

# Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation

2019-2020 Annual Report

# 2019



## JULY 2019

- Janet Cochran, project manager, hired in north Georgia office
- Opening of Georgia's Rural Center north Georgia office in Ellijay, Georgia



## AUGUST 2019

- Donaldson Dining Hall official dedication as Georgia Grown



## SEPTEMBER 2019

- GMET-X Symposium hosted
- Attended REED Summit and hosted table to share about projects



## OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2019

- Data collection for Sunbelt Ag Expo and Berrien County projects



## JANUARY 2020

- Loren Lindler, communication specialist, hired
- Data collection for Chattooga County project



## FEBRUARY 2020

- Presented at Georgia Assoc. of Convention and Visitor Bureaus Conference, Valdosta
- Began Dawson County Trail Master Plan project



## APRIL 2020

- Completion of Sunbelt Ag Expo Strategic Plan project



## MAY 2020

- Completion of Berrien County project

# 2020

 [www.ruralga.org](http://www.ruralga.org)  [info@ruralga.org](mailto:info@ruralga.org)  Georgia's Rural Center  @GeorgiaRuralCenter  @georgiaruralcenter

Subscribe to our newsletter through our website to get quarterly updates from Georgia's Rural Center.

\*\*Photos featured in this annual report were submitted to our 2020 photo contest, except two on the back cover collage, which were featured on our blog. Dr. Jessica Burmfield Mitchum photo by Colquitt Regional Medical Center (right side, fourth row). Wael Zahrouni photo by David Parks (center, below "O" and "R").

## REDISCOVERING RURAL

In 2017, rural leaders approached Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College President Dr. David Bridges and Special Projects Director Scott Blount with the idea of creating a rural center for Georgia. Out of the initial conceptual proposal drafted by Bridges and Blount, the team transformed the Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation from a vision to reality.

Housed at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College in Tifton, Georgia's Rural Center serves as a central information and research hub for rural best practices, which may include community planning, industry-specific assistance and cooperative efforts with state and federal entities, nonprofit organizations and other higher education partners. With a focus on producing results that directly impact rural people and places, the center works to reconnect the state's rural and urban people and places, rediscovering all that is unique and extraordinary in the state's less populated areas and reminding all Georgians of the power and potential present in small towns and crossroad communities.

We work to recognize successful businesses and efforts and help other communities recreate those models throughout the state. While the center's projects vary widely, the focus of each remains the same: reconnecting Georgia residents to all our rural places have to offer.

## OUR MISSION

To build healthy, vibrant, rural Georgia communities with managed support and collaborative partnerships

## OUR CORE PRINCIPLES

**REDISCOVER** all that is unique and extraordinary in the state's less populated areas

**RECONNECT** all Georgians to the vital role that rural people and places play in statewide success

**RECREATE** ideas working in rural Georgia to advance other communities throughout the state

**REINVEST** in small towns and rural communities through internships and special projects

## OUR VISION

 **COMMUNICATION**  
share the stories of rural Georgia and its impacts on the entire state

 **ADVOCACY**  
recommend policy change and/or implementation to benefit rural Georgia

 **NETWORKING**  
establish relationships within rural communities to aid in advocacy and development of policy and prospective projects

 **MANAGEMENT**  
project management that results in completed projects benefiting rural communities

 **DEVELOPMENT**  
create a portfolio of completed projects to share with other rural communities

## OUR TEAM SERVING RURAL GEORGIA



**DR. DAVID BRIDGES**

Interim Director



**SCOTT BLOUNT**

Associate Director



**JANET COCHRAN**

Project Manager



**BRIDGETT MOBLEY**

Logistics and Operations Manager



**JESSICA AKINS**

Communication Manager



**LOREN LINDLER**

Communication Specialist



**MARY CATHERINE GASTON**

Communication Specialist

## CENTER PARTNERS

Stanley M. Fletcher - Professor of Policy, Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation + Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College

Rural Health Innovation Center at Mercer University

Georgia Department of Agriculture (GDA)

Dr. Kent Wolfe + Dr. Sharon Kane - UGA Center for Agribusiness and Economic Development (CAED)

Paul Umbach + Angie Vincent - Tripp Umbach

Eloise Stewart - Eloise. Design. Co.

# MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

## *Finding our way –*

That's what the past year has been about for the staff of the Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation.

Rural Georgia has many needs. It needs a growing and diverse economy with more opportunity and more jobs, but how? It needs better education, but how? It suffers from a lack of awareness about the opportunities that exist there, but how can we change that? It needs greater access to primary health care, but how do we provide that?

During the past year the small, but diverse staff of the center, along with expertise from outside consultants, has been finding their way to help rural communities across Georgia to find ways to better their communities. From planning to marketing to identifying tourism assets, the center has helped communities find their way to greater prosperity.

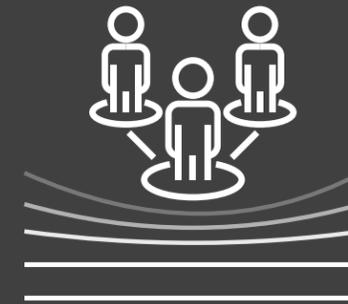
Our work continues on behalf of Georgia's largest industry - agriculture. A project completed with the Sunbelt Agricultural Exposition sought to expand the impact of this unique asset. Another recent collaborative project with farmers, the private sector, and rural hospitals is helping to find a way to source wholesome Georgia Grown foods and, then, serve them in their hospital dining operations. Better food for patients and new markets for Georgia farmers, that's a win-win.

Thanks to the persistent work and support of dedicated members of the House Rural Development Council, other members of the General Assembly, and the Governor's office in supporting the center as it continues its work to RECONNECT the state's rural and urban people and places and to REDISCOVER all that is unique and extraordinary in the state's less populated areas.

As we find our way to new ventures, the center will never leave behind the core mission. It works to remind all Georgians of the power and potential present in small towns and crossroad communities in rural Georgia. The center's team works to recognize successful businesses and efforts to help other communities RECREATE those models throughout the state. Because people are Georgia's most valuable asset, we work to REINVEST in human capital in the state's rural fringes through internship placement, career development, and innovative projects, all of which will hopefully contribute to a better understanding of the opportunities that exist in rural Georgia.

The state is blessed with many public and private organizations and resources essential to revitalizing Georgia's rural communities. Whether you prefer to call it collaboration, partnership, or teamwork, the synergy that comes from working together almost always results in the greatest success. So we will continue to find ways to bring people, programs, resources, and innovation to the forefront for rural communities to create prosperity through innovation across Georgia.

*David C Bridges*



## RESILIENCE

COVID-19'S IMPACT ON RURAL GEORGIA

# COVID-19

Before 2020 began, most people had plans and thoughts for the year of vision (20/20). However, coronavirus (COVID-19) had different plans for the world and induced a global pandemic forcing the world to see things a little differently than they once thought. Through the pain of job loss, cancelled live events, and much more, COVID-19 did lay the groundwork for one idea - innovation was needed in order to prosper.

Georgia was unfortunately one of the states most impacted by COVID-19, but rural Georgia has proven to be resilient despite the hardships. Stories from all across the state were being shared about how rural Georgians were seeking new and innovative ways to keep their businesses and communities afloat.

Zoom, Teams, FaceTime, and social media platforms allowed connection in a time when we were encouraged to disconnect. Virtual activities, curbside pick-up, online ordering, shifts in production, and many more changes brought about the “new” normal that lasted longer than just a few weeks. Many communities found new ways of doing life, bringing their citizens even closer together.

As the “new norm” continues when this report is published, one thing remains the same - rural Georgia continues to be the backbone of the state. Home to the state’s largest industry, agriculture, rural Georgia went on and businesses needed to support the farmers worked hard to make sure seeds got in the ground and farmers had what they needed to grow and harvest the seasons’ food, fuel, and fiber. Many produce farmers found new ways to distribute their goods to customers they would not sell to, generally, and Georgia Grown supported to-go stations that had produce from all around the state.

In addition, the spirits of those who worked in health care persevered and the communities in rural Georgia supported the first responders working with COVID-19 cases. Masks were made by many for the health care workers, and donations of much needed PPE were given to help those who sacrifice their health for others.

Furthermore, businesses all across rural Georgia found unique ways to support those in the community and make supplies needed during the pandemic. From ventilators, to hand sanitizer, and community hero bags, rural Georgia united to do what needed to be done.

Thank you to all who have sacrificed, persevered, and overcome the hardships brought about by COVID-19 during these times. The work in rural Georgia does not go unnoticed. To learn more about more stories of rural Georgia’s resilience, check out our blog at [www.ruralga.org/blog](http://www.ruralga.org/blog).



## COMPLETED PROJECTS

PROJECTS WORKING FOR RURAL GEORGIA TODAY



## DONALDSON DINING HALL SUPPORTED BY GEORGIA GROWN | TIFTON, GEORGIA

ABAC opened Georgia's first Georgia Grown college dining hall in August 2019. #NowMoreThanEver, ABAC remains committed to sourcing products in-state. The college was dedicated to sourcing at least 50 percent of the ingredients used in the dining hall from Georgia producers in 2019. Now, in 2020, despite COVID-19, the share is intended to increase to provide more dollars in the pockets of the 392,000-plus hard-working men and women employed in our state's number one industry. CRPI staff are working closely with Food Service Partners, the food processing company that is taking over operation of the newly renovated Parham Kitchen in Milledgeville, to incorporate more Georgia products in the college's dining hall menu. Learn about this project on page 15.

*“ABAC’s Georgia Grown Dining Hall is an example of the outstanding impact Georgia agriculture has on our local food community: By sourcing Georgia Grown products from local producers, food dollars stay in the local economy and help strengthen our rural communities. Suppliers, producers, and procurement staff at ABAC worked in harmony to create a more sustainable food system including reduced food miles. The dining hall also showcases the vast diversity of products that Georgia farmers grow and produce reminding ABAC students, staff, faculty, and visitors why Georgia is “Nature’s Favorite State.”*

Sarah Cook, Domestic Trade, GDA



## SUNBELT AG EXPO STRATEGIC PLAN + IMPACT ASSESSMENT | MOULTRIE, GEORGIA

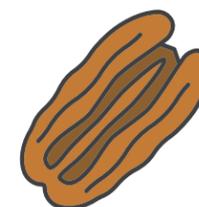
The center teamed up with UGA's CAED to complete a two-part project providing the Sunbelt Ag Expo's leadership team with information and recommendations to aid in positioning the Expo as "North America's Premier Farm Show." Entering into its 43rd year in 2020, the Expo continues to attract thousands of people from around the southeast and beyond. Thus, the need to show economic impact and the creation of a strategic plan moving forward was imperative for the future. CAED completed the economic impact analysis illustrating the event's value to the surrounding 20-county region. CRPI staff created a strategic plan with the Expo staff, which was crafted data gleaned from surveys, interviews, and focus groups covering stakeholders such as Expo staff and executive board members, Expo attendees, vendors, and community leaders. The final report was presented in April 2020. CRPI staff continue to work with the Expo staff to carry out the strategic plan positioning the Sunbelt Ag Expo to remain strong and relevant in the constantly changing agribusiness sector.

*“We appreciate the opportunity to partner with the Rural Center to chart the course for the future of the Sunbelt Ag Expo. Their very thorough and comprehensive review of our operation was essential to garner us feedback from multiple stakeholder groups as we move forward.*

Chip Blalock, Executive Director, Sunbelt Ag Expo



\*Photos from Georgia Department of Agriculture/Facebook



## PECAN CO-OP ASSESSMENT + FEASIBILITY STUDY

In cooperation with the Georgia Agricultural Commodity Commission for Pecans, CRPI conducted a needs assessment and feasibility study regarding the potential development of a Georgia pecan farmer-owned pecan shelling and processing facility. CRPI contracted with UGA's CAED to conduct the study. CRPI and CAED presented findings of the feasibility study at a Georgia Pecan Commission meeting in February 2020.



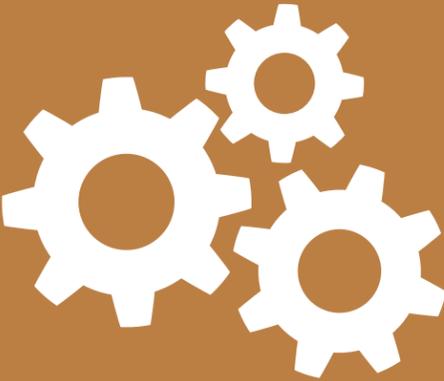


COMPLETED PROJECTS

## GEORGIA MEDICAL EDUCATION TECHNOLOGY EXPERIENCE PROJECT (GMET-X)

CRPI conducted a needs assessment, market study, and feasibility study aimed at creating a regional simulation and continuing education center to support educational and health care institutions that have the responsibility for providing health care in rural Georgia. The Center worked with the South Georgia Medical Education & Research Consortium (SMERC) to conceive the project and Tripp Umbach, a consulting firm from Erie, Pennsylvania, performed the work. The project culminated in September 2019 when CRPI hosted a symposium at Lake Blackshear to examine the health and wellness challenges confronting rural Georgians and to begin to craft innovative solutions, possibly including training through simulation. Following the symposium, a task force was created involving key leaders in the medical arena in south Georgia. The vision is to see the establishment of the Georgia Medical Education and Technology (G-MET) Experience soon.

“*During our work with Georgia’s Rural Center, it was clear community transformation is at the heart of their mission. While this plan is rooted in medical and health science technology and innovation, the potential outcomes will touch the lives of everyone in the region – better health care, a stronger economy, and improved quality of life. Thus, this initiative is more important than ever as rural communities focus on health care and public health preparedness in the Post- COVID era.*”  
Paul Umbach + Angie Vincent, Tripp Umbach



## ON-GOING PROJECTS

PROJECTS WORKING FOR RURAL GEORGIA TOMORROW



## CREATIVE PLAN | BERRIEN COUNTY + NASHVILLE

CRPI completed a community branding project for Berrien County and the city of Nashville, Georgia. Center staff, interns, and a branding consultant conducted community focus groups in late 2019, providing feedback from residents. The creative team used the feedback to create a branding guidelines report and recommendations, which were approved by the community steering committee in May 2020. Staff will continue monthly check-in meetings for up to a year.

“*Our governmental agencies chose to work with the Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation because of their professionalism and creativity. Working with them during this project has proven to be one of the best experiences I’ve had since serving in this position. The team works so well together as a unit and provided a quality product in the end. Great experience from beginning to end - they went above and beyond what we expected.*”  
Lisa Smart, Executive Director, Berrien County Chamber/Development Authority

## COMMUNITY & COLLEGE PARTNERS PROGRAM PROJECT

The center has partnered with Mike Burns of the nonprofit Community & College Partners Program on a research project focused on the disparity in health outcomes between rural areas lacking broadband access and those with such capabilities. The center is working with a second-year graduate student in Emory's Master of Public Health program, providing guidance on potential topics of research related to telemedicine and connecting the student with center partners across the state. Additional partners include the Georgia Rural Health Innovation Center at Mercer University, the South Georgia Medical Education and Research Consortium based in Moultrie, and the Department of Community Affairs and its leadership of the Georgia Broadband Deployment Initiative. The research project will be completed in mid-August 2020.

## TOURISM + MARKETING PROJECT | CHATTOOGA COUNTY

CRPI is working with the Chattooga County Chamber of Commerce to develop a community and tourism marketing strategy. Goals of this project focus on economic impact, tourism assets, and enhancement of local value. The project has completed the data collection phase. A tourism marketing plan will be developed, and steps toward the goals of the project will be taken. Chattooga County is the most economically distressed county in north Georgia.

*“It has been a pleasure working with Georgia's Rural Center on a community re-branding and tourism marketing project to help tell our Chattooga County story that is current, relevant and authentic. It is vitally important to relay a unified message to increase our tourism industry and attract a workforce looking for a high-quality way of life. This project will put our rural community on the map, so to speak. We are looking forward to a fresh new look at Chattooga County, one of which we can share and be proud!*

Cindy Rivers, Executive Director, Chattooga County Chamber of Commerce

## CO-OP ECONOMIC IMPACT | DOUGLAS, GEORGIA

The Rural Center is nearing completion of an economic impact study for one of rural Georgia's newest and fastest growing farmer-owned cooperatives. The study will demonstrate the economic impact to more than a dozen rural south Georgia counties and emphasize the important role that cooperatives play in adding value, retaining value, building wealth and otherwise positively contributing to economic vitality in rural Georgia communities.

## TRAIL MASTER PLAN | DAWSON COUNTY

CRPI is working with Dawson County and Economic Development Authority to create a trail master plan utilizing a significant portion of the county's public forest land to generate property tax revenues. Developing and implementing an economic diversification strategy to support entrepreneurs in their endeavors is the goal of this project. Thus, with more economic diversification, the tax burden on residents and farmers is offset. While there has been growth and impact in the retail sector, limited land area for development has reduced growth for similar industry and office space.

## GEORGIA INTERNATIONAL FOOD CENTER | MILLEDGEVILLE, GEORGIA

The center continues working with the Central State Hospital Local Redevelopment Authority (Milledgeville), USDA-Rural Development, and Food Service Partners (FSP) in the development of the Georgia International Food Center at Renaissance Park. The team is working with ABAC leadership and FSP to expand the college's Georgia Grown dining hall offerings. Additionally, CRPI is working with FSP, public and private entities, and state leadership to expand the state's ability to add value and transition from agricultural production to food production.

## ABAC CONNECT

CRPI continues to expand the number and diversity of employers who are using ABAC Connect, an online platform bringing students and employers together to capitalize on career opportunities. Employers are able to post jobs and internships to connect with students and recent alumni in all schools and majors across campus. CRPI staff work specifically to increase the number of participating employers in rural communities across the state to provide students and graduates as many opportunities as possible in those communities that are in need of young talent.

## GEORGIA GROWN TRAIL - HWY 27, NORTH GEORGIA

CRPI is working with the seven northernmost counties on U.S. Highway 27 to designate the route as a Georgia Grown Trail. The association has been formed, bylaws adopted and currently waiting on approval from the Department of Agriculture before moving forward for official designation. The project aims to bring attention to the agricultural assets in these counties while increasing visitor traffic and spending at these locations. Phase 2 of this project is directed at a marketing research study of all Georgia Grown trails to ensure maximum marketability and sustainability.

## TIRED CREEK LAKE PROJECT | GRADY COUNTY

CRPI is working with Grady County in the development of Tired Creek Lake. In 2010, Grady County secured a permit from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to construct a 960-acre recreational fishing lake, which opened Memorial Day weekend 2018. Since, Grady County officials have been exploring future development opportunities to hopefully spur economic activity for the county. Staff have helped identify state and federal resources available to finance necessary infrastructure to attract potential developers. CRPI has worked with USDA-Rural Development and the Georgia Environmental Finance Authority (GEFA) to identify funding options and the necessary project planning. CRPI is currently working with Grady County officials to complete the required environmental impact study.

## GEORGIA GROWN TO-GO HOSPITAL PROJECT

CRPI is working with HomeTown Health, the Georgia Department of Agriculture, Fort Valley State University, and CEOs of several rural Georgia hospitals to create a pilot project connecting rural healthcare institutions with Georgia farmers that will result in direct-marketing opportunities for fresh fruits, vegetables, and meats by farmers to these institutions. The first transaction is expected to occur by Spring/Summer 2020.

## GEORGIA RURAL HEALTH INNOVATION CENTER

The center is working cooperatively with the Mercer University Georgia Rural Health Innovation Center to identify communities where there are intersections of need regarding economic development and health care.

## TERRELL COUNTY ROAD IMPROVEMENT PROJECT

Working with officials in Terrell County, Georgia's Rural Center is assisting to identify sources of funds for much-needed transportation improvements to a one-mile section of West Lee Street (New Bethel Church Road) that serves several businesses critical to the county's economy, including the county's only full-service farm supply business.

## MILLER COUNTY HOSPITAL COMMUNICATION AND EDUCATION STRATEGIC PLAN

Partnering with Miller County Hospital to develop a multifaceted communication and education strategy, the Rural Center aims to help improve the public's understanding of the transformational work conducted in this rural south Georgia community. The project focuses on fact finding, research, documentation of process and accomplishment, employee training, and community outreach. CRPI has engaged the ABAC School of Nursing and Health Sciences to develop an on-site nursing education program to help meet the growing nursing demand of this thriving health care facility.



# LEGISLATIVE UPDATES

POLICIES ADVOCATING FOR RURAL GEORGIA

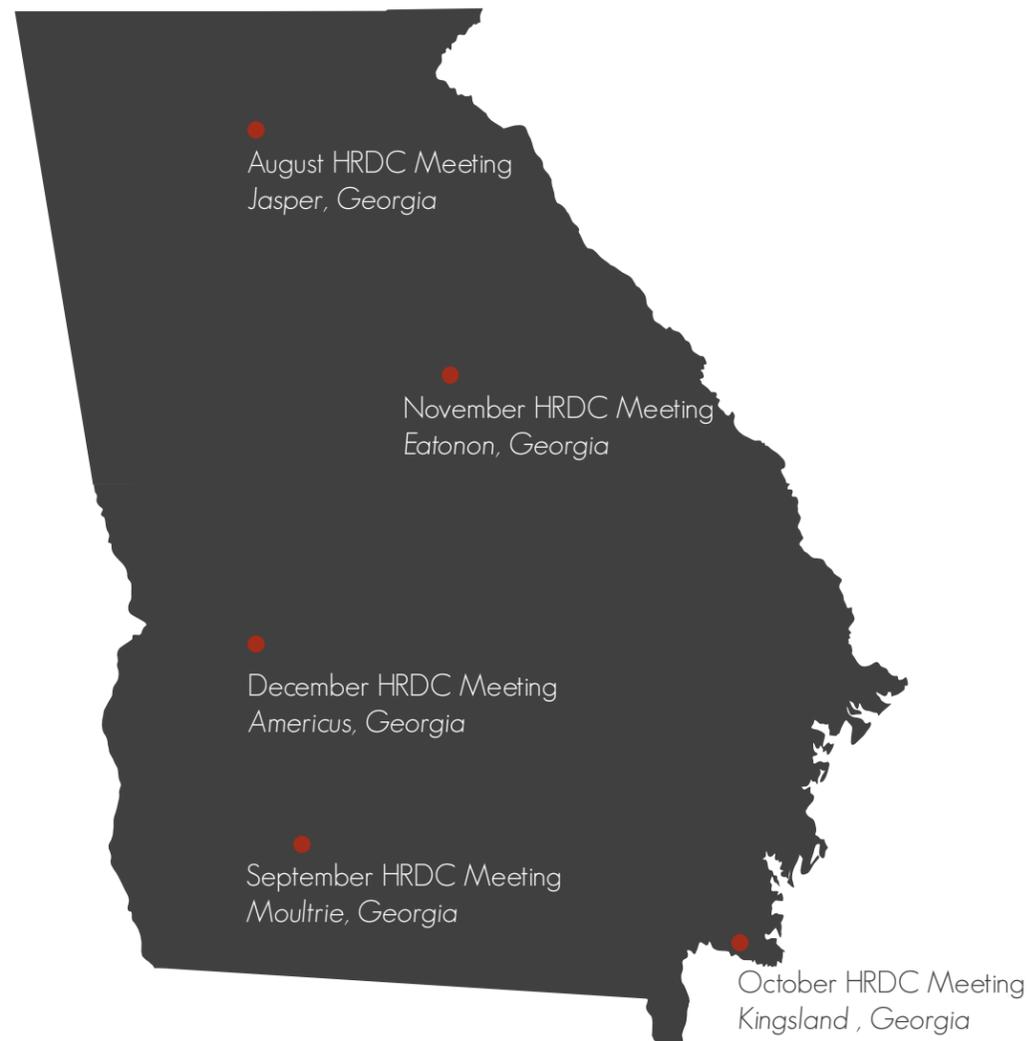
## LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

The legislative session came to a historic end June 26, 2020, with much of the focus on the new budget. However, the Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation was able to continue working with leaders across the state of Georgia throughout the year, specifically with the House Rural Development Council. They conducted their third year of work studying ways to meet the challenges facing rural Georgia.

The council met in Jasper in August, Moultrie in September, Kingsland in October, Eatonton in November, and had their final meetings in Americus in December. During the December meeting, final recommendations for the 2020 legislative session were made. The meetings covered topics including rural transit, rural brownfield redevelopment, industrial hemp research, and the rural physician shortage, among others.

At the August meeting, the center's director, Dr. David Bridges, presented to the council an overview of the center and the work completed up to that date. In November, Dr. Bridges presented on succession planning to preserve access to primary health care in rural communities. He was joined in the presentation by Chris Scoggins of the Georgia Rural Health Innovation Center at Mercer University.

Since an emphasis was given to the budget this legislative session, we look forward to more policy recommendations being made in the 2021 session next spring as the center continues to diligently work with the legislators.



# COMMUNICATION + OUTREACH BY THE NUMBERS

A VOICE SERVING RURAL GEORGIA WITH DATA-DRIVEN RESULTS

3,745  
Facebook followers

670  
Instagram followers

262  
LinkedIn followers

296  
Email subscribers

66,000  
People reach, top 10 Facebook posts

24,865  
Pageviews on website

373  
Photos in photo contest

21  
Partnerships

11  
Focus areas for projects

11  
On-going projects to date

108  
Published blogs

6  
Total completed projects to date

50\*  
Counties directly impacted  
\*more counties indirectly impacted

# ACTION IN RURAL GEORGIA





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