



2017

ANNUAL REPORT



MESSAGE FROM GEORGIA FORWARD



Margret Mead once said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

Her words so accurately describe the mission of *GeorgiaForward* and our work around the state. Bringing people together who care about the future of Georgia and are willing to do what it takes to make a difference is the heart of what we do.

This past year we brought back the popular *GeorgiaForward* Forum to convene statewide thought leaders to help define Georgia's prosperity. Mayors, farmers, business leaders, students, and engaged citizens from all parts of our state came to get inspired, learn, network, and participate. From Bank of America's Atlanta Market President Wendy Stewart's opening keynote that asked us what we will do to ensure Georgia prospers, to Civic Strategies' Otis White's interactive sessions that brainstormed ways to create common prosperity, to Mercer University Chancellor Dr. Kirby Godsey's keynote address outlining seven ways to "live forward," the Forum encouraged attendees to think BIG.

And speaking of thinking big, that's just what one hundred of our state's emerging leaders did last year through our leadership action program, Young Gamechangers. Each class worked for roughly six months to develop big idea recommendations and solutions for longstanding challenges in their host communities. The Spring 2017 class worked in LaGrange/Troup County while the Fall 2017 class focused on Milledgeville/Baldwin County. Both communities, along with the four previous Young Gamechanger communities, have started the process of implementing these recommendations. We are proud to currently have over two hundred and fifty Young Gamechanger alumni in organizations, institutions, communities, and companies across our state.

The committed citizens and leaders that work alongside *GeorgiaForward* through both the Young Gamechangers program and the annual Forum are indeed changing the world – one idea, one relationship, one community at a time.

Kris Vaughn
Executive Director
GeorgiaForward

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OVERVIEW OF GEORGIAFORWARD

GeorgiaForward is an independent, non-partisan organization whose mission is to improve the state of Georgia. We do this in two ways: acting as a catalyst for cross-sector, statewide conversations and by bringing together young leaders from all professions to help solve some of our state's most pressing challenges. Founded in 2010, *GeorgiaForward* has a track record of strengthening communities, uniting our state, and creating a talent pipeline within Georgia.

In 2012, our founders saw the success of *GeorgiaForward*'s work, including annual convening of state leaders, and decided to build upon that foundation with an action-oriented program to foster the amazing pool of talented young people in our state. The program they created, Young Gamechangers, went beyond networking and issue awareness, it also asked participants to help solve problems specific to a Georgia community.

Young Gamechangers is a leadership action program that brings young professionals from across the state to ONE Georgia community to grapple with some of that community's most persistent challenges. Over the course of the program, participants spend time learning from local leaders, exploring the history of a community's successes and challenges, and

working together to identify meaningful, ambitious solutions. The result is a written report and public presentation of Final Recommendations that are big, creative, but realistic "game changing solutions" to some of their most persistent challenges.

Although *GeorgiaForward* does not implement the Young Gamechangers' Final Recommendations, we do work with the host community to advocate for and support the next steps following the presentation. Each community differs in their approach to prioritization and implementation. Yet, in every community that has hosted the Young Gamechangers, there is a proven track record of success and implementation of recommendations. Whether the recommendations serve as the foundation for further planning efforts or are used as a check list of projects in the community, the recommendations from Young Gamechangers have indeed been game changing.

For more information about *GeorgiaForward* and our leading program, Young Gamechangers, please find us on social media or visit us at GeorgiaForward.org.

SPRING 2017 YOUNG GAMECHANGERS: LAGRANGE/TROUP COUNTY

GeorgiaForward's Young Gamechangers worked in LaGrange/Troup County from January through June, creating big ideas for some of the community's most persistent challenges, and came up with recommendations to the following questions.

How can Troup County strengthen the community's relationship with our three local colleges and incentivize students to stay in the community post-graduation?

The community can build relationships with the collegiate community through work-based learning (WBL) opportunities, affordable office space, employer and student events, a student discount program, and a centralized internship database. Leaders can focus on creating housing options geared to millennials' lifestyles and incentives designed to encourage graduates to stay in Troup County.

Troup County is home to outstanding tourism assets that currently attract travelers over 45 years old. How can the community appeal to more millennial travelers/tourists?

Since studies show millennials value experiences and travel over material goods, the idea is to bring millennials to the heart of LaGrange by positioning downtown as a unique cultural arts attraction. The LaGrange Art Museum is an underutilized space and could bring in younger tourists. The addition of public art, streetscaping, and facade updates would make downtown more inviting. Also recommended to develop a millennial retreat in the City of Hogansville.

Development of nightlife and entertainment is crucial. To attract a younger demo, downtown businesses could extend hours of operation, and begin hosting First Fridays. Increased walkability and connectivity between the new Wild Leap Brewery, Courtyard by Marriott, and The Thread would also be key.

With great industry partners and proximity to excellent engineering schools, how can Troup County become a center for advanced manufacturing and innovative technologies?

Citing research that indicates ninth grade is the year that determines whether a young person will move on or drop out, it was suggested that schools introduce STEM careers to middle school students rather than waiting until high school.

Another idea is to launch a program combining apprenticeships for high school students with summer internships for teachers aimed at promoting manufacturing as a viable career option.

Create an innovation community with a business incubator and mixed-use spaces featuring loft apartment housing geared toward millennials.

With "The Ray" as a catalyst for conversation regarding environmental sustainability, how can Troup County become the greenest community in America?

Since many people are unaware of ways the community can be sustainable, it's important to introduce sustainable practices to everyday life. Weave sustainability through the community by connecting LaGrange with a zero-emission transportation system and promote the next step in solar roadway integration by bringing the WattWay concept to downtown. Create a mixed-use building downtown that would include coworking green office and meeting space, an interactive learning center, and the home of a proposed new non-profit: LaGrange Sustainability Institute.



FALL 2017 YOUNG GAMECHANGERS: MILLEDGEVILLE/BALDWIN COUNTY

The Fall 2017 Young Gamechangers worked in Milledgeville/Baldwin County from August until December, focused on the following challenge questions, and developed the corresponding recommendations.

With Milledgeville/Baldwin County's central location and gateways created by major traffic thoroughfares, in what ways can the community improve its entrance points through the creation and incorporation of a unique brand image?

To help both residents and out-of-town visitors navigate the area and reconnect Milledgeville/Baldwin County's "sub-communities," Young Gamechangers suggest improving entry points and thoroughfares that lead drivers into downtown Milledgeville. Signage should be more eye catching and vibrant.

Expand Milledgeville's brand to reach new audiences by highlighting the community's quality of life amenities such outdoor recreation (lakes, rivers, parks, greenway) and refreshing the "I Love Milly" campaign. Branding opportunities could be extended to water towers, traffic boxes and strategic walls.

How can Milledgeville/Baldwin County incorporate and engage their growing retirement community and, in turn, provide an exceptional quality of life and the necessary resources to retain them?

Young Gamechangers were surprised at how active today's seniors are and this factored into their recommendations. They envision Milledgeville/Baldwin County becoming home to an active lifestyle community with a new senior center featuring exercise facilities, social and cultural events, and intergenerational networking.

A partnership with Georgia College could help create a community where retirees can engage in lifelong learning through both academic curriculum and peer-to-peer learning.

Finally, offering viable transportation options would be important to active retirees so they could explore the rich history and natural attractions of the area.

How can the community realign and refocus Milledgeville/Baldwin County to become the booming economic driver it once was while diversifying its employment sectors?

A recurring theme noted by the Young Gamechangers was a desire for places the community could come together. Creating a pedestrian-only area downtown where residents of all ages and backgrounds can work, play, and live can help form a sense of community. Recreating the concept of community at Central State Hospital can provide another opportunity for shared space and unique culture for visitors to experience. Their third idea was to connect the natural assets available in Milledgeville/Baldwin County including Lake Sinclair, the Oconee River and Greenway, Bertram Wildlife and Berry Farm Conservation areas, and biking and hiking trails to bring visitors and the community together.

All three recommendations would promote business growth, help attract and retain young professionals, and ultimately spur the economy.

In what ways can the citizens of Milledgeville/Baldwin County publicly and positively support and promote the public schools, thus strengthening the opinion of our future workforce and its economic impact on the community?

While analyzing the question, the group found a lack of support for the public school system, including issues around poverty, transportation, and race relations. Despite this climate, Baldwin County Schools have shown significant improvement recently, with graduation rates increasing to 88.8% in the past four years, which is above the state average.

Young Gamechangers suggest refining public relations and marketing messages by involving community stakeholders in campaigns proclaiming, "I am Baldwin County Schools," and creating a grassroots effort by empowering local community members to vocally promote the school system by spreading positive stories about the schools, teachers, and students.

Visit GeorgiaForward.org/young-gamechangers to read the full written report for each of the programs.

2017 GEORGIAFORWARD FORUM

The 2017 GeorgiaForward Forum presented by Bank of America was the first in four years and marks the return of a popular and powerful convening of stakeholders. The Forum places participants at the nexus of business, innovation, and collaboration. The two-day conference brought together a diverse cross-section of academics, small business owners, agricultural experts, and leaders from every corner and sector of Georgia to the World Congress Center in Atlanta.

The Forum included breakout and interactive sessions ranging from education to agriculture, along with a host of other topic areas. Each day, the full group gathered for interactive sessions. The first interactive session built a foundation by defining what participants shared in common as Georgians and their conception of common prosperity. The second interactive session challenged them to develop ideas to help create common prosperity through big ideas and goals.

The top three ideas generated and prioritized at the forum were:

- 1. *Create an "Agriculture Research and Production Triangle" in South Georgia.***
 - Be a world leader in farm and agriculture production research
- 2. *Encourage strong connections between businesses and schools for workforce development.***
 - Break down the stigma of two-year degrees ("middle-level skills")
 - Create mentorships and partnerships (career fairs, internships, work study)
 - Use media to expose students to businesses
- 3. *Find ways of encouraging creative industries and non-profits to locate and grow in small towns as a form of economic development.***

In 2018, GeorgiaForward will be working to connect these ideas with people and organizations who have the passion and wherewithal to move these ideas forward. To work on this process, contact GeorgiaForward.



COMING UP IN 2018

GeorgiaForward is excited to host the seventh Young Gamechangers program in Albany/Dougherty County in 2018. With an expanded timeline, the 2018 Young Gamechangers will work from January until August in Southwest Georgia. These fifty young leaders will focus on recreation, downtown, workforce, and government efficiency. Mark your calendar to join us for their Final Recommendations to the Community on Friday, August 10 from 2-4 pm at Albany State University.

2017 saw the return of our foundational event, the GeorgiaForward Forum. Plans are underway to convene statewide thought leaders and idea generators in Central Georgia in the Fall of 2018 to talk about engaging young people in our communities. Stay tuned for more details.

DONORS AND SPONSORS

A special thank you to those who supported the work of GeorgiaForward in 2017.

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