



# 2021 Annual Report

Flexibility. Adaptability. Consistency. Engagement.



*Wolf Mountain Vineyards & Winery*  
Photo Credit: Jack Anthony

# From the Chairman



**Sam Norton**  
**Chairman**

What a year it has been for the GMRC and all elected officials in the Region!

This past year posed challenges unlike any in recent memory. As our Region battled an ongoing pandemic, faced lockdowns, and navigated history making events, our organization remained focused and energized about meeting the needs of our communities. One of the more notable changes at the GMRC was the realignment of our regional footprint. This change brought with it funding modifications and changes in the way we allocate resources. Nonetheless, the staff stepped up to meet this challenge.

The COVID-19 pandemic with the Delta variant has added an unprecedented challenge to public service. The mixed messaging from health leaders and federal officials add to the difficulty of navigating our communities to safe harbor. With no real precedent to follow, most local leadership has had to rely on commonsense and recommendations of trusted family doctors to set policy. As I write this report, COVID cases continue to spike for the third time in the last 18 months. Our state conference has been canceled for the second time and mask mandates are back as the topic of discussion. With vaccines and booster shots being messaged on all fronts, it is clear that this pandemic is far from over.

Despite these challenges, the work of the GMRC must go on. Our work does not stop at political boundaries, during pandemics, or because of realignments. We are charged with addressing regional issues. Water, traffic, economics, and planning do not respect boundaries and neither does our obligations. Our staff and Council are focused on remaining the premier Regional Commission in the state and it continues to show.

GMRC received three (3) coveted National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) Impact Awards which reinforce that we are on the right trajectory. These projects included: Planning Department - Towns County 2021 Economic Development Strategy; Economic Development Department - Fox Factory Holding Corporation; and WorkSource - Electro-Mechanical Academy.

Our staff is up to the task, and it shows in their results. Our Council is in unison in its unselfishness regional focus. Our counties and cities grow and prosper as the envy of the state. This Region is the best in the state, and our success is evident everywhere in this corner of the state. Each of you should be proud and encouraged as we move forward because even in our success – brighter days are ahead!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Sam Norton'.

Sam Norton  
Chairman

# GMRC Council

## **BANKS COUNTY**

Danny Maxwell  
Jerry Payne  
Vicki Boling

## **HALL COUNTY**

Richard Higgins  
George Wangemann  
Deborah Mack

## **TOWNS COUNTY**

Cliff Bradshaw  
Andrea Gibby  
Denise McKay

## **DAWSON COUNTY**

Billy Thurmond  
Mike Eason  
Betsy McGriff

## **HART COUNTY**

Ricky Carter  
Tray Hicks  
William Chafin

## **UNION COUNTY**

Lamar Paris  
Jim Conley  
Mitch Griggs

## **FORSYTH COUNTY**

Cindy Jones-Mills\*  
Laura Semanson\*  
Jason Evans  
Scott Evans\*

## **LUMPKIN COUNTY**

Chris Dockery  
Sam Norton  
J.B. Jones

## **WHITE COUNTY**

Travis Turner  
Nan Bowen  
Bill Black

## **FRANKLIN COUNTY**

Jason Macomson\*  
Thomas Bridges\*  
Courtney Umbehant  
Gerald Voyles

## **RABUN COUNTY**

Kent Woerner  
Michelle Duquette  
Douglas Wayne

## **GOVERNOR'S APPOINTEE**

Angela Whidby  
Will Wade\*

## **HABERSHAM COUNTY**

Natalie Crawford\*  
Bruce Palmer\*  
Audrey Turner  
Ken Schubring

## **STEPHENS COUNTY**

Dean Scarborough  
David Austin  
Connie Tabor

*\* Served Partial Year*



**Sam Norton**  
Chairman



**George Wangemann**  
Vice-Chairman



**Ken Schubring**  
Secretary

# From the Executive Director



As an organization, the Georgia Mountains Regional Commission has always been accustomed to change – changes in programs, funding, personnel, service delivery, etc. While the pandemic posed new changes and threats, we recognized that we needed to FACE it....by practicing Flexibility, Adaptability, Consistency, and Engagement.

The pandemic posed significant threats to our communities, citizens, and our economic vitality. With new challenges, comes new opportunities. The CARES Act provided new opportunities through Revolving Loan funding to support the start-up and expansion activities of small businesses and entrepreneurs negatively impacted by COVID-19. These funds are enhancing the regional economy through the creation and/or retention of jobs. Additionally, staff has been working on a disaster resiliency plan for the Georgia Mountains Region.

Creating skilled workers for an economy that is constantly changing required strategic investments as was demonstrated with the receipt of a National Dislocated Worker Grant which is designed to employ workers who have lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic, and assist local businesses who need additional workers due to the impact of COVID-19. Designed to provide a hands-on experience while fine tuning soft skills that employers desire and provide opportunities for full-time employment upon completion, the GMRC also hosted several Employability Skills Bootcamps as a response to business needs.

Leadership, teamwork, and discipline are keys to success for any organization, and this year was no exception for the GMRC. The coordination and hard work between the staff and our communities resulted in several new projects as highlighted in this report and this collaboration has been crucial to the GMRC's success. The GMRC is blessed with fantastically dedicated and talented staff, and I am very thankful to be surrounded by individuals who take such pride in all they do and put so much effort into every program we provide.

I would also like to thank the entire GMRC Council for their support, guidance, and energy that they give to the Georgia Mountains Regional Commission.

Sincerely,

*Heather Feldman*

Heather J. Feldman  
Executive Director

# Senior Management

**Heather Feldman**  
Executive Director



**Daniel Martin**  
Director of Economic Development



**Alicia Page**  
Director of Finance



**Faith Bryan**  
Director of Information Services



**Adam Hazell**  
Director of Planning



**Whitney Williams**  
Director of Workforce Development



**Gina Kessler**  
Executive Assistant

Staff photos courtesy of **John Seibel Photography**.  
Photos taken at White Oaks, Dahlonega.

# Economic Development



10

Grant Applications Completed

\$6,333,562

in Grant Awards

\$139,500,000

in Private Investment

The Economic Development Department provides assistance to local governments in identifying projects to improve community programs and facilities, packaging grant and loan applications, and administering funded projects. Through partnerships like the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) and the Economic Development Administration (EDA), GMRC is able to provide assistance to member governments.

## Appalachian Regional Commission

- **Dahlonega** Downtown Development Authority: Holly Theatre - \$109,232
- **White County** Development Authority: Economic Development Blueprint - \$70,000

## Economic Development Administration

- **Banks County**: Sewer Improvements - \$1,500,000
- **Lumpkin County** Water and Sewer Authority: Infrastructure Improvements - \$2,000,000

## U.S. Department of Agriculture - Rural Development

- City of **Hiawassee**: Downtown Redevelopment - \$66,750
- Development Authority of **Dawson County**: Innovation and Entrepreneurship Hub Assessment - \$35,000

## OneGeorgia

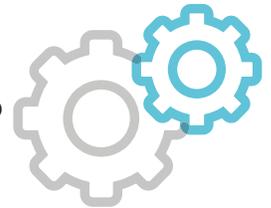
- **Gainesville - Hall County** Development Authority: Fox Factory - \$2,500,000

## Roadside Enhancement Beautification Council

- City of **Cumming**: Canton Highway Beautification - \$50,000

## Georgia Historic Preservation Division

- City of **Dahlonega**: Historic District Survey - \$2,580



*Pictured above, progress continues with critical sewer infrastructure in Banks County which will support 50 new jobs and over \$20 million in private investment.*

# Revolving Loan Fund

The Georgia Mountains Regional Commission Revolving Loan Fund (RLF) is available to companies for purposes that include: acquisition and improvement of real estate; the purchase of machinery; equipment or inventory; and working capital. Terms and conditions will vary with each loan application and are based on a review of the collateral, finances, and market risk associated with each request.

The minimum loan amount is \$10,000 and the maximum is \$300,000. Since inception, the program has loaned out more than **\$5.8 million** to **62** businesses throughout the Georgia Mountains Region.



*Debra Taylor, owner of Twelve South Artisan Gallery in Hartwell is living her dream of business ownership and sharing her artistry with the community.*



*Pictured: City of Cornelia -  
USDA Appletree Alley  
Redevelopment Project*

## Grant Administration

The Economic Development Department administered **15** projects totaling over **\$11,000,000** in grant dollars for communities across the Region in FY 21. GMRC's grant administrator serves as consultant, liaison, problem-solver, and project administrator for units of local government on both state and federally funded projects. The administrator monitors project activities, coordinates construction, oversees compliance with labor laws, and approves distribution of grant funds.

## Disaster Recovery

The GMRC continues to provide disaster recovery assistance to our communities through funding provided by the Economic Development Administration CARES Act Recovery Assistance fund. A key component of this initiative is the development of a region-wide resiliency plan to accompany the Georgia Mountains Region's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS).



# Information Services

The Information Services Department assisted the City of **Cleveland** in providing accurate and up to date utility infrastructure maps for the City's service area. To begin the project, GMRC staff created a grid encompassing the entire service area. The grid is used to systematically work throughout the City, using a Trimble Geo7x, collecting GPS coordinates for each visible utility structure. As field data is collected and checked for quality, line work is created for water and wastewater. GMRC staff compare field collected data to older utility maps and as-buils that have been scanned into the GIS software. Ongoing progress is available to the City via a web map that is updated periodically during the project.



## CENSUS 101: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

The 2020 Census is closer than you think!  
Here's a quick refresher of what it is and why it's essential that everyone is counted.

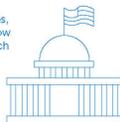
### Everyone counts.

The census counts every person living in the U.S. once, only once, and in the right place.



### It's about fair representation.

Every 10 years, the results of the census are used to reapportion the House of Representatives, determining how many seats each state gets.



### It's in the constitution.

The U.S. Constitution mandates that everyone in the country be counted every 10 years. The first census was in 1790.



### It's about \$675 billion.

The distribution of more than \$675 billion in federal funds, grants and support to states, counties and communities are based on census data.

That money is spent on schools, hospitals, roads, public works and other vital programs.



### It's about redistricting.

After each decade's census, state officials redraw the boundaries of the congressional and state legislative districts in their states to account for population shifts.

### Taking part is your civic duty.

Completing the census is mandatory: it's a way to participate in our democracy and say "I COUNT!"



Everyone Counts. The U.S. Constitution mandates a census of the population every 10 years. The goal of the 2020 Census is to count everyone who lives in the United States as of April 1, 2020 (Census Day). The 2020 Census counted every person living in the United States and the five U.S. territories. It marked the 24th census in U.S. history and the first time that households were invited to respond to the census online. All housing units and addresses nationwide were accounted for in the 2020 Census as of the end of self-response and field data collection operations on October 15, 2020. "The 2020 Census faced challenges like no other decennial census in living memory," said Secretary of Commerce Wilbur L. Ross, Jr. "Achieving these metrics in the face of severe weather events and a global pandemic is a testament to the determination and ingenuity of the hundreds of thousands of dedicated women and men who worked on the 2020 Census." GMRC was actively engaged with communities in the Region to secure a high census response.

Digital data is very important to City and County Planners and utility field crews. When a water line breaks, it is imperative to know where the nearest shut off valve is located. The City of **Dahlonega** had digital data, but it needed to be more accurate and complete. The project also needed to include all utility infrastructure including water, wastewater, and storm water. The City wanted to approach the project in two phases. Phase 1 included collection of utility base structures such as wastewater treatment plants, water treatment plants, water intakes, water discharge sites, water storage tanks and lift stations. GMRC staff acquired **Lumpkin County** parcels, roads, and 2019 aerial photography. The above-mentioned structures are mapped using a Trimble Geo7x thereby providing a sub-foot accuracy level. The structures were found in the field using older utility maps and assistance from City personnel. Once the base structures were collected a web map was created for use by the City staff and as a progress map for the rest of the project. Phase II has begun and will include field collection of fire hydrants, water valves, storm water structures, manholes, and customer water meters.



### **2021 GMRC Aerial Photography Project**

During the leaf off period of December 2020 through January 2021, Quantum Spatial acquired aerial photography for **Banks, Franklin, Hall, Hart** and Whitfield Counties. The six-inch pixel resolution imagery will be delivered to the counties in late 2021.

### **Roadway Element Validation and Mapping Program (REVAMP)**

Phase II of the Roadway Element Validation and Mapping Program (REVAMP) has begun throughout the State as each Regional Commission validates or collects data for the Georgia Department of Transportation. The first set of data include locations of schools, sidewalks within one mile of schools, school zones, crosswalks, pedestrian signals, turn lanes, and on-street parking. GMRC has completed **Banks, Dawson, Lumpkin, and Towns** counties in the first portion of the project. The second set of data to be acquired will be speed limits on local roads.

The Information Services department also assisted the City of **Dawsonville** with updating Water, Sewer, and Sidewalk data. In addition to developing a Customer Route Map for the City of **Hiwassee**, the department conducted Zoning Map Updates for the Cities of **Lavonia, Tallulah Falls, Gillsville, Hartwell, Baldwin, Royston, Dawsonville, Lula, Cornelia, Toccoa,** and **Sky Valley**.

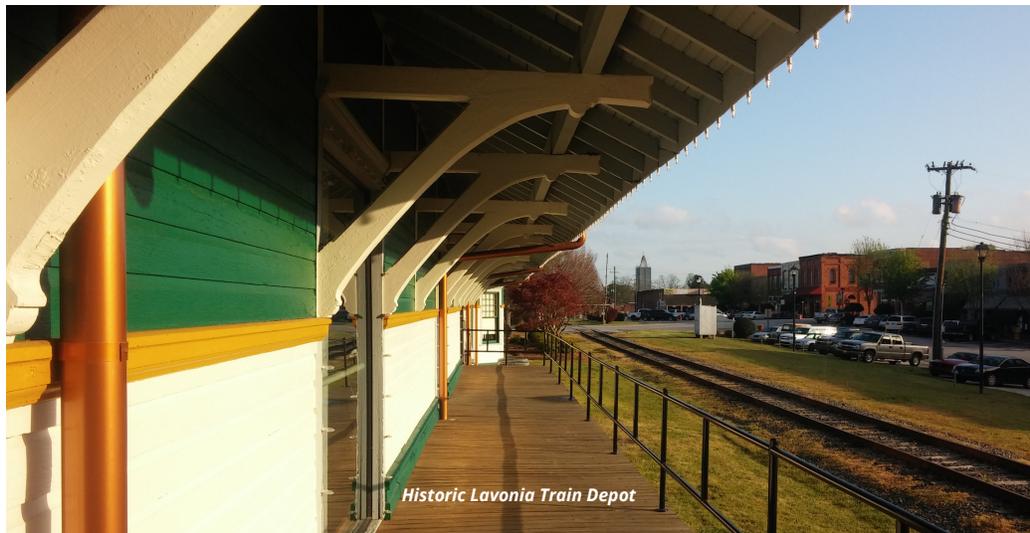
# Planning



The Georgia Mountains Region continues to evolve. Some communities are facing rapid growth as suburban Atlanta migrates up the Georgia 400 and I-985 corridors, others are adapting to shifting age demographics among youth and the elderly, while everyone is learning modern economic development in the "Attention Economy." Amidst this change, the most common theme heard as communities ponder their future is how can they retain the best of who and what they are while also striving for positive changes. How is character preserved while managing change? How do communities accommodate new housing and commerce while still feeling rural? Can the best of both worlds be achieved?

During FY 21, the GMRC completed or initiated 12 comprehensive plans for 18 local governments. This included a variety of public forums managed under pandemic protocols, dozens of online meetings, and several online surveys that produced more than 1,200 different responses. The GMRC staff researched, compiled, and analyzed all this information to ensure each community could plan ahead based on effective data.

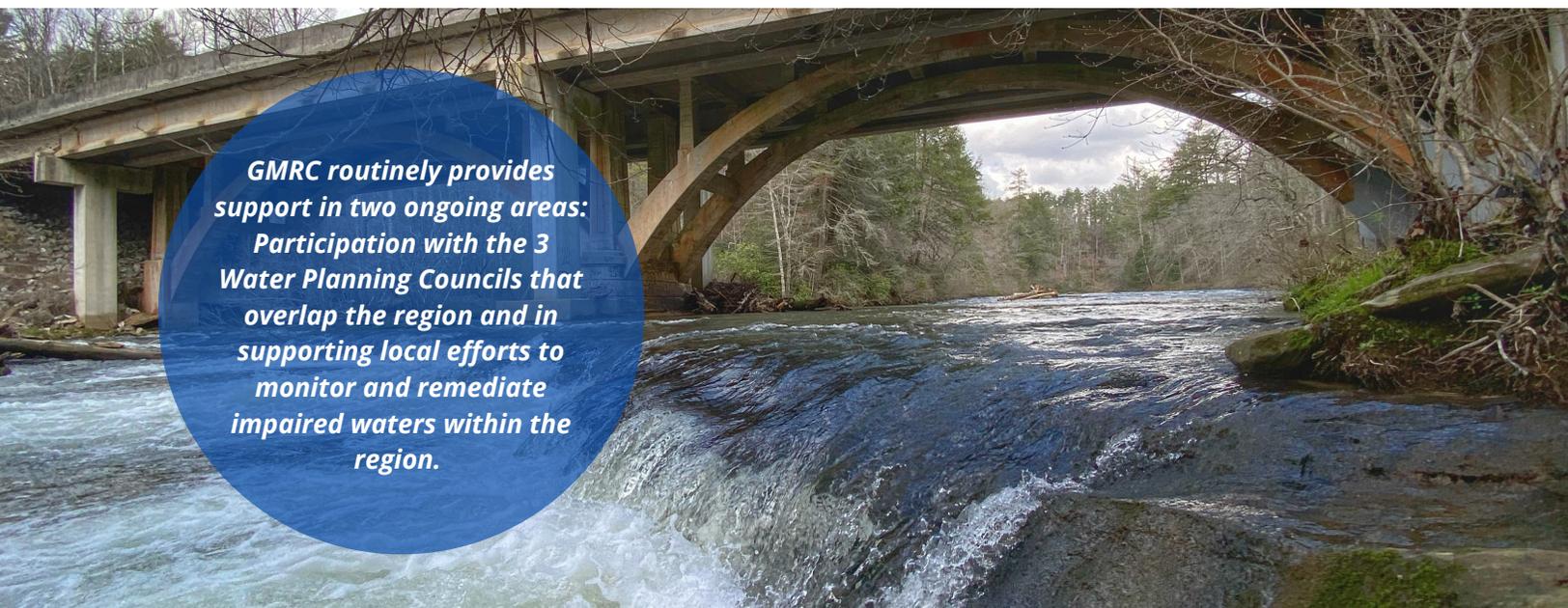
The Planning Department assisted with applications for special programs and grants to support of their community development efforts. During FY 21, the GMRC assisted in packaging Rural Zone applications for **Lavonia** and **Clayton**, and the PlanFirst application for **Young Harris**. The GMRC also pursued Brownfield Assessment funds for the Region and provided data and environmental assessments for local water withdrawal permits.



Historic Lavonia Train Depot

The Georgia Mountains Region is one rich with natural resources and scenic beauty that have defined the character of each and every community. As one of 12 Regional Commissions across Georgia, the GMRC is in a position to assist with local water resource planning and protection efforts.

During FY 21, GMRC staff worked with regional water councils to conduct two training workshops for water system staff to apply for state and federal funding for studies regarding nutrient trading in the Coosa-North Georgia area and phosphate assessments of Lake Lanier. The GMRC also administered a grant for the Chattooga Conservancy supporting their work in the Warwoman Creek watershed of **Rabun** County. The GMRC also makes sure that local comprehensive plans support permits for water withdrawal and discharge with assessments of water quality compliance measures requested by the State.



*GMRC routinely provides support in two ongoing areas: Participation with the 3 Water Planning Councils that overlap the region and in supporting local efforts to monitor and remediate impaired waters within the region.*

The GMRC served as the facilitator for five local government retreats in FY 21, and provided training for three different local planning commissions. These sessions included single or multi-day forums as communities worked through critical issues, eventually identifying priorities and proposed actions measures. Among the topics commonly discussed were updating HR policies, improving the use of social media for communications, supporting revitalization programs, and updating land use policies in growing areas.

The Regional Resource Plan was updated in 2021 with input and guidance by representatives from member governments and private individuals and organizations. It is intended to serve as an inventory and assessment of those historic, cultural, and natural resources considered vital to the character, ecology and overall wellbeing of the area. It also serves as a guide for incorporating the preservation and promotion of these resources amidst the varying layers of management applied by local, state, and federal government organizations as well as private stakeholders. In conjunction with the other elements of the Regional Plan, this document will help provide for the appropriate level of protection as local communities work towards achieving their respective visions for a better, healthier, and more environmentally sound Region.

# Workforce Development

## ADULT SERVICES

Individuals Served **447**

Earned a Credential **88.5%**

Employed One Year After Exit **90.7%**

WorkSource Georgia Mountains (WSGM) serves adults and dislocated workers in the Region who have been laid off, are unemployed, or underemployed. All participants train in a Growth and Demand Occupation for the Georgia Mountains Region and are working toward earning a certificate, diploma, or degree at a participating college or technical school, GED, or a professional license. WorkSource served 447 individuals during this program year. Services received include assistance with tuition, books, supplies, and supportive services such as gas and childcare reimbursements while attending classes and job search or follow-up support once training is completed.

All potential participants attend an Overview session before applying for WorkSource assistance to learn about the benefits and eligibility requirements of Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) services before filling out an application. To better meet the needs of individuals in our Region, the Overview is offered in person, through scheduled online sessions, onboard the Career Coach, or through self-guided sessions. Visitors to the Career Coach received assistance with job searches, online applications, resume help, WIOA Overview and application assistance. The Career Coaches also assisted several area businesses on-site during hiring and Rapid Response events.



I wanted to go to school for a career that would allow me to find local employment. After planning, I decided to become a Registered Nurse.

I started the ASN program at North Georgia Technical College and it was well worth the effort! While attending school, I learned about WIOA from a friend. WIOA services were amazing. The grant took the burden of education costs off my shoulders and allowed me to focus on my studies.

When I finished my program, I had interviews lined up and three job offers to choose between. This had never happened to me before!

If you are thinking about signing up for WIOA- DO IT! Sure it's a lot of paperwork, but it's worth it. I feel so grateful for the opportunity to use this grant. It's a game changer.

Thanks to all the WorkSource Staff for being so helpful!

**Anna Edwards, Registered Nurse**



Georgia Mountains  
**WORK SOURCE GEORGIA**  
Cognitived Talent & an Opportunity  
Approved partner of the American Job Center network

# BUSINESS SERVICES



APPRENTICESHIPS

ON-THE-JOB TRAINING

INCUMBENT  
WORKER TRAINING

This year, four area businesses received reimbursements for their employees through the On-the-Job (OJT) Training Program. These four businesses received a combined amount of \$38,132 to offset new employee wages. OJT provides employer wage reimbursements, which help compensate for the costs associated with training a new employee. The program may also be a good fit for the job seeker who cannot attend school full-time but is looking for a way to 'earn while they learn.'



*Gainesville based, Truck It Up, took advantage of On-the-Job Training.*



*10 companies and 200 participants attended the Hispanic Alliance Job Fair*



## ROUTE 180

The ROUTE (Road to Opportunity Utilizing Training and Enrichment) 180 Center, designed as a training and enrichment center geared toward youth and young adults ages 16-24, provided a place of their own for current and future youth participants to engage in WSGM Youth Services. This year, the Youth Center held GED classes, workshops, and occupational skills training for youth around the Region.

## Project Search

WSGM, in partnership with the Hall County School system, Vocational Rehabilitation Services, and Northeast Georgia Medical Center, offers the Project Search program to students with disabilities. The program provides real life work experience and helps youth with disabilities transition from school to adult life. Students who graduated from Project Search were prepared for their careers through the Project Search blend of classroom and hands on training.

## Occupational Skills Training

Eligible applicants pursuing college or technical school may receive assistance with the cost of books, tuition, and supplies needed to complete their educational programs. Enrolled participants are also provided with case management services to assist in navigating their career pathway and the transition from training to employment. As a result, 25 participants took part in or earned skills credentials this year.

## Youth Department Workshops

Youth workshops are designed for 8th-12th grade students and the young adult population. Mapping Your Future Workshops increase awareness in students about the importance of planning for the future and setting goals for career paths. Workshop curriculum can be customized and may include College Knowledge, Making High School Count, Dress For Success, Time Management, WorkSource Overviews, and Money Management. Youth staff hosted over 80 virtual workshops for K-12 schools in the Georgia Mountains Region this program year.

## GED/Career Pathways

Eligible applicants ages 16-24 who have dropped out of school or eligible high school graduates may be offered assistance, including obtaining a GED through funding for test fees, work skill or employment training, and internships.



*More than 115 GED students participated in the GED /Career Pathways Program and 35 graduated with their GED.*

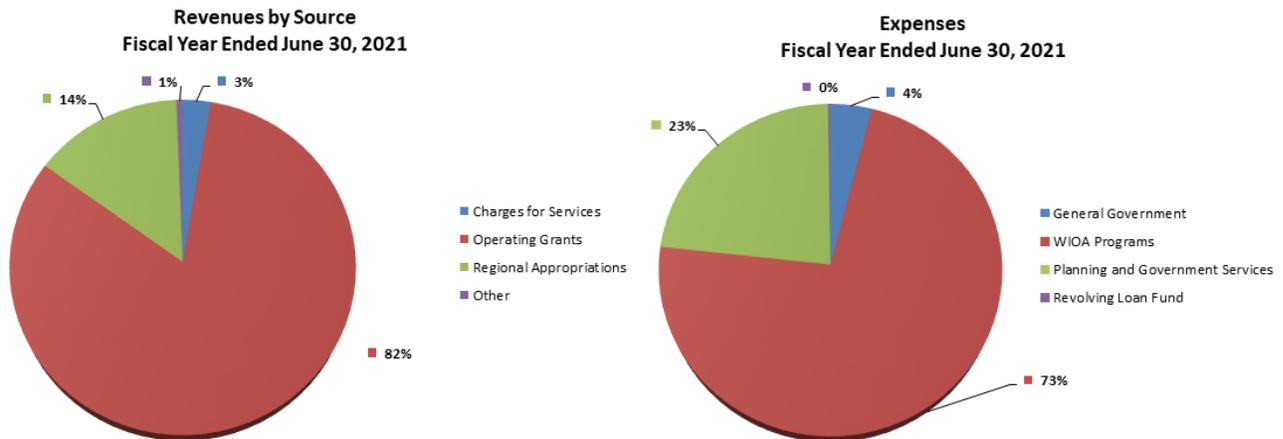
## Credit Recovery Program

A total of 15 participants completed Credit Recovery this year. This program assists youth participants who have dropped out of high school or withdrawn from a credit recovery program to retrieve credits for diploma completion. Eligible Youth receive incentives for each credit recovered, while assistance with transportation costs and daycare may also be provided.

## SHIFT

Eligible Applicants ages 16-24, who are currently incarcerated in the Regional Youth Detention Center, on probation, or under court supervision, are offered specific WSGM services to assist them in completing and furthering their educational and employment goals. 11 SHIFT participants earned their GED during the program year with four earning additional occupational skills certifications.

# Finance & Administration



The Finance Department oversees all financial aspects of GMRC. The Finance Director has a close working relationship with the Executive Director, Department Heads, Audit and Finance Committee, federal and state agencies, and local member governments.

GMRC's fiscal year begins July 1 each year and goes through June 30. An annual Financial Budget and Work Scope are prepared by the Executive Director and Finance Director, who works closely with the GMRC Finance Committee and Department Heads, for presentation to the GMRC Council for their review at the regular monthly Council meeting. After the Council has reviewed the document, the Financial Budget and Work Scope is voted on and adopted for implementation July 1.

The GMRC is funded by federal, state, and local governments. For FY2021, the GMRC received \$4,502,591 in grant funding from federal and state agencies. The leveraging effect for local governments is for every \$1.10 paid in member dues, GMRC received \$5.69 in grant funding for program services in the region.

The Administrative Services Department serves as the backbone of the GMRC, providing professionalism through administrative, public relations, and maintenance operations. The Department provides a wide array of internal support services that ensure the proficient daily operations of the GMRC. The Administrative Services staff also provides public relations activities to our member cities and counties that include our monthly newsletter, news releases, meeting announcements, flyers and brochures, City/County Directory, organizing and scheduling meetings and reserving the Regional Commission training and meeting rooms.

# NADO IMPACT AWARDS



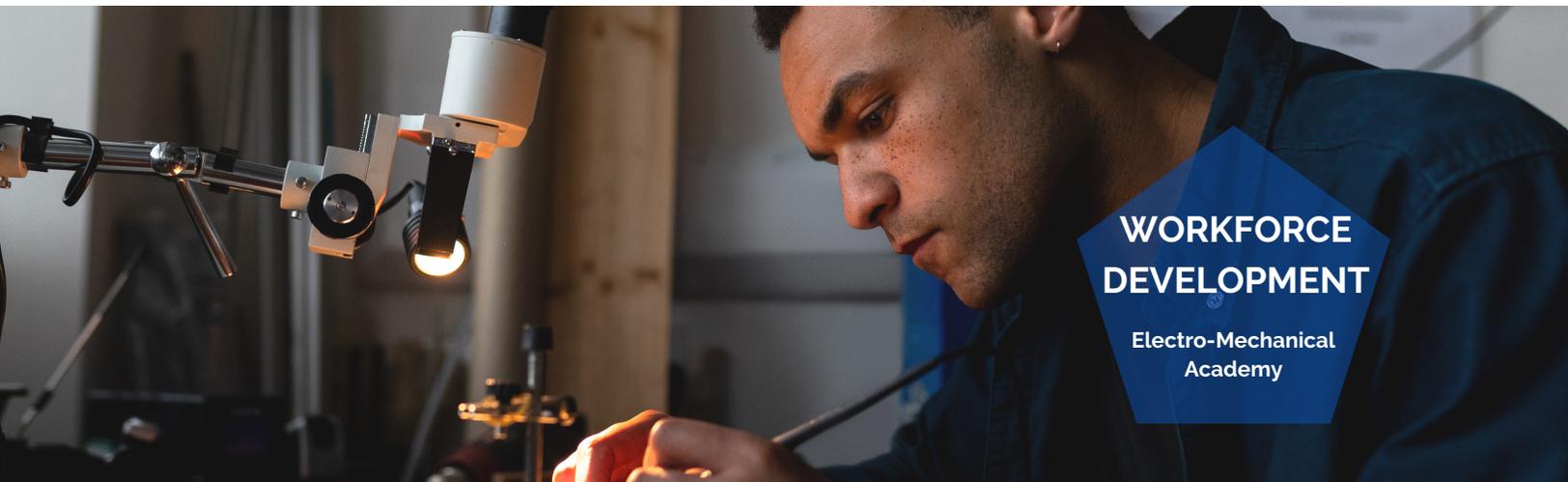
## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Fox Factory  
Holding Corporation



## PLANNING

Towns County Economic  
Development Strategy



## WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Electro-Mechanical  
Academy



Each year, the National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) recognizes member organizations that demonstrate valuable and effective approaches to regional economic and community development. These Awards have recognized nearly 2,000 NADO member projects since 1986 for their creative efforts in advancing regional economic development and improved quality of life.

# Annual Award Recipients



*Appointed Official of the Year*  
**Vicki Boling**



*Councilmember of the Year*  
**Deborah Mack**



*Chairman's Award*  
**Kevin Tallant**



*Employee of the Year*  
**Nona Turk**



*Elected Official of the Year*  
**Andrea Gibby**

## Congratulations!

# A Culture Of Service



## Mission

To serve the local governments of the Georgia Mountains Region by improving the quality of life through economic development, community planning, information technology, and workforce development to support and enhance the region's prosperity.

## Vision

The GMRC envisions the Georgia Mountains Region as an area that values its diverse communities and resources, fosters economic vitality and innovation, and provides opportunities to meet local and regional needs. This is accomplished through maximum cooperation between the GMRC staff, council, member governments, and other stakeholders.

## Values

Collaboration  
Service  
Trust  
Innovative  
Sustainability  
Rewarding

**Georgia Mountains Regional Commission**  
**P.O. Box 1720**  
**Gainesville, GA 30503**



**(770) 538-2626    [www.gmrc.ga.gov](http://www.gmrc.ga.gov)**

