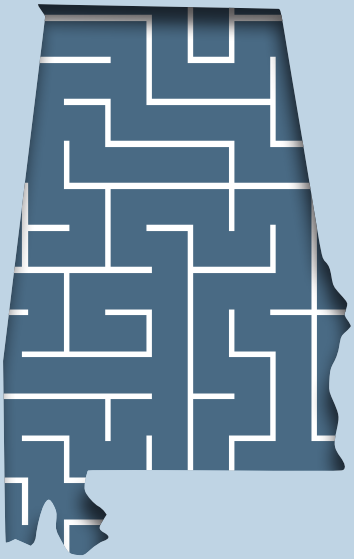
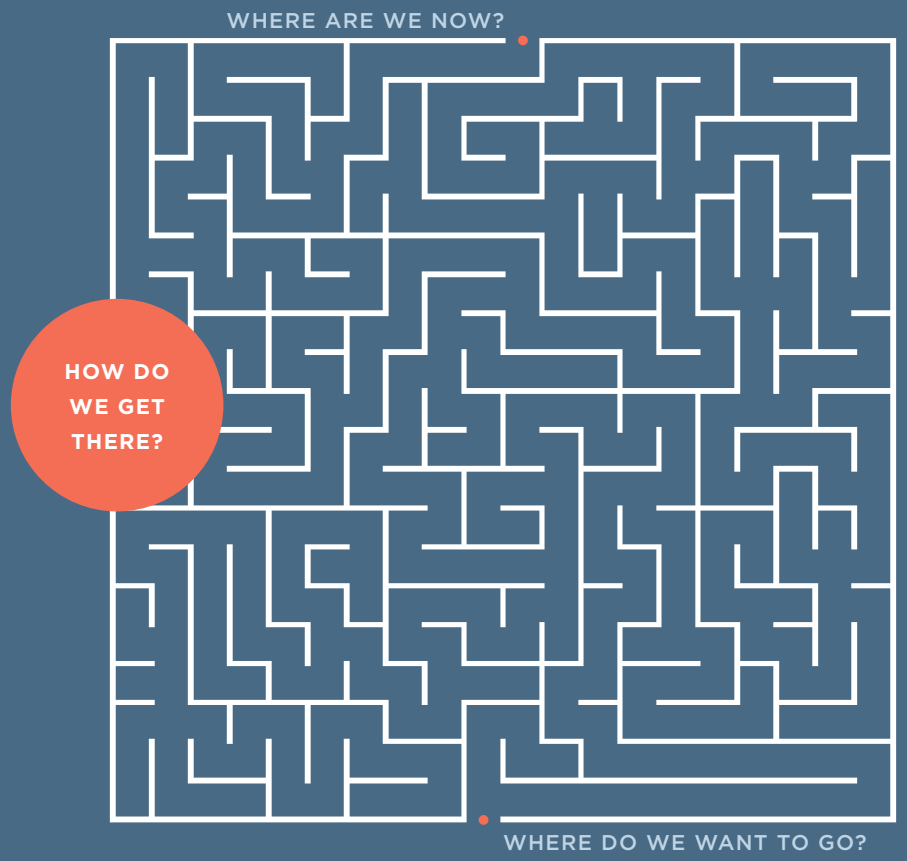


What's Next, Alabama?

Building your community's physical, human, and civic infrastructure from the ground up.



What's Next, Alabama?

A discussion guide developed by the David Mathews Center for Civic Life for Alabama Issues Forums 2017-2020

LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The David Mathews Center for Civic Life recently celebrated ten years of strengthening civic life across Alabama. During the past decade, we have engaged thousands of Alabamians around issues that impact their lives through the Mathews Center's Alabama Issues Forums (AIF) series. Individuals and communities have welcomed us into their churches, libraries, schools, and neighborhoods to hear what they have to say and, in the process, have made connections with their fellow citizens in a way that is both profound and rejuvenating.

AIF has addressed issues including the problem of high school dropout rates, the epidemic of bullying, and the challenge of raising healthy children. No matter the issue on the table, however, the conversation frequently came back to a similar theme: the ability of individuals to make a living in their community.

Many of the most personal and intractable issues facing Alabamians are fundamentally economic. The issues are not economic in the abstract or academic sense—they are simply the challenges that Alabamians face as they try to make a living. That's why this AIF series will be different. Entitled, "What's Next, Alabama?", the forum series will be the most ambitious programmatic effort of the DMC to date. Spanning three years (2017-2020), the series will engage Alabamians as they work to shape their economic future as a community. In each community, the DMC will host a series of no fewer than three deliberative forums:

- The first forum will ask, "Where are we now?"
- The second forum will ask, "Where do we want to go?"
- The third forum will ask, "How do we get there?"

Over the course of these forums, participants will cultivate their collective hindsight, insight, and foresight to understand how their community got to where it is today, and how they can shape their community into a place they would want to live for the rest of their lives.

One of the most profound commitments of the DMC is to build trust between ourselves and the communities with which we are privileged to work. This is why we have chosen to facilitate at least three forums in each community, because we realize these issues are complex, long-standing, and can't be properly addressed in a single forum. We are dedicated to working with communities as they build their civic muscle memory, so that the dialogue and deliberation continues in communities long after we're gone.

"What's Next, Alabama?" is not the beginning of this conversation. We recognize that communities have been asking these questions long before this series, and will continue asking these questions long after this series. Our hope is to help amplify and catalyze the conversations already going on in communities across our state.

Finally, "What's Next, Alabama?" is a testament to the thousands of Alabamians that voiced their concerns in hundreds of forums over the last decade. We have been listening, and we look forward to hearing your thoughtful, imaginative response to "What's Next?" for Alabama.

Cristin Foster Brawner,
Executive Director, David Mathews Center for Civic Life

The GOOD LIFE

When you think of "the good life," what comes to mind? What does "the good life" mean to you? Does it mean having a steady job? Does it mean earning a solid middle-class living? Being able to provide for your family? What does it look like? Is it being able to leave your doors unlocked? Or seeing your kids get a good education? Or being able to take public transportation to work? Or breathing clean air? Perhaps it's all of these things? Certainly it's more than these things, too.

This is a conversation about what the good life means to you and your community, and what you can do together as a community to make strides toward achieving a better life, however you define that. It's a conversation about your community's economic future, in the broadest sense. What do we mean by the "economy," anyway?

“

It’s about taking stock of your community’s assets, appreciating what you love about your community, understanding what challenges your community faces, and taking an active role in shaping the world around you.

When we talk about “the economy,” we don’t just mean jobs and unemployment or the stock market. We define the economy as any issue that is important to your community on its quest to achieve a better life. Perhaps it’s ensuring quality schools in your community, or expanding broadband internet access, or having an educated and sober workforce, or a thriving downtown area—the economy is the community you live in, and your capacity to thrive and prosper as a part of that community.

This dialogue is about your Alabama—it’s about your community, the place you call home, warts and all! It’s about taking stock of your community’s assets, appreciating what you love about your community, understanding what challenges your community faces, and taking an active role in shaping the world around you.

Q:

What is “the economy?”

School Conditions

Internet Access

Workforce Quality

Unemployment Rates

Public Safety

Access to Public Transportation

Quality of Life

Retail Opportunities

Entrepreneurship

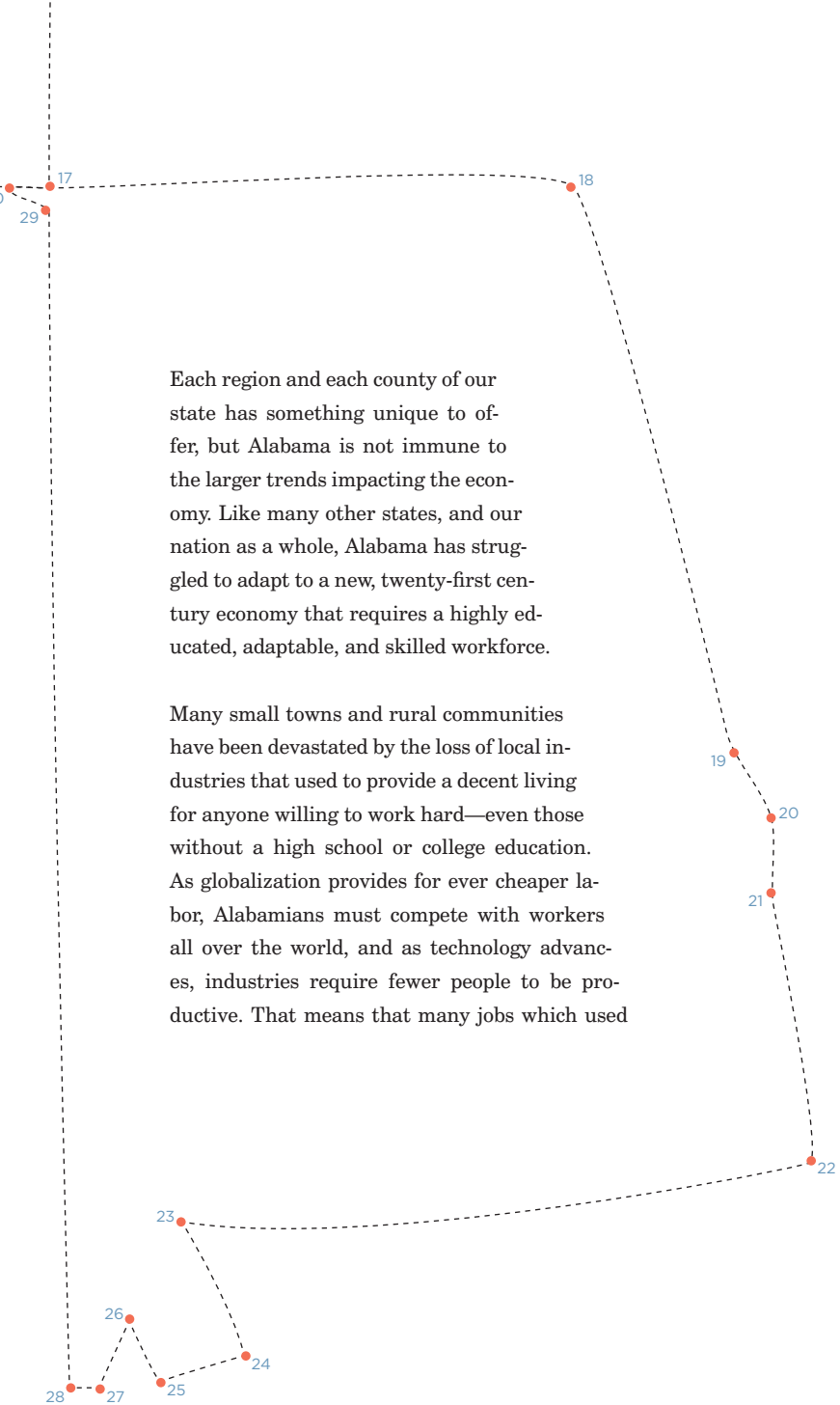
Thriving Downtown

Any issue that is important to your community is part of its economy!

Take a moment to note what the economy means to you!

THE STATE WE'RE IN

Which Alabama do you call home? When we ask, "What's Next?" for Alabama, which Alabama are we talking about? Our state is vast and diverse, from the Gulf Coast to the Shoals, from the Black Belt to the Wiregrass—we know that there isn't one Alabama—there are many.



Each region and each county of our state has something unique to offer, but Alabama is not immune to the larger trends impacting the economy. Like many other states, and our nation as a whole, Alabama has struggled to adapt to a new, twenty-first century economy that requires a highly educated, adaptable, and skilled workforce.

Many small towns and rural communities have been devastated by the loss of local industries that used to provide a decent living for anyone willing to work hard—even those without a high school or college education. As globalization provides for ever cheaper labor, Alabamians must compete with workers all over the world, and as technology advances, industries require fewer people to be productive. That means that many jobs which used

to support the working class no longer exist, and the majority of jobs that are created tend to be located in or near metropolitan areas, leaving many small towns and rural communities with little to offer. Of the top six counties expected to lose population over the next twenty-five years, all are rural.

In fact, the hollowing out of rural Alabama is nearly total, and has left many small towns decimated as their brightest young people leave to find education and work elsewhere. This is often referred to as rural "brain drain," and the exodus of young people from rural America has been so drastic that often the only people left in these places are the elderly and retired—leading one publication to describe the phenomenon as "the graying of rural America." [1]

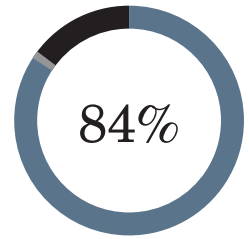
> "Clearly, there are two Alabamas, one urban and one rural.[2]

[1] Alana Semuels, "The Graying of Rural America," The Atlantic, June 2, 2016.
[2] Alabama Commerce Commission.

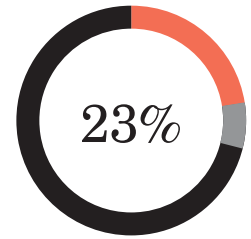
The Data

A Look at Alabama's Economy by the Numbers

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT



High School Dimploma or Greater [3]
United States: 86%
Alabama: 84%



Bachelor's Degree or Greater [4]
United States: 29%
Alabama: 23%

EXPECTED WORKFORCE CHANGES

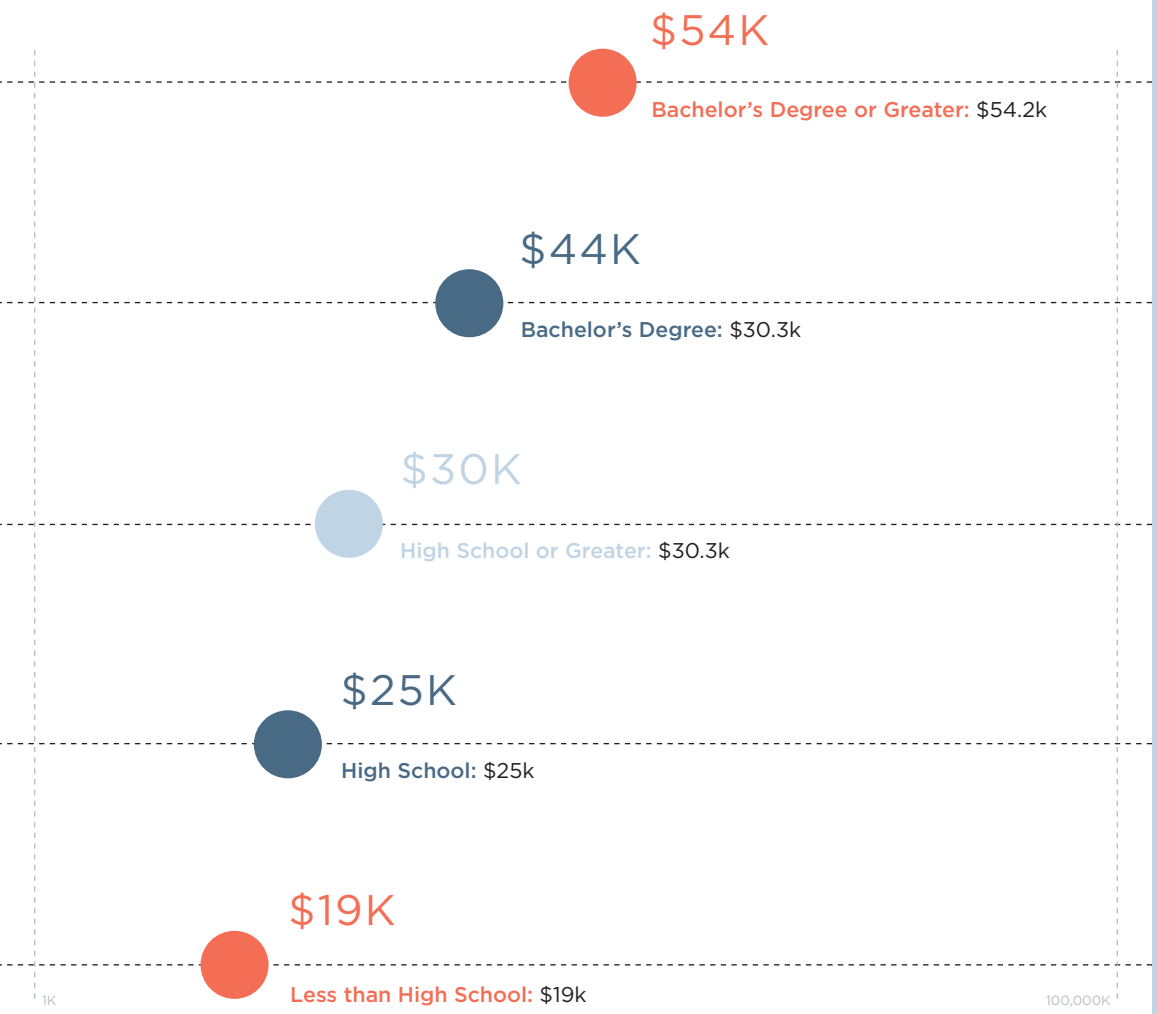
Statewide Population Increase of 11.4% [5]
from 2012 to 2030

Worker Shortfall of 350,664 [6]
by 2030

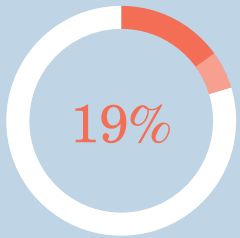
THAT MEANS 350K EMPTY JOBS!

[3] Samuel Addy et al., "State of the Workforce Report X: Alabama" (University of Alabama Center for Business and Economic Research, April 2016), 21.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid., 5.
[6] Ibid., (v).

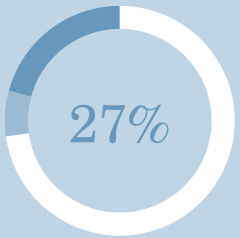
ANNUAL MEDIAN EARNINGS BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT IN ALABAMA[7]



LIVING IN POVERTY

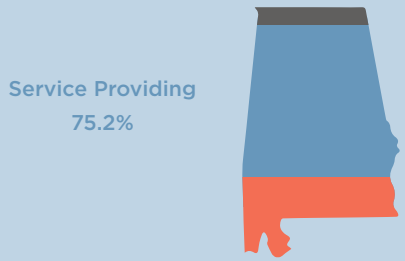


All Ages [8]
Alabama: 19.2%
United States: 15.5%



Under 18 [9]
Alabama: 27.4%
United States: 21.7%

JOBS BY BROAD INDUSTRY CLASSIFICATION [10]



[7] "Median Earnings by Educational Attainment for the U.S. and Alabama, 2011" (U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2011).
[8] "2014 Poverty Estimates - States: All Ages" (U.S. Census Bureau, Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE) Program, December 2015).
[9] "2014 Poverty Estimates - States: Under Age 18" (U.S. Census Bureau, Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE) Program, December 2015).
[10] Samuel Addy et al., "State of the Workforce Report X: Alabama" (University of Alabama Center for Business and Economic Research, April 2016),, 13.

FASTEST GROWING JOBS [11]

1. Engine and Other Machine Assemblers
2. Occupational Therapy Assistants
3. Personal Care Aides
4. Diagnostic Medical Sonographers
5. Helpers – Brickmasons, Blockmasons, Stonemasons, and Tile and Marble Setters.

"The pace of training needs to increase for technical skills, while the scale of training is raised for basic and social skills" [12]

SHARPEST DECLINING JOBS [13]

1. Farmers, Ranchers, and Agricultural Managers
2. Meat, Poultry, and Fish Cutters and Trimmers
3. Postal Mail Carriers
4. Sewing Machine Operators
5. Textile Winding, Twisting, and Drawing Out Machine Setters, Operators, and Tenders

"The Health Care and Social Assistance sector will continue to dominate employment in the state. [14]

LARGEST EMPLOYERS [15]
BY SECTOR

1. Manufacturing
2. Health Care & Social Assistance
3. Retail Trade
4. Accommodation & Food Service
5. Educational Services

HIGHEST DEMAND JOBS [16]
2012 - 2022

1. Registered Nurses
2. Team Assemblers
3. General Operations Managers
4. Licensed Practical & Vocational Nurses
5. Personal Care Aides

[11] Ibid., 16.
[12] Ibid., (v).
[13] Ibid., 18.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid., 12.
[16] Ibid., 14.

Infrastructure

Physical, Human, and Civic

A community's infrastructure is the key to building a prosperous, diverse, and sustainable economy. Infrastructure is the key to mobility—whether it's physical, economic, or social mobility. Infrastructure, however, isn't just the roads we drive on or the bridges we cross. There are, in fact, three different types of infrastructure that are critical to a community's economic success.

Physical

The material products required to build and sustain a vibrant economic landscape: roads, bridges, tunnels, gas, electricity, water, sewer treatment, waste management, broadband internet, etc.

Take stock of *your* community's infrastructure.
What are your community's assets — physical, human, and civic? Map them out using the space provided on each page.

Human

The quality of the workforce as evidenced through a community's investment in education, healthcare, safety, and anything else that goes into producing a strong, educated, healthy, sober, and adaptable workforce.

Civic

Civic infrastructure is built upon a community's capacity to collaborate among its citizens and its organizations, both public and private. This includes local government, businesses, schools, churches, and nonprofits. Communities with strong civic infrastructure are built upon an engaged public and, perhaps most importantly, they are communities with *many leaders.*

Civic infrastructure is a community's capacity to collaborate and to get things done. It requires active citizenship and without it, building physical or human infrastructure is nearly impossible.

Start the Conversation

Where are we now?

What assets do we have in our community?

What makes us most proud to live here?

How has our community changed over the past few years?

How did we get to where we are today, and what major influences have shaped our community?

How would we describe our community's economy today?

How is our community's economy different than it used to be?

What work is already happening in our community to build a stronger economy?

What is working well? What achievements have we made?

What isn't working well?

What has the community tried before that never got off the ground?

What is not going as well as the community hoped?

What are the biggest challenges to improving our community's economic future?

What are we recovering from?

How has our past informed our future? What lessons have we learned?

Where do we want to go?

What would it take for you to want to live here for the rest of your life?

What do you want to change about your community? What do you want to preserve?

What options should we consider for improving the quality of life in our community?

Given that resources are limited, what issues should we prioritize?

What do we already have in place to build on?

What differing perspectives do we hear?

For each option we hear, what are the:

- Strengths:
- Opportunities:
- Resources:
- Tradeoffs:

What are the potential impacts of the actions we're considering?

What are we most excited to see happen?

Who else needs to be involved?

How do we get there?

Since we can't do everything at once, where should we start?

What actions are most doable—in terms of time, resources, and public will?

What actions will have the greatest positive impact?

What challenges do we anticipate? How can we deal with these challenges?

What do we need to put in place to help us move forward?

What attempts to address this issue have already been made? How can we build upon those initiatives?

Who in the room has talents that are uniquely suited to addressing this issue?

What can you do? What knowledge and skills do you bring to the table to address this issue?

Who else needs to be involved?

How and when will our work together continue?

What are our next steps?

What actions can we commit to today, both individually and as a group?

As you leave the final forum today, what ideas do you want to hold on to? What new connections have you made with your fellow citizens? What actions can you commit to today? What is your next step?

Notes

> The direction of a community's movement, forward or backward, is determined by its patterns of interaction, by the habitual way that people respond to one another. Everyone, whether they want to be or not, is a player. Even choosing not to participate affects the game.
>
> *Dr. David Mathews*

ABOUT THE DAVID MATHEWS CENTER FOR CIVIC LIFE

The David Mathews Center for Civic Life is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to strengthening Alabama's civic life by engaging communities around issues of public importance. We moderate deliberative community forums in every corner of the state. Our programs connect citizens, organizations, and local leaders together to build the civic infrastructure necessary to meet community challenges in a way that is both locally-driven and sustainable. Our ultimate goal is to foster skills, habits, and community practices that build and preserve a healthy democracy.

We are a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization located at the American Village in Montevallo, Alabama. Our impact is statewide.

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Special thanks to Betty Knighton of the West Virginia Center for Civic Life for inspiring this forum series and contributing her invaluable insight.

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