sector in Rockdale

The film and television industry has been a success story for Rockdale County in recent years. This new industry has found a great home in Rockdale County and the City of Conyers. While the film and television industry supports over 650 jobs, there are opportunities to attract more production and related services to the community. COVID-19 is also reshaping the entertainment industry and increasing interest in streaming services, which may increase demand for entertainment production. Rockdale County can accomplish this goal by creating more space for production, developing the film and television workforce, and partnering with studios and production companies to explore additional ancillary service needs (i.e., what services are you purchasing from out of the community).



## PRIORITY 2

# TELLING THE ROCKDALE STORY

Many of the contributors to the economic development strategy felt that Rockdale County is a great place live and to site their businesses, but they did not feel that many others were aware of all that the county and city have to offer. Telling the story of why Rockdale County and the City of Conyers are a great place to live and do business will help set it apart and define why it is unique.

Telling Rockdale County's story helps outsiders—both potential businesses and future residents alike—understand what exactly Rockdale has to offer in its location, accessibility, government, economic development organization, business climate, employment opportunities, and residential life. Telling any community's story involves data, history, and the future: where it has been, where it is now, and where it wants to be. It helps a community define why people want to live there and why a business locates there. The story is not only beneficial to outsiders but can also bring a community together to help residents learn more about their own community and see things they might be missing. Clear messaging can also help prevent misconceptions and fear of change among residents and businesses.

### ACTION ITEMS

#### Define the Rockdale story

Telling the community's story creates a brand around which marketing efforts can be centered. The first step is to clearly identify what that story is. Mapping Rockdale's assets and strengths, as laid out in this document, is a first step in moving these efforts forward.

Accompanying that list of assets and strength should be data pulled from federal, state, and local government sources. Baseline and trend data for some of these assets and strengths will help Rockdale leaders tailor the community's story. For example, data for workforce characteristics can include income, educational attainment, age, experience, and skills. When considering the assets, strengths, and data, it is important to include surrounding counties and communities as these impact what is available in community as well as who lives and works in Rockdale County.

#### Enhance economic development marketing efforts

Many of the pieces of Rockdale's story are already there and agreed upon: It is home to many name brands (e.g., Solo cups, YellaWood, and many others); its location is advantageous; it has a low cost of living and doing business; and it has a good quality of life for residents. But effectively communicating those strengths and assets through high-quality photographs and videos on social media and at trade shows and other venues will help more effectively promote the existing "Perfectly Positioned" tagline.

Hiring a marketing professional to work at the CREDC or an outside firm to help shape the story and then tell it will allow specialization of labor at the economic development organization and with communication professionals at the city and county governments. A marketing firm or CREDC marketing professional will be able to concentrate on enhancing marketing and outreach for lead generation. This can include, for instance, a new website, increasing social media engagement, developing content (e.g., videos, blog posts, newsletters), and engaging with state and regional economic development project managers.

#### Focus marketing efforts on targeted industries

The new economic development strategy for Rockdale envisions three target industries: advanced manufacturing, logistics, and film and television production. While this does not mean that Rockdale won't pursue or accept other industries, it does help to focus the relationship building, outreach, and recruitment strategies to attract prospects and best position the community for success. Targeted economic development is about positioning Rockdale County as a strong candidate for future location and expansion decisions. This is done through preparing the community to support this development (e.g., site development, workforce development), marketing (e.g., advertising, trade show attendance), research (e.g., identifying growing companies, outreach to companies in states with a high cost of business), and outreach (relationship building, connections on LinkedIn, coordination with the Georgia Department of Economic Development, utility partners, and the Metro Atlanta Chamber).





## PRIORITY 3

# BUILDING A STRONG WORKFORCE

According to Area Development magazine, highway access, availability of a skilled workforce, and labor costs continue to be the top three site selection priorities in 2020.<sup>1</sup> Rockdale County is well positioned when it comes to highway access. As highlighted in the Major Themes and Findings section of this report, compared to the rest of Metro Atlanta, Rockdale County has a low cost of living and low cost to do business. Thus, focusing on the third priority—building a skilled workforce pipeline—will allow Rockdale County to maintain and expand its competitive advantage in site selection efforts.

Workforce development is a long-term, community-wide proposition. When done well, it can bring many groups together, support student success, and expand economic prosperity. Good workforce development is specifically tailored to the community and directly addresses the needs of employers and preparing students to fill current and future job openings. Below are several ways Rockdale County and Conyers can work to build a strong workforce.

### ACTION ITEMS

#### Establish a community workforce council

Workforce development is a key part of successful economic development. To ensure that the community is effectively addressing workforce issues, Rockdale County should establish a community workforce council. This council would include a wide variety of community stakeholders from early care and secondary education to postsecondary partners, employers, and other organizations with an interest in workforce development. A community workforce council would allow for regular collaboration and connection between education, industry, and economic development stakeholders. The group would work to assess current skills gaps to better serve the existing industry base and prospective businesses. The skills gap assessment could then be used to develop strategies to address the identified needs.

#### Strengthen the education ecosystem in Rockdale County

Having a strong education ecosystem that starts early and supports individuals through their ongoing educational needs is pivotal to community success. Many good things are happening with the local school district, the Rockdale Career Academy, and Georgia Piedmont Technical College, and the community should find ways to share this information and provide additional resources to these organizations. Beyond high school, the community should look to increase access to postsecondary opportunities locally and provide customized training for employers. Ongoing training can ensure that the Rockdale workforce is prepared for the future with existing companies or even new entities that may choose to locate in the county in the future. Finally, it is important to note that educational institutions cannot prepare the future workforce by themselves. They need the support and feedback of the community to help them succeed. Businesses and community organizations should find ways to connect with education through advisory committees, Perkins V teams, or experiential learning opportunities.

#### Develop the Rockdale Ready internship program

Rockdale County should consider developing a Rockdale Ready internship program to provide young adults with hands-on experience. With active support from the business community, this program could offer local high school students real-world experience, allowing them to explore the opportunities that Rockdale County has to offer and connect with local business. The Rockdale Ready program would allow businesses to connect with and mold the future workforce of Rockdale County. Internship programs can be flexible to meet the needs of all stakeholders while still producing positive outcomes.

<sup>1</sup> [www.areadevelopment.com/Corporate-Consultants-Survey-Results/Q1-2020/34th-annual-corporate-survey-16th-annual-consultants-survey.shtml](http://www.areadevelopment.com/Corporate-Consultants-Survey-Results/Q1-2020/34th-annual-corporate-survey-16th-annual-consultants-survey.shtml)



# ADDITIONAL SUPPORTING ELEMENTS FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Economic development is not just about building the tax base of a community through business recruitment, retention, and expansion; it also involves making the community a vibrant and desirable place to live through enhancements to quality of life (sometimes called placemaking), transportation, and housing. These enhancements complement a business-friendly environment within any community and draw workers—not just for the job but also as community members, including remote workers.

It's not just workers who are looking for quality of place, companies are too. They want to locate in communities where their current and future workforce wants to live and work. Census Bureau data over the past six years show that the trend of Millennials and younger Gen Xers leaving cities for the suburbs is not slowing.<sup>2</sup> Businesses are more interested in the character and livability of a community than they were just a few years ago.

Contributors to this economic development strategy expressed a strong desire to see Rockdale County improve its transportation infrastructure, housing stock, and desirability as a place to live. They felt that the county already has many of the right elements in place to be a great live-work-play community, including affordable housing, proximity to Atlanta and Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport, and recreation opportunities. Additional investments in the transportation infrastructure, newer housing stock, and placemaking (such as parks, schools, cultural activities, shopping, and restaurants) will only enhance the county's appeal to future businesses and residents alike. Success in making Rockdale County a desirable place to live will support other economic development efforts.

## CONCLUSION

While marketing real estate to induce businesses to locate in the area and supporting existing industry employers are core tenets of economic development, it must be looked at more holistically to improve the quality of life of residents and workers alike: increasing wages, workforce development, infrastructure, and recreational activities. Economic development must incorporate both the tangible — business recruitment, retention, and expansion — and the intangible, like the community's story.

Effective and coordinated economic development impacts the whole community. The strategy outlined in this document is intended to serve as a roadmap for Rockdale County and the City of Conyers to enhance and coordinate their economic development efforts to benefit all residents, businesses, and workers.

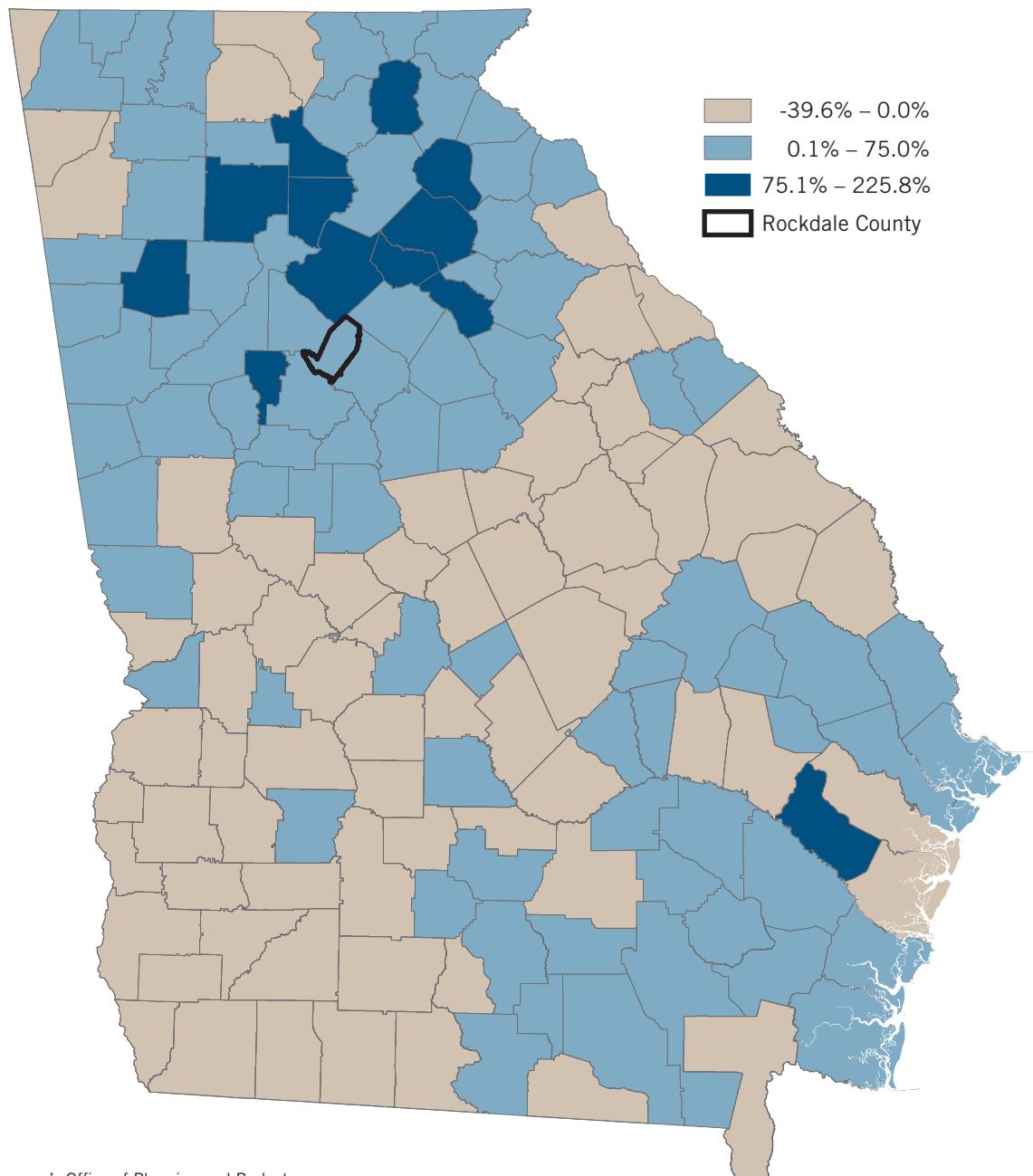
Through the comprehensive economic development planning process, the steering committee identified three priorities for initial focus: (1) growing and supporting the business community, (2) telling the Rockdale story, and (3) building a strong workforce. Economic development is a long-term proposition and successfully tackling these priorities over the next few years will have a marked impact on the community's future growth. Successfully implementing this strategy will require the city, county, and whole community to remain actively engaged and focused. No single entity can accomplish the vision and priorities alone; it will take the entire community aligning their efforts and strategies to fulfill the goals.

<sup>2</sup> Adamy, Janet and Paul Overberg. 2019, September 26. Millennials Continue to Leave Big Cities. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/millennials-continue-to-leave-big-cities-11569470460>.

# DATA APPENDIX

Rockdale is expected to see population growth similar to its regional counterparts in Metro Atlanta over the next 30 years. Rockdale County's population has grown 34% since 2000 and is expected to grow another 30% by 2050.

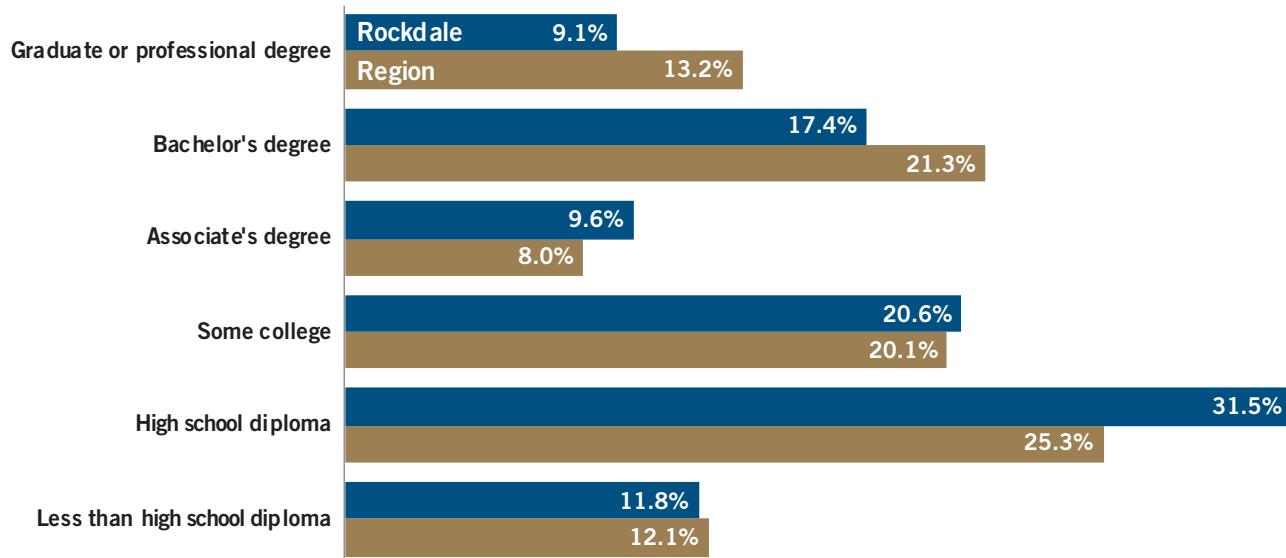
## POPULATION CHANGE, 2010–2050



Source: Governor's Office of Planning and Budget

Fifty-seven percent of Rockdale residents over the age of 25 have some college education or more, slightly lower than the regional average of 63%.

#### EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF THE POPULATION AGE 25 AND OVER, 2014–2018

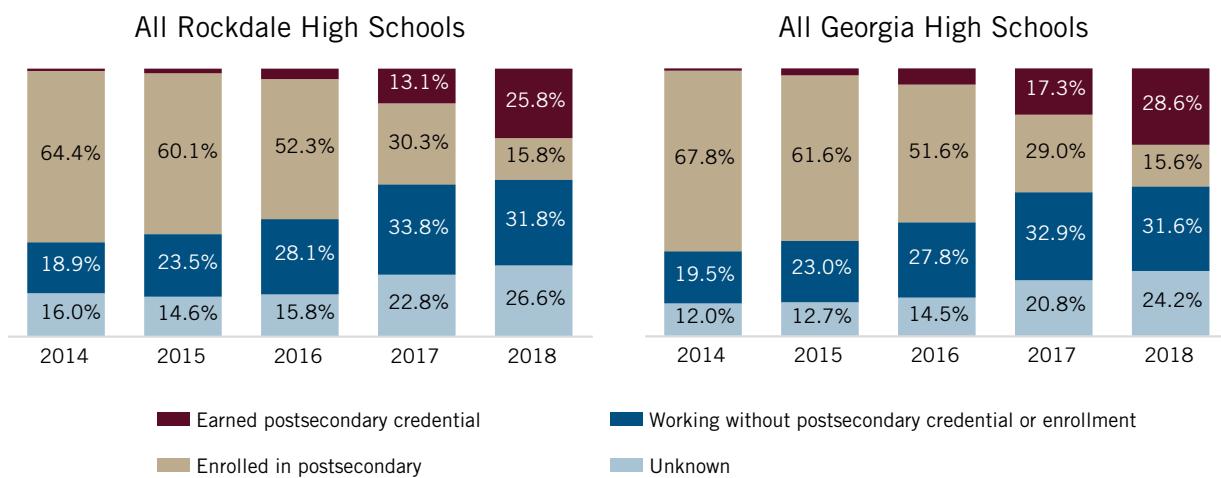


Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Note: Rockdale region includes Rockdale, Newton, Walton, Gwinnett, DeKalb, Clayton, Henry, Carroll, and Douglas

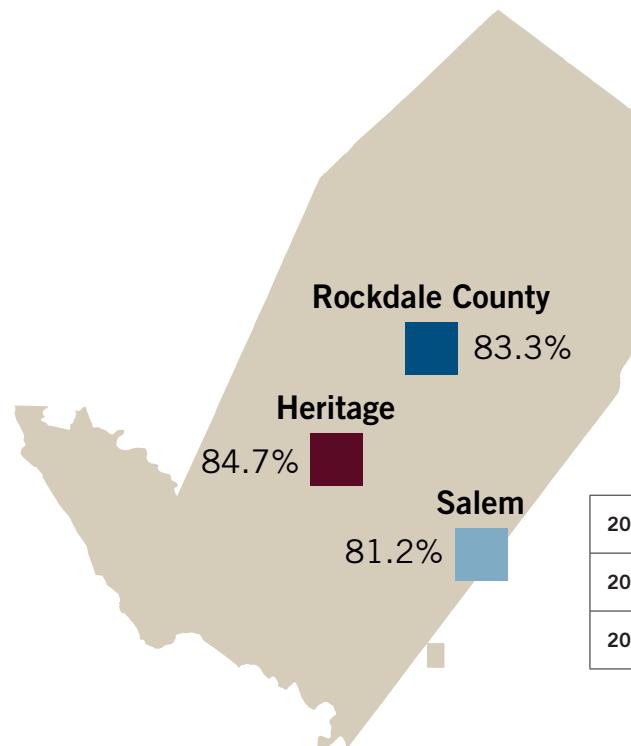
**Rockdale County high school graduates progression is similar to the state average.**

#### CLASS OF 2013 POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT AND PROGRESS FROM GRADUATION



Source: Governor's Office of Student Achievement

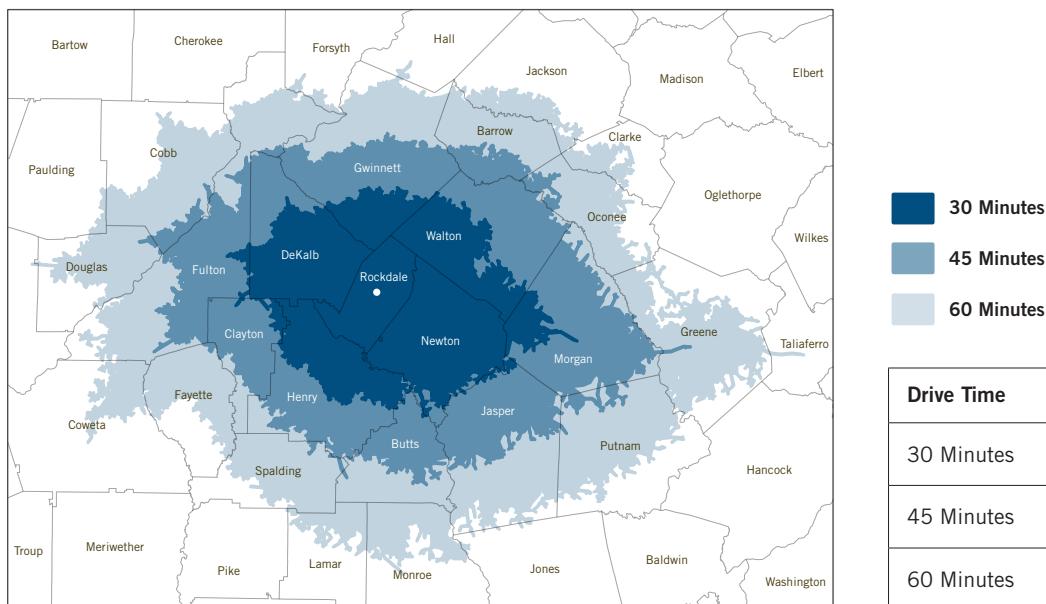
Two Rockdale County high schools surpass the state average graduation rate of 82%.



	Heritage High	Rockdale County High	Salem High	District Average	State Average
2019	84.7%	83.3%	81.2%	81.2%	82.0%
2018	81.8%	85.4%	83.7%	86.3%	81.6%
2017	84.0%	85.3%	84.6%	84.0%	80.6%

Source: Governor's Office of Student Achievement

There are 1.6 million workers with a 45 minute radius of Rockdale County.

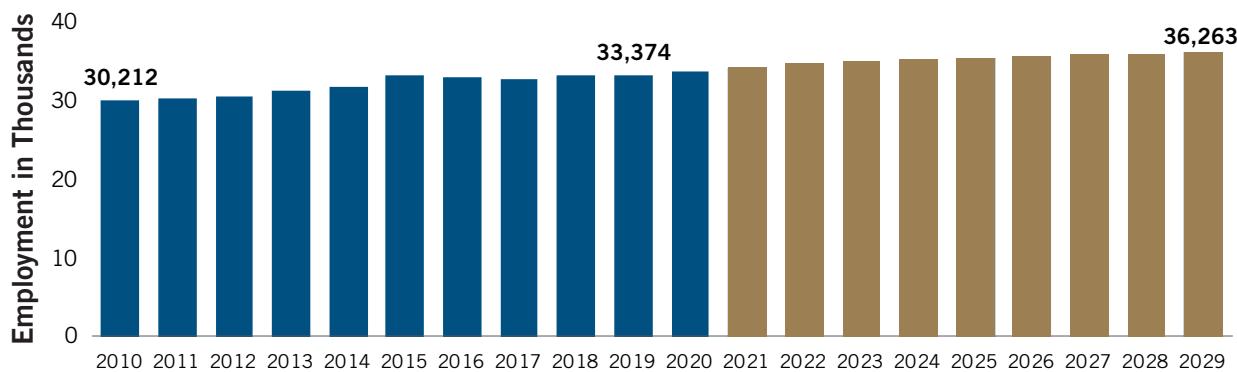


Drive Time	Workers
30 Minutes	344,000
45 Minutes	1,600,000
60 Minutes	2,500,000

Source: ESRI

**Rockdale County has seen employment growth over the past 10 years, and it is projected\* to continue.**

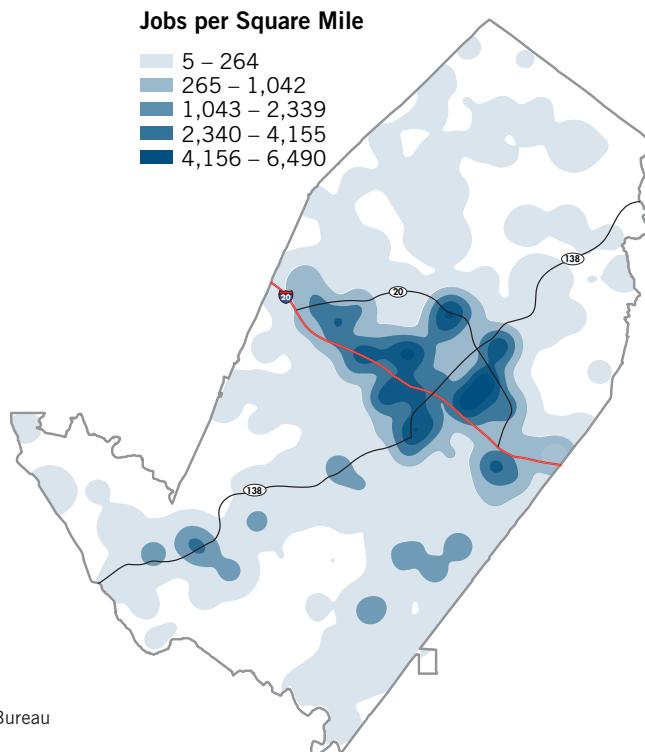
**BETWEEN 2010 AND 2019, EMPLOYMENT IN ROCKDALE COUNTY GREW BY 3,162 JOBS (10.4%). IN THE NEXT 10 YEARS THAT GROWTH IS PROJECTED TO CONTINUE WITH AN ADDITIONAL 2,889 NEW JOBS (8.6%).**



Source: EMSI

\*Projections are based upon historical trends and long-term assumptions. COVID-19 will impact employment in the short-term.

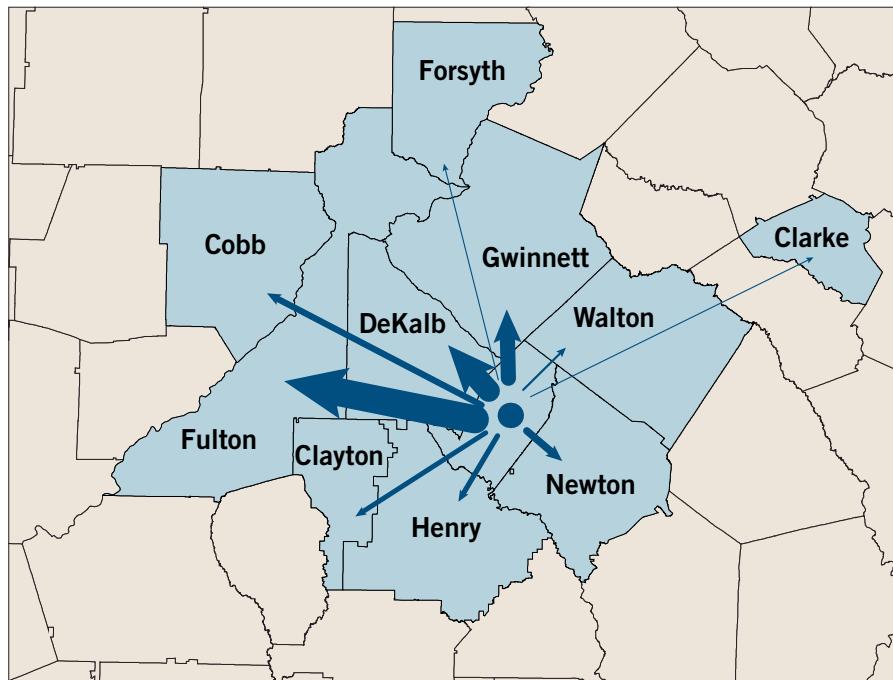
**The majority of employment opportunities in Rockdale County are along the I-20 corridor, with other smaller pockets throughout the rest of the county.**



Source: OnTheMap, U.S. Census Bureau

Fewer than 20% of Rockdale residents work within the county. Nearly 50% commute to Fulton, DeKalb, or Gwinnett for a job.

#### OUT COMMUTE OF ROCKDALE COUNTY RESIDENTS



County Where Rockdale County Residents are Employed	Jobs Count	Share of Total
Fulton	7,215	20.4%
Rockdale	6,522	18.4%
DeKalb	5,672	16.0%
Gwinnett	3,891	11.0%
Newton	1,906	5.4%
Cobb	1,605	4.5%
Henry	1,314	3.7%
Clayton	1,291	3.6%
Walton	541	1.5%
Forsyth County	287	0.8%
Clarke	268	0.8%
All Other Locations	2,446	6.9%

Source: OnTheMap,  
U.S. Census Bureau

**In Rockdale County, 3,000 new jobs were added between 2010 and 2019 (growth of 10%).**

#### TOP GROWTH INDUSTRIES

NAICS	Industry	2010 Jobs	2019 Jobs	2010–2019 Change	Percent Change	Average Earnings Per Job	2019 Location Quotient	2019 Establishments
23	<b>Construction</b>	2,337	3,221	884	38%	\$72,092	1.96	221
31	<b>Manufacturing</b>	3,641	4,296	655	18%	\$75,182	1.55	84
44	<b>Retail Trade</b>	4,020	4,666	646	16%	\$34,147	1.37	264
62	<b>Health Care and Social Assistance</b>	3,661	4,208	547	15%	\$57,739	0.97	276
52	<b>Finance and Insurance</b>	770	1,108	338	44%	\$73,277	0.80	95

Source: EMSI

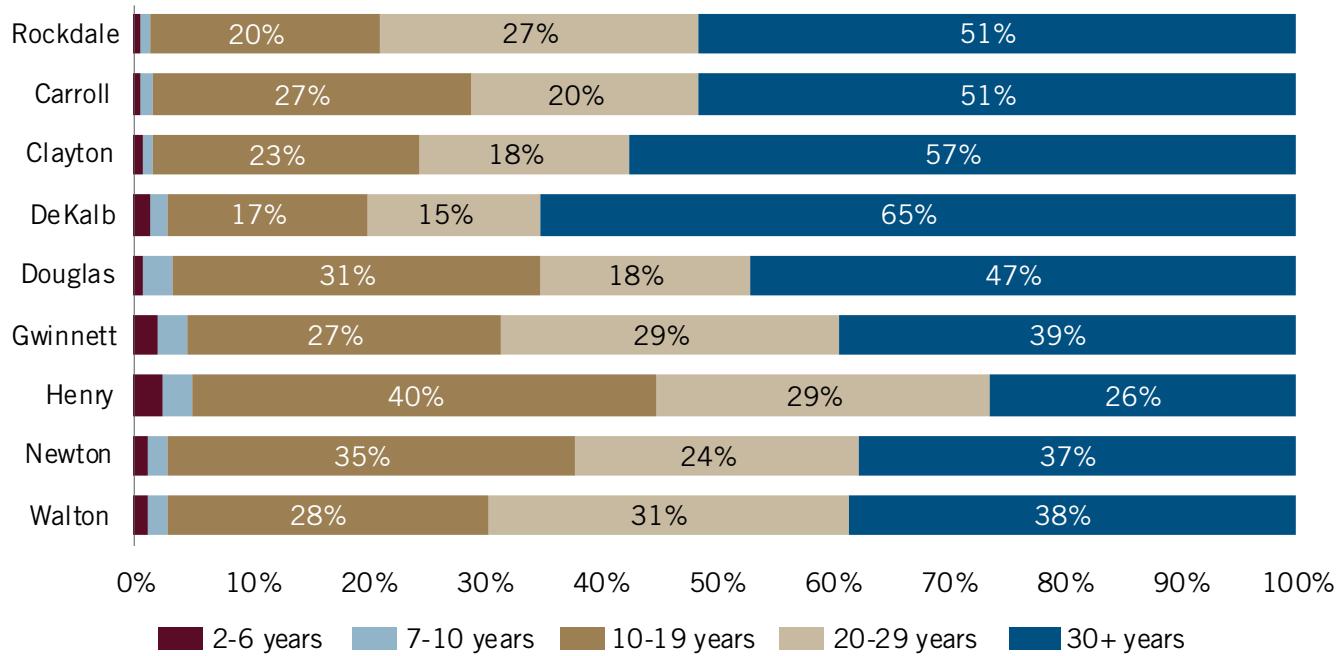
**Rockdale County has a lower cost of living than the region, Georgia, and other southern states.**

Location	Cost of Living Index
<b>Rockdale County</b>	91.5
<b>Tennessee</b>	92.5
<b>Rockdale Region</b>	92.9
<b>Alabama</b>	93.7
<b>North Carolina</b>	94.1
<b>Georgia</b>	94.3
<b>South Carolina</b>	99.2
<b>United States</b>	100
<b>Florida</b>	100.9

Source: EMSI Inc., C2ER

Note: Rockdale region includes Rockdale, Newton, Walton, Gwinnett, DeKalb, Clayton, Henry, Carroll, and Douglas

**Nearly 80% of the housing stock in Rockdale County was built more than 20 years ago.  
Less than 1.5% was built within the last 10 years.**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau





# ADVANCING ROCKDALE

ROCKDALE COUNTY–CITY OF CONYERS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY 2021–2025

