



GEORGIA'S RURAL CENTER

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GEORGIA'S RURAL CENTER MARKS FIFTH ANNIVERSARY, CELEBRATES "PHENOMENAL" RETURN ON INVESTMENT

TIFTON— July marked the fifth anniversary of the creation of Georgia's Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation. Known as Georgia's Rural Center and headquartered on the Tifton campus of Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College, the center was created by the state's General Assembly during its 2018 session. The establishing legislation, House Bill 951, granted the center state-wide authority to work with communities and the private sector to promote general welfare, encourage business, and achieve prosperity through innovation and investment in rural communities throughout Georgia.

To facilitate the success of Georgia's Rural Center, HB951 called for state agencies and other public entities to collaborate with the center to the benefit of rural communities. With a comparatively small annual budget appropriation of just over \$1.5 million, Georgia's Rural Center must leverage funds from other sources— local, state, federal and private—in order to fulfill its purpose.

In his budget notes at the close of the 2023 session, Governor Brian Kemp challenged the center to use its small budget to leverage other resources.

David Bridges, director of Georgia's Rural Center, asserts that the center has been doing exactly that since its inception, adding that the center's ability to leverage funds during its first five years serves as a model for other public and non-profit organizations. As an example, Bridges points to the 52 individual, locally focused projects center staff have initiated, led and seen to completion since 2018.

"Those 52 projects have directly affected rural Georgians in 69 counties throughout this state," Bridges says. "Add to that our other projects that were regional or statewide in nature, and the center has not only had a statewide impact, but the leverage we've been able to create is truly remarkable."

To accomplish those projects, which include rural workforce development, healthcare, transportation and more, Georgia's Rural Center invested \$2.4 million, not including personnel and operating expenses. To date, that \$2.4 million investment has leveraged \$1.5 million in local funds, \$7.3 million in additional, non-center, state funds, \$78.3 million in federal funds, and \$316 million in private funds. In all, the center has worked to secure investments in rural Georgia of more than \$405 million since 2018.

Bridges, a native of rural Terrell County in southwest Georgia, calls that a “phenomenal” return on investment.

“In essence, every dollar the center has invested in rural Georgia has been multiplied by 168,” Bridges says. “Leverage of that magnitude is almost unheard of in the public sector.”

Sparsely populated Taliaferro County in the eastern part of the state is home to one of the Rural Center’s successful efforts. Harrison Poultry, a family-owned, vertically integrated poultry company headquartered in Barrow County, sought the assistance of the Rural Center to determine how to best begin expanding and relocating their operation from now-urbanized Barrow County, roughly an hour east to rural Taliaferro County. Working with Harrison Poultry leaders, the Rural Center positioned the company to access state programs and incentives that made the first phase of expansion and relocation feasible.

The initial phase of the project, the construction of a new, state-of-the-art feed mill in Crawfordville, subsequently resulted in a capital investment in Taliaferro County which included infrastructure upgrades and totaled about \$300 million. In addition, approximately 50 new, full-time jobs were created in Taliaferro County, while neighboring Lincoln, Oglethorpe and Wilkes counties also saw double-digit job growth related to the company’s expansion and relocation.

Referring to the ratio of job growth to county population, Bridges points out that most standard economic development practices exclude rural places because the metrics used for site selection were created with more densely populated areas in mind. While an additional 50, full-time jobs might not seem significant in a densely populated metro Atlanta county, he says, the creation of 50 jobs is a potential “game-changer” to Taliaferro’s 1,500 residents.

Harrison Poultry’s new Crawfordville feed mill also increased feed production enough to allow the company to add a second shift at its original Barrow County processing plant, resulting in another 266 full-time jobs in suburban Atlanta, and illustrating another of the Rural Center’s fundamental principles—the mutually beneficial link between the state’s rural and urban economies.

According to Bridges, the center’s work is grounded in the belief that the state of Georgia is no more prosperous than its least prosperous community, and in order to prosper, rural communities must be positioned to attract energetic, educated and determined young people to live and work there. Those promising young people are typically drawn to communities where they will have ample opportunity to make a living and access to quality education and healthcare.

“This is why business, education and healthcare are defining principles for the center’s work and the reason we invest in communities that demonstrate a willingness to prioritize progress in these areas,” Bridges says.

In addition to projects, Georgia’s Rural Center engages in communication and advocacy work on behalf of rural Georgia.

“We shine the light so that others can see what we see,” Bridges says. “And what we see is that real opportunity exists in rural Georgia. It’s time to rediscover that potential and reinvest in the state’s less-populated places.”

Learn more about the Rural Center’s on-going efforts to reinvigorate rural Georgia at www.ruralga.org.

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