Jasper County, SC

Erasing Stigmas Through Community-Directed Change

Governance Studies at BROOKINGS

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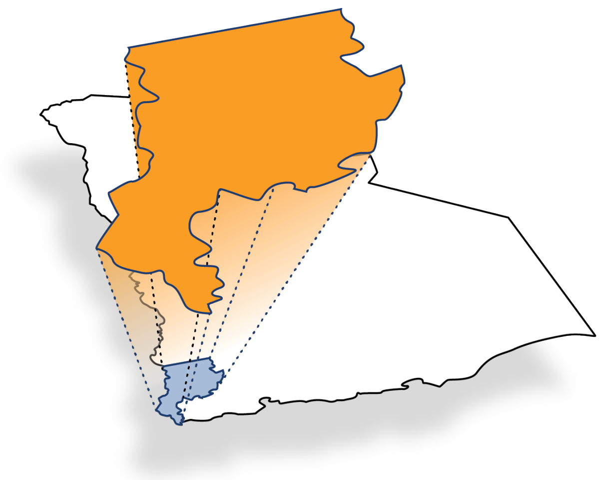
SOUTH CAROLINA

JASPER COUNTY



29,558[1]

Total population of Jasper County, South Carolina

25.1%

Population change 2010-2020

$42,924[2]

Median household income

18.4%[3]

Poverty rate

2,264[4]

Nonemployer businesses

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
TELLING AN ASSET-BASED STORY OF DEVELOPMENT

Jasper County is one of those rural communities that policymakers often view through a deficit lens.

With a population of roughly 30,000, Jasper County is nestled deep among the sleepy Spanish moss of South Carolina's Low Country region. The county has long been mired in inexorable economic deprivation and persistently high poverty levels that seemed impervious to change—almost forgotten or perhaps forsaken. But a closer look at Jasper reveals a story of resilience and transformation rooted in both structural forces and bold leadership choices. This closer look reveals a community brimming with assets—physical assets, such as a port and an airport, and social assets including a successful jobs training center—which can drive economic growth.

Our goal is economic development. Jasper County is a very poor county, but we want to change that profile. We want to make Jasper County a place where people want to come and live. As a council, we have been doing just that. We have been bringing developers in and working with them through incentives, to attract companies. We've done a good job and the bulk of the fruits are going to come in the next two or three years. Jasper is going to bloom.

Barbara Clark
Chair
Jasper County Council

In this case study, we outline how in recent years, Jasper County has emerged as a model of rural development. Jasper's leaders and involved citizens have dared to tell a better story about their community, and policymakers should follow that lead in seeking to tell a better story too. In that spirit, to gain a fuller understanding of Jasper's path toward development, we conducted research using a mixed-methods approach that combined analysis of administrative data and detailed interviews with key stakeholders in Jasper including elected officials, workers, and students. Together, this approach illuminated the political cooperation, forward vision, and key investment that have enabled Jasper to leverage its assets toward meaningful, broad-based economic development.

This case study has three parts. Section 1 introduces the challenges that Jasper County has had to face, including persistent poverty and narratives of shame that might have trapped the county in cycles of deprivation. In the second section, we explore the various steps that Jasper County is taking to overcome its struggles to become a vibrant regional economy. This section also features insight on how Jasper County is seeking to provide middle-skill jobs that can elevate the quality of life for all of the county's residents. Finally, our third section explores what steps will be needed to build on this economic development, including a few potential pitfalls that Jasper County will need to navigate around to fully achieve its goals.

We believe that there was nothing inevitable about Jasper's ability to rise to the moment. Instead, the positive change beginning to emerge is the product of strategic leadership and regional planning that capitalized on new opportunities. Consequently, we believe that core aspects of Jasper County's strategy can be replicated by other similar communities that can tailor the approach to fit their particular strengths to meet the unique opportunities that might emerge for them. Ultimately, in addition to providing a model for leaders, we hope this report will challenge policymakers and news media to tell a more complex story about rural communities that emphasize their potential for growth.

Global e-commerce has created economic development opportunities for rural communities strategically located near trade hubs. Jasper County's investment in industrial parks and warehouse construction has attracted new companies and jobs.

We’ve come a long way in terms of education, preparing our students for jobs that we anticipate coming to the county. It’s extremely important that we have companies join hands with us in making certain that we provide the kinds of opportunities that students will need to meet their workforce needs.

Dr. Curtis Brantley
Vice-chair
County Council

Workforce development is an essential pillar of Jasper County's economic revival. County executives earnestly recruit companies capable of creating high-quality jobs, and are deeply committed to ensuring that Jasper residents have fair access to higher wages.

LEAVING IGNOMINY BEHIND

In 2005, Jasper County gained national recognition in Bud Ferillo's documentary *Corridor of Shame*.

The documentary was intended to awaken the nation's conscience to the shockingly deplorable conditions in which thousands of rural Low Country students were educated.[5] The region's rural school district, stretching across 17 counties, saw elementary school teachers complaining of raw sewage leaking into hallways and early learning classroom floors: a poverty purgatory.[6] Sen. Lindsey Graham reasoned then that the corridor's contemptible school districts were a consequence of non-existent industries and a thin property tax base that was too weak to generate adequate revenues to fund school operations.[7]

Decentralized public school funding is an outgrowth of neighborhood affluence. The politics of ability-to-pay for public schools fundamentally shape the zip code destinies of millions of poor students and reinforce unequal access to mobility. South Carolina is not unique in this regard. Though instead of working to secure the future of its youth, the state has redoubled its inequities. In 2006, just a year after the documentary aired, the state legislature passed Act 388— effectively relieving private homeowners of their duty to fund public education. The short-sighted decision to decouple residential property from school funding, in conjunction with the ill-timed subprime crisis which depressed housing values, adversely affected school districts statewide. According to a 2020

Lincoln Land Institute study on the effect of Act 388 on school budgets, the recession caused property values to slowly appreciate. But spatially insensitive legislation played a pivotal role in flattening school district revenues and student expenditure growth.[8]

Sen. Graham was partly right; the economic odds were stacked against places like Jasper County which had weak industrial bases. Between 1995 and 2005, Jasper County lost 10.1% of its small commercial base annually. In total, 471 business establishments closed within 10 years, but about 700 opened in the county over the same period. The replacement rate was roughly 14.9% of the area's business base. Despite these difficult circumstances, the county's birth rate was 1.5 times higher than its death rate. But the Great Recession changed everything—companies across the country tightened budgets and froze significant capital investments. The financial crisis squeezed the county's net business creation margin to 0.7% as considerably fewer companies were interested in Jasper.

During the recession, manufacturing and construction firms (already small sectors) exited the county, taking output and jobs while leaving behind a service-dependent economy. Minimal growth in the retail trade, accomodation and food, and administrative service sectors fromed a skeletal backbone of low-paying jobs for Jasper County's residents. This industrial mix had severe implications for the county's ability to raise revenue to improve its public institutions, including schools. The impact on Jasper County's capacity to invest in building a thriving, entrepreneurial workforce—a key determinant of economic progress—was equally profoundly negative. Background details on the industrial mix and trends matter because these facts condition the commercial base's capacity to develop new properties that add to static inventories. Local governments need assessable properties with solid values to grow a sufficient tax base that supports investment in schools, essential public administrative services, or critical economic development activities.

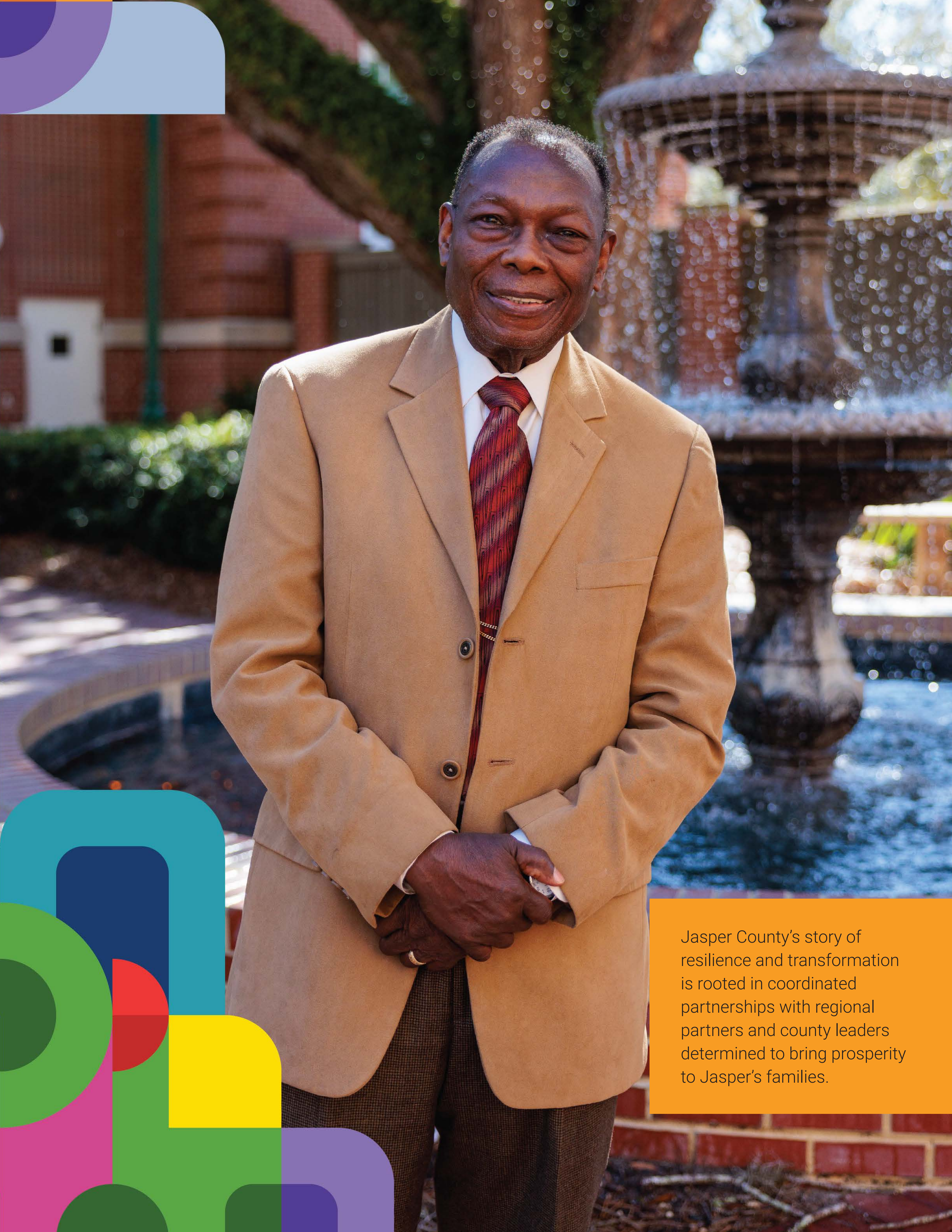
Narratives should evolve with the progress places like Jasper County experience over time. However, 17 years after the seminal documentary raised critical awareness of the failures in South Carolina's poor lining the I-95 corridor, narrative associations linked to the "Corridor of Shame" continue to stigmatize Jasper County communities economically. Place-

Our industrial parks are like that proverbial snowball going downhill. The Port of Savannah is the fastest-growing port in the country over the last 10 years. They have needs for logistical warehousing. Warehousing that allows ships to quickly get the containers off the dock and into a distribution center so they can unload the ships behind them. Right now, Hardeeville has the closest available land to the Port of Savannah, that's why we're attracting companies. By our location alone, we are attracting that kind of industry."

Harry Williams
Mayor
City of Hardeeville

shaming is effective at shocking policymakers into action. However, shame imposes symbolic violence on communities that solidifies perceptions and shapes the choices of families and companies about these communities as places to live, work, and thrive.[9] Much has changed in Jasper County in the way of progress for its families, businesses, and workforce. This case study fills the gap between a problematic past, sited in an I-95 corridor passed over by the economic benefits of highway and interchange development, and the current version of Jasper County where conscientious community leaders are earnestly working to transform the area into a growing rural minority economy brimming with optimism about its future.[10]

New companies expanding their footprint within the boundaries of Jasper County are a crucial migration inflow with enormous implications for the future of the county. New manufacturing and distribution companies mean jobs and opportunities to grow the county's tax base.



Jasper County's story of resilience and transformation is rooted in coordinated partnerships with regional partners and county leaders determined to bring prosperity to Jasper's families.

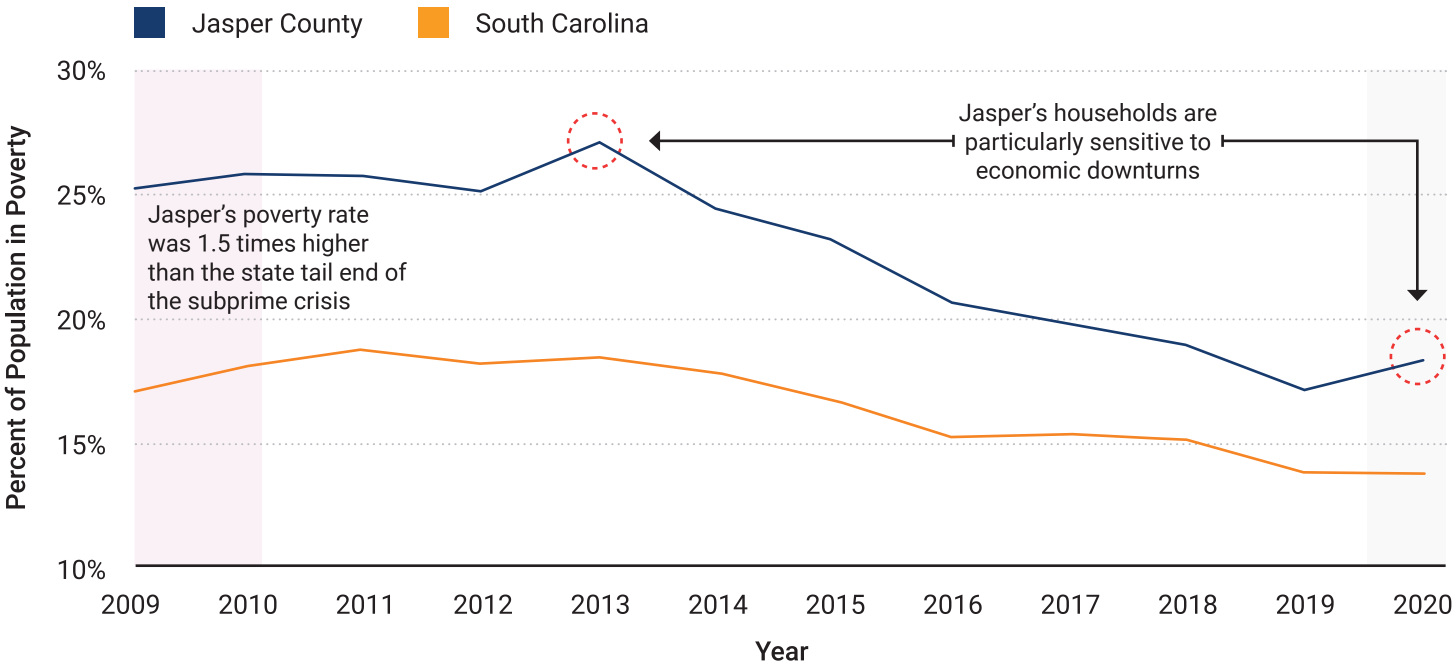
I'm hopeful because of the industries that have already made positive moves to come here...Many would be amazed at companies that have an interest in Jasper County. It's going to really blow Jasper County off the map! We have come a long way, to say the least. We have a long way to go. But we have come a long way in terms of job opportunities here in the county.

Dr. Curtis Brantley
Vice-chair
Jasper County Council

FIGURE 1

Jasper County cut household poverty by 32% in the decade before COVID-19

The county's poverty rate dropped nearly two times faster than the state level, though the poverty rate for children ages 5 to 17 remains stubbornly elevated at 31.3%



Source: Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAPIE) Poverty Rate of Children in Families Ages 5 to 17 years, 2010-2020.

some families benefit from the shift more than others? How many long-term resident families remain chronically poor? Understanding the distributional effects of the county's poverty shifts is vital, primarily because much of county's population growth comes from migration flows. Two distinct groups are largely responsible for this rapid population expansion: relocating retirees moving away from distant metros and workers from peripheral counties. Migrating retirees, who tend to settle in the county's affluent Sun City and Margaritaville neighborhoods, make up a large portion of the county's new arrivals. Contrastingly, less affluent groups moving to Jasper County are primarily workers spilling over from coterminous counties, such as Beaufort and Hampton, where access to affordable housing is extremely limited or where fewer job opportunities exist.

Access to affordable housing is a key factor for people moving from Beaufort County. Historically, by virtue of systematic socioeconomic differences, rents in Beaufort County are typically higher than multifamily rents in Jasper County. According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) 2013 rent estimate, for example, the median rent for a two-bedroom apartment was $894, but a similar unit cost 8.8% more in neighboring Beaufort. By 2022, the rent differential surged by a factor of 4—rents in

Beaufort for a baseline two-bedroom unit were 20.7% higher than in Jasper.[12] Access to affordable housing has affected every community in the United States, including rural communities. Considerable differences in the rental gradient between places emerge as a push factor for low-income families forced to move and search for affordable housing markets near existing jobs or to move further away for accessible housing and attendant work.

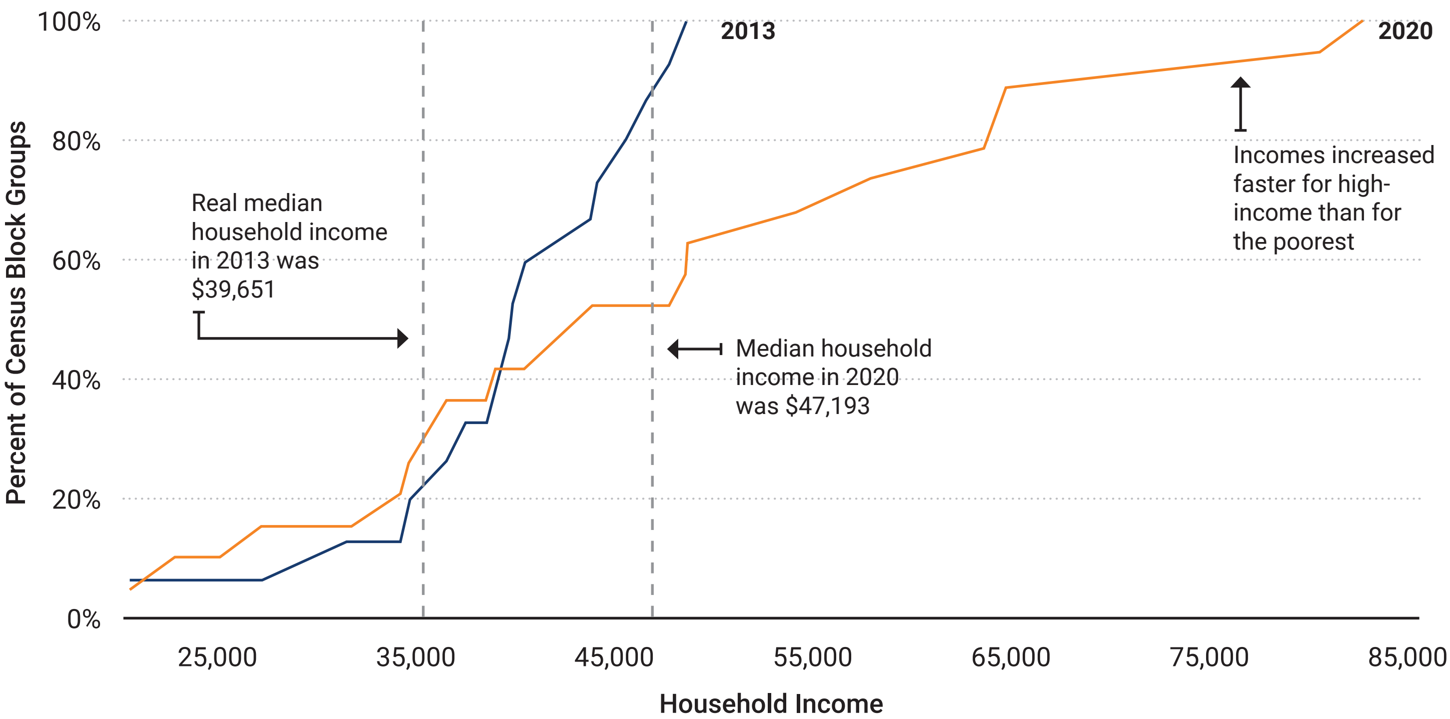
Jasper County rents increased .08% between 2020 and 2022, whereas corresponding rents in Beaufort County rose by 12.6% during the same period. A Jasper County family earning in the bottom income tertile in 2020 had an inflation-adjusted average income of $33,011. According to HUD's rent estimates, such incomes would result in a housing cost burden of 36.5%. However, a Beaufort County family with similar earnings would be yoked by housing costs, as rent would consume nearly 50% of their gross annual income. A cost burden of 36.5% is indicative of pressing affordable housing issues in Jasper County for working families. Still, the county offers considerable relief to low-income families compared with those living in other high-cost places. Varied economic circumstances motivate Hampton County residents to move to Jasper County. Between 2010 and 2019, Hampton movers accounted for more of Jasper's regional population inflows than Beaufort; net flows from these counties were 17% and 9%, respectively. Hampton County has experienced multifaceted deterioration since the subprime crisis. Its population declined by 9.2% in the last decade, while its commercial establishment base and labor force contracted substantially, falling by 16.6% and 10.3%, respectively.[13] Hampton County rents are significantly lower than Jasper County's; our baseline two-bedroom unit costs 29.1% less in Hampton. However, the drag of the county's enervated economy outweighs the benefits of lower-cost housing. Families are hence willing to move to higher-cost markets like Jasper to seek uplifting opportunities.

Jasper County's flatter rent gradients and historic pandemic-induced food and gas inflation exert tremendous gravitational force on Beaufort County's lower-income families—at least those with resources to relocate— pulling them into the county and driving population counts. The promise of better employment prospects draws households from Hampton County. Retirees with fixed incomes are lured towards markets with lower living costs, warmer weather, and recreational amenities like Jasper's world-class Congaree Golf Club, which attracts premier golfing events such as the recent Canadian Open hosted in June 2021.

FIGURE 2

Jasper County real household incomes improved between 2013 and 2020, though gains were not equitably distributed

Cumulative distribution of median household income inflation-adjusted; 2013 incomes are adjusted to 2020 dollars.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 5-year Estimates, 2009-2013 and 2016-2020. Household income is measured at the block group level. Incomes are inflation adjusted to 2020 dollars.

Jasper County fully embraces its new residents, especially at a moment when rural counties are confronting population loss and the concomitant shredding of political representation, reduced federal subsidies, and shrinking industrial base. However, growth has costs for the lucky rural communities eager to encourage movers to expand their population base. The inflows of these distinctive groups drastically alter the socioeconomic characteristics of Jasper County's communities with implications for income inequality and mobility for indigenous residents. Figure 2 depicts how the mix of newcomers altered the socioeconomic complexion of Jasper's communities considerably: Neighborhood real median household income, inflation-adjusted to 2020 dollars, increased 19% from $39,651 to $47,193 in 2020.

Figure 2 shows a dramatic shift in the distribution of median household income at the neighborhood level, which is defined here as block groups, between 2013 (the earliest year for which block group data is available) and 2020. It should be noted that census geographical boundaries evolve to accommodate changes in population densities. This variation is what our analysis exploits to assess the changing nature of Jasper's local communities on a fine-grained scale. In 2013, the U.S. real median household income was $59,640; comparatively, Jasper's 2013 neighborhood-level income was $48,776. On balance, Jasper's neighborhoods were heavily concentrated at the low end of the income continuum. An evaluation of income dispersion at the census tract level revealed a neighborhood income Gini coefficient of 0.10, suggesting that communities were somewhat income-segregated but that income inequality was generally low. This interpretation accords with Jasper's profile as a county where low-income communities predominate.

Partially decomposing the Gini coefficient into between- and within-group partitions indicates that differences between incomes in census tracts accounted for 40% of income segregation, and within-group inequality amounted to 25% of the coefficient. This forensic decomposition suggests that neighborhoods were fairly mixed, considering that census tracts cover vast geographic expanses. Still, low-income and higher-income households were clustered in the same neighborhoods. However, by 2020, the Gini coefficient effectively doubled to 0.21 while between-group inequality increased by 5.1% and within-group inequality was roughly 46.8% lower. At 41.4%, between-group inequality dominated the within-group component of the Gini index, estimated at 12.5%. As noted, the 2020 income distribution had a broader range relative to 2013. Computationally overlapping incomes in neighborhoods prevent complete decomposition of the Gini index. In other words, because Jasper County's census tracts are geographically vast, households from different socioeconomic backgrounds comingle and are note as intensely segregated as tracts in urban areas. However, the marked shift in tract-level income inequality offers evidence of the impact of in-migration on community characteristics and its role in pushing a new ecological dilemma undergirded by inequality to the forefront.

First, a mix of working and non-working migrants from Beaufort and Hampton Counties and indigenous residents with access to the recent wave of jobs coming online has stretched the income distribution substantially. However, it has also birthed places where these low- to moderate-income households can settle; that within-group inequality in the county nearly halved implies that people are increasingly sorting into neighborhoods according to their income purchasing power. Second, retirees, the third group of inflow migrants, up-weight Jasper's aggregate median household income, but their settlement patterns are concentrated in affluent places such as Sun City and Margaritaville. In summary, the micro-scale of income inequality forces Jasper County to contend more directly with the politics and consequences of inequality than in the past.

The south end of Jasper County is located at the mouth of the Atlantic Ocean, which means that we have means [for] the Jasper terminal [to come here and] afford masses of jobs. It would change the complexity not only of the surrounding area, but … of our state. That's the kind of impact it would have. As a matter of fact, it would be the largest shipping port on the East Coast.

Dr. Curtis Brantley
Vice-chair
County Council

Census 2020 Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates exposed that 31.3% of children aged 5 to 17 live in poverty, suggesting that Jasper County's chronically poor and low-income newcomers labor under toxic poverty levels. Creating escape velocity for children born in poor neighborhoods is paramount to their future life prospects. Thanks to Raj Chetty and Nathaniel Hendren's groundbreaking work on mobility, we know that when families move to higher-income neighborhoods, their children's future incomes converge to the incomes of incumbent residents at a rate of 4% per year.[14] Path dependence shapes future trajectories. The current level of child poverty is a clear sign that Jasper County needs to invest considerable resources into its anti-poverty programs and tailor income subsidies to the needs of chronically poor and low-income families, particularly those nurturing school-aged children.

Our industrial parks are almost like that proverbial snowball going downhill. The Port of Savannah is one of the fastest growing ports in the country over the last 10 years. They need logistical warehousing, where they can quickly get containers off the dock and into a distribution center. Hardeeville has the closest available land to the Savannah port, and that's attracting companies. By our location alone, we are attracting that kind of industry.

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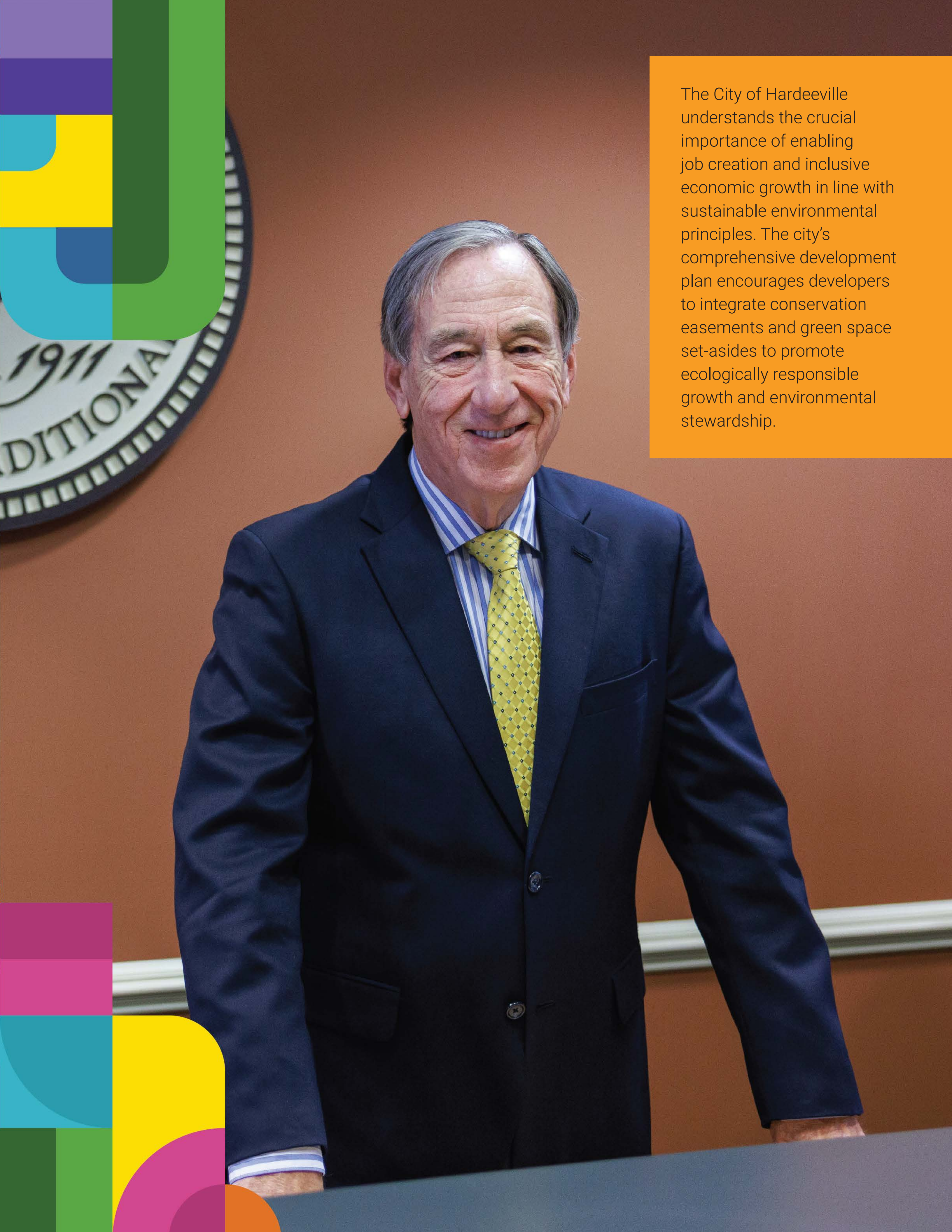

The City of Hardeeville understands the crucial importance of enabling job creation and inclusive economic growth in line with sustainable environmental principles. The city's comprehensive development plan encourages developers to integrate conservation easements and green space set-asides to promote ecologically responsible growth and environmental stewardship.

RE-APPRAISING LOCAL ASSETS

For too long, Jasper County has been defined by a static narrative of deep poverty and rural deficits.

Poverty status is malleable to the winds of change. However, the repeated choice by academics to focus only on dated static equilibria or selected dimensions of progress, such as nonfarm payroll growth or unemployment rates, ignores the shifting sands that have evinced positive changes. If the full scope of Jasper County's localtional assets, the extent of ownership and control over local assets, and the capacity of local leadership were included in appraisals or rural communities, the public's perceptions of places like Jasper would change appreciably.

Tracing the etiological roots in Jasper County's inchoate transformation is beyond the scope of this case study. However, 2007 served as a crucial inflection point in the county's development arc. In 2007, Georgia Governor Sonny Perdue and South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford signed an agreement to construct a new marine cargo terminal. The terminal would increase the region's capacity to support commercial cargo vessel traffic in the Savannah River channel.[15] The momentous decision to site the eponymous Jasper Ocean Terminal (JOT) in Jasper County was an acknowledgment of the importance of the ports of Charleston and Savannah as critical geo-economical trade assets that serve as gateways to Asian and European trade markets.

Jasper's positionality on the Savannah River channel offers port authorities access to a blue infrastructure that can support increased cargo traffic between strategic Asian markets such as China and South Korea.[16] JOT would be the first strategic southeastern port to be constructed in the 21st century. The terminal's enhanced capacity would accommodate larger vessels, service higher trade capacity for agricultural exports and retail goods imports, and improve the efficiency of containerized e-commerce through advanced technology logistics. Moreover, spillover benefits from the completed Panama Canal extension augur advantages for the Jasper County terminal as it has for other eastern ports in the United States. However, the upgraded Panama Canal has increased vessel size and cargo capacity, creating infrastructure pressure in the United States to retrofit eastern ports to accommodate these substantially larger neo-Panamax vessels.[17] Improved cost efficiency has significant trade implications for the Port of Savannah and, in turn, for the planned JOT. In 2011, a joint study by the American Association of Port Authorities and the University of Georgia predicted that JOT would create 1 million jobs and anadditional $9 billion in tax revenue for the two states.

For Jasper County, the decision reflected a shift in the appraisal of the county as a valuable locational asset, with trade-facilitating amenities not available in Savannah, Georgia, or upriver in the Port of Charleston.

According to *Global Trade* magazine, competitive ports should possess certain characteristics: (1) located in a region with access to natural resources, (2) access to transportation, (3) enough space to accommodate future growth, and (4) access to deep investment pools to build the necessary infrastructure to ship and store in-transit goods inventory. *Global Trade*'s port of typology, short of infrastructure funding, is an apt description of the business case for the Jasper terminal. Unfortunately, JOT's development has faltered many times since the joint agreement was inked in 2017. The project remains frozen at the planning stage, enmeshed in bi-state negotiations.

The potential for the new port was the genesis for a critical re-appraisal of Jasper County's locational assets, which include proximity to the Port of Savannah, I-95 running through the middle of the county, railroads, and an airport. In other words, without JOT, Jasper County controls an underdeveloped intermodal distribution system that, with sufficient and well-timed investments, could capitalize on economic spillover benefits from the fast-growing Savannah port. Global e-commerce trade patterns and shifts in consumer preferences have altered worldwide supply and value chains. An essential residual of this process has been increased demand for logistical infrastructure and warehousing real estate. Globally linked e-commerce supply chains have created new modes of economic development. For communities like Jasper County, these developments translate into comparative locational advantages that allow goods to move through ports with reduced friction and speedier delivery to consumers. According to Harry Williams, mayor of the City of Hardeeville, acting on this re-appraisal is fundamental to changes underway in Jasper County—including the development of industrial parks with warehouse buildouts and new companies that have internalized Jasper's location as a balance sheet asset.

New companies expanding their footprints within the boundaries of Jasper County constitute a 4th migration inflow with tremendous import for the county's future. When Farrar Scientific announced the opening of a new manufacturing facility in Jasper County, the company noted that the location supports better integration with the company's end-customer supply chain by connecting its Ohio operations to its European customer base because of access to interstate highways and two major global gateway trade ports.[18] New company transplants mean job opportunities for Jasper County residents and a substantial increase in the county's tax base. However, managing the quality of companies attracted to Jasper County and the county council's tactical use of Fees in Lieu of Taxes (FLOT) to incentivize companies to establish operations there will determine how much of this projected growth potential the county eventually harnesses. As County Council Chair Barbara Clark noted, the goal is economic development, "Jasper County is a poor county, but we want to change that facelift. We have been doing that as a council. We have been bringing different developers in to look. We try and work with them to give them incentives so that they [will] come. It's been a hard task. But I feel like we've done a good job. And the bulk of the fruits are going to come in the next two or three years."

Conversations about Jasper County's blue infrastructure have dominated the discourse on growth. However, the county's transformation investments in its local airport represent an underappreciated locational asset that completes the 360-degree view of the county's geo-economic comparative advantage. Importantly, the council sees the airport as an integral part of the county's economic development toolbox. The airport facilitates a seamless end-to-end connection between business principals interested in exploring possibilities in Jasper County and the port logistics already capitalizing on the county's seaborn trade assets. Chairwoman Clark was instrumental in acquiring $20 million in seed capital to change the character of the airport, which included modifying the site's physical orientation so that the wheels of incoming planes no longer risked grazing the roof of the school across the street from the airport.

Upgrading the airport as a connection hub to high-value markets like Boston, St. Louis, New York, Houston, and other cities boosts Jasper County's appeal to business speculators. This advantage makes the area a serious contender in the Low Country corridor for high-quality business recruits and for individuals interested in the county's recreational amenities. An airport with strategic connections to regional travel hubs is an especially salient consideration for retirees interested in moving to warmer climates serviced by airport routes that keep them connected to extended family. Airport authorities need an additional $6 million to complete the transformation of the airport site into an air bridge to high-value markets to accelerate economic growth-enhancing activities.

Jasper County has worked with the Southern Carolina Alliance (SCA) to develop an economic development strategy that leverages the county's natural assets. A pillar of this strategy is the county-financed speculative development of logistics and manufacturing warehouses that offer prospective companies a ready-made platform for relocation. Strategic speculative buildouts have proven to be successful in increasing lease occupancy in the county's industrial parks. Jasper County has completed four buildout projects to date with aspirations to develop more in the near future. Three of the speculative builds have already sold. According to Brantley Strickland, an SCA senior project manager, these projects have been successful: "It's proven concept and economic development to have ready products for companies that may be considering the area. We try to make the development process as easy as possible. We try to remove obstacles for companies that may be considering the area, and we try to create a business-friendly environment by removing risks for the potential customers. Companies want to get from spending money to making money as quickly as possible. And that's what we aim to do with facilities like this."

Jasper's County Council, in partnership with SCA, has compelled firms like Home Depot, Builders First Source, Coca-Cola, and Dominion Natural Gas and Power Plant to put down roots in Jasper. SCA announced in 2019 that North Signal and EJF Capital agreed to develop 4.6 million square feet of Class A distribution space at the Riverport Commerce Park. In 2021, the firm announced multiyear leases covering roughly 483,000 square feet. The deal includes Home Depot, apparel and luxury furnishings retailers, and logistic value chain distributors among others. Yet amid these exciting announcements is a disconnect between the scale of job creation and thephysical footprint: These lease commitments will create a total of only 60 jobs for the county.[19]

Distributor expansions like Home Depot's move exemplifies Jasper County's potential to absorb Savannah Port spillovers and build a distribution network that will be a pillar for the future Jasper terminal. The hardware chain opened a distribution center—not a retail store—that will extend its supply chain, which fits into the company's national distribution strategy. According to the company's corporate statement, the Jasper distribution center "is part of ourstrategic investment in our supply chain network to offer same day/next day delivery to 90% of the United States."[20] The company signaled interest in hiring warehouse workers and drivers to support its logistics needs. The planned facility will occupy 50,000 square feet but produce a mere 14 jobs. The luxury home furnishing company will lease 164,500 square feet and create 40 jobs.[21]

De novo distribution centers typify the "Amazonization" of port economics: enormous facilities running on sophisticated automated systems, supported by advanced robotics and a small workforce. These dynamics are largely beyond the control of the Jasper County Council. Automation casts serious doubt on the job creation capacity cited in the 2011 JOT study. New studies are needed that account for the role of automation to help elucidate the true extent of job creation. More importantly, the distribution economic development model reprises a worrying national job polarization that preeminent economist David Autor and others have documented extensively: Companies have increased their demand for high- and low-skilled workers while the demand for middle-skilled workers has cratered.[22] According to ZipRecruiter's salary database, the going salary for a full-time warehouse driver in Jasper County, SC, is $31,394 or just about $15 per hour—the new de facto minimum wage benchmark.

It's very important that we get our children and people in Jasper County trained. Local employment is a critical part of the negotiation, companies must employ a certain number of employees from Jasper County. Jobs for Jasper residents are part of our Fee in Lieu of Taxes negotiations, our council is serious about this. You've got to employ Jasper residents! We demand that companies train our people and invest in our technical colleges.

Barbara Clark
Chair
Jasper County Council

If Home Depot hired only Jasper County residents, all employees would be low-income workers trapped in tenuous circumstances, such as struggling to afford the county's rising rents. If the council exchanged Fees in Lieu of Taxes (FLOT) for a stream of low-income jobs with minimal mobility prospects, then the county and its low-income residents would lose. It is imperative that the council attend to the quality of jobs that migrating companies are bringing to the county. Perhaps the council should consider indexing FLOT incentives to job quality and quantity. For instance, companies importing high-quality logistics jobs should be eligible for the highest tier of incentives, whereas those bringing low-quality jobs could receive FLOT allocations proportionate to their job creation quality.

Scaling FLOT incentives to be commensurate with job quality should incentivize companies eager to access Jasper County's locational assets to be creative in their talent acquisition strategies. For example, Home Depot could upgrade its FLOT allocation by subsidizing workforce training for Jasper residents hired into entry-level roles and by committing to scaling these workers' progression within the company over a defined period. In four years, a warehouse driver could have the chance to become an assistant warehouse manager—earning 36% more than a driver. This worker will have also acquired competitive technical skills. Alternatively, Home Depot could recapture FLOT allocation by establishing an apprenticeship program to pipeline high school students into the company's warehouse workforce. Such an effort would effectively mean that Home Depot would be supplementing the workforce development pursuits of the county's workforce institutions. In this case, the company should naturally be rewarded for civic-minded investments that yield tangible opportunities for Jasper's youth.

It is essential that the Jasper County Council work with the South Carolina Alliance to improve the recruiting mix. Companies with the capacity to create jobs with high earning potential are crucial to the mobility of Jasper's low-income residents. The SCA has already set precedents in this regard. For instance, Builders First Source is a structural building product manufacturerthat announced a $16 million facility which will create 126 county-based jobs. According to the Quarterly Census on Employment Wages, the average annual pay for manufacturing and construction workers between 2017 and 2020 was $42,991 and $51,160, respectively. The council needs to recruit firms willing to bring jobs with similar earning potential to the county. Innovative tier-based incentives could again play a role in incentivizing Builder First Source to work with the county to train low-skilled workers through apprenticeship programs that position these employees as credible competitors for the 126 jobs. Moreover, Builder First Source could be awarded preferential bid status on the council's capital build projects in exchange for workforce training investments. In essence, the council needs to explore creative options to recruit and retain companies with high-impact job creation potential.

Barbara Clark, chair of the Jasper County Council, is a staunch advocate of inclusive growth in the county. Over the past 14 years, she has worked with county administrators and the Southern Carolina Alliance to spearhead Japsper's drive to attract businesses, build infrastructure, and develop affordable housing.

You can’t really do this kind of work if you don’t have vision coming from the County Council or the City Council. If you don’t have a vision coming from the city manager or the County Administrator for this sort of thing, it just does not happen.

Danny Lucas
Development Services Director, Division Director for Jasper County; airport manager

Antioch Educational Center's direct care program is focused on learner-centered outcomes. Nursing assistant trainees receive tuition assistance and access to robust clinical externships with community-based health partners. These critical elements underpin AEC's impressive completion rates and post-employment outcomes.

ADAPTIVE WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Jasper has considered the brick-and-mortar infrastructure needs of incumbent companies and new firm recruits.

Jasper County has made substantial progress on constructing Exit 3, a new I-95 interchange that will serve the nascent port commercial base. Talks are underway to widen I-95 and rehabilitate internal county roads that have been neglected for decades. Even the dilapidated schools that garnered nationwide scorn are undergoing a generational renovation. However, the county has done little to develop its human infrastructure—a crucial aspect of production that will severely limit Jasper's dreams of growth if left unattended. This pronouncement is not an indictment of the county's tremendous efforts to create growth-inducing fundamentals, nor does it intend to suggest that county leaders are not striving to develop the workforce base. Instead, this observation is motivated by the anemic job creation scale associated with port development activities and the associated quality of those jobs. It should signal to county executives that bolder action on workforce development is immediately warranted.

Jasper County must upgrade its middle-skill worker segment. Just 21.4% of the population aged 25 and older hold a bachelor's degree. Setting ambitious goals could help drive all agencies toward the singular objective of elevating the share of the labor force with associate degrees coupled with industry-recognized certifications. The private, philanthropic, and public ecosystems should embody a shared urgency around the workforce quality problem. The county needs workers with relatable expertise and technical skills. Developing these workforce characteristics should be a key ingredient in Jasper County's industrial recruiting strategy, particularly among distributors capable ofcreating middle-skill jobs that pay high wages.

Workforce development is infrastructure development, and it conditions the quality of firms and the jobs these companies are willing to make available to Jasper residents. A wanting workforce forces companies to import high-skill workers and leave low-wage job residuals to Jasper residents. Jasper County is rural but is not a remote frontier community. The county's access to international and regional airports, golf courses, and planned passive recreation makes the task of importing a competing workforce of non-local workers less onerous. As mentioned, higher-income migrants gravitate to income-segregated neighborhoods and exacerbate spatial sorting. Neglecting workforce infrastructure development is tantamount to the willful importation of inequality into Jasper's communities. Inequality has historically materialized along racialized lines.

Jasper County requires a three-pronged approach to build its human infrastructure. Parts of the long-term strategy, such as rebuilding the K-12 system, are already underway. The county hired Dr. Rechel Anderson as school superintendent in 2018 to lead Jasper School District's turnaround. Dr. Anderson came to the work of school progress with an unequivocal commitment to safeguarding the well-being of the county's teachers, families, and students. The core tenets of upgrading teacher quality, creating environments conducive to cultivating healthy minds, and impact-measured student achievement bulwark Dr. Anderson's turnaround agenda.

Under her leadership, several transformative capital projects have either been completed or are in progress: Ridgeland-Hardeeville High School Athletic Stadium Complex; the construction of two Early Leading Academies serving ages birth to 5 years; and the Career and Technology Education Center (CATE), dedicated to state-of-the-art applied instruction in STEM, health sciences, distribution, and e-commerce logistics disciplines. The latter is a 25-000 square foot facility and represents a critical investment in securing access to quality paying jobs in and around the growing ports serving the region. CATE also supports students' aspirations and their ability to thrive.[23] Student academic achievement has shown improvement as well: Three of the district's four schools earned ratings of average or good according to the statewide school scorecard system. These outcomes complement substantial increases in student-level funding as of 2018. Currently, the district receives $25,000 per student in combined school funding—56% higher than neighboring affluent counties such as Beaufort. Moreover, improved resources allowed the county to respond to the needs of its growing multicultural Hispanic community by hiring bilingual parent liaisons and seeding a nascent dual language immersion program.[24]

Graduation rates have also improved, rising from 71.8% in 2017/18 to 83.8% in 2020/21. But only 11.3% of students met state standardized proficiency levels in math. Performance in reading was modestly better at 17.2% but fewer than 2 in 10 students met basic academic requirements.[25] As Darryl Owens, project manager at Antioch Educational Center and former Jasper educator, remarked, "We're now affording these kids the opportunity to participate in things, but definitely we're not there yet. But we've made strides." People in spatially segregated communities that have been othered in the political economy, particularly those marked by race/ethnicity and poverty, exemplify the desolation that conditions their circumstances and lack of mobility. Attention to the residual effects of place-regulated disadvantages will be a core part of Jasper's renewal process.[26]

The K-12 transition cannot be realized overnight, but it must be pursued with urgency and purposefulness. According to Mayor Harry William's assessment, "Educational issues don't change overnight, but the new administrators are making progress. They're the best that Jasper County has had probably in generations."[27] In the meantime, Jasper must lean into a bold strategy capable of yielding workforce improvements in the medium term and in restocking the labor pool with qualified workers. SCA and Jasper County leaders should incorporate leaders from the Technical College of the Low Country as thought partners in their strategy design programs. The Technical College could reliably inform SCA and the County Council about existing programs that can meet the needs of company recruits as well as provide realistic timelines on the runway needed to mold existing programs to the future needs of promising company recruits.

Involving the Technical College as a strategic negotiating partner could position the county to extract more value from high-value companies interested in exploiting the spectrum of Jasper's assets. For example, to the extent these negotiations require the Technical College to create new programs from whole cloth, then companies could be persuaded to invest in the development and scaling of these bespoke training curricula and commit to fixed hiring targets for successful graduates. Jasper is already deeply invested in the speculative development of logistical real estate assets that translate into tangible balance sheet savings for lease occupants. Requiring the county to fully subsidize the cost of speculatively developing niche workforce skills would be an unethical proposition.

In the short term, Jasper must devise workforce development strategies that meet people where they are. For inspiration, county leaders should test tactics from the nonprofit sector such as Antioch Educational Center (AEC). AEC's certified nursing assistant (CNA) training program is an exemplar of a program that can identify workforce-ready individuals who possess the grit to withstand intense short-term training that offers access to legitimate employment pipelines with credible job prospects. According to Jackie O'Bannon, AEC's Executive Director, hospitals are constantly courting the facility's past graduates and incumbent students as potential recruits for their health technician pipelines. AEC has developed robust employer relationships that provide extraordinary benefits to AEC students, such as tuition reimbursement and assistance with clinical placements for vocational training in externship settings. AEC's graduation and post-graduate employment rates are exceptionally high. Current trainees' perceptions are testaments to the rigor and gainful employment associated with AEC's programs.

Although AEC's value speaks volumes about returns on employment potential for its trainees, the organization can do little in the way of guaranteeing career progression for graduates. Agencies like AEC need support from eager employer partners to develop and fund next-level programs that allow CNA graduates to return to AEC's classrooms for subsequent training to propel their career progression. The health care sector is known for its well-developed entry ramps to health care sector jobs; however, this industry has not been overly successful in creating growth pathways for women of color—particularly those who enter the workforce as CNAs and remain trapped at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy, subjected to unstable employment and low wages. AEC needs to partner with well-resourced partners like regional hospital partners or larger private clinical practices to co-design workforce training programs geared to entry-level workers' career progression.

Generalizing this practice to for-profit employer partners should spur the county to use its Jobs Tax Credit incentives innovatively. Hardeeville's welder training program is another example of a pipeline of technically skilled workers; trained and certified in Oxyfuel and Plasma Arc in welding production techniques. The program's 20 graduates are workforce-ready and searching for gainful employment. The county could re-allocate a portion of its credits to a training booster program where companies agree to hire entry-level workers like Hardeeville's welding graduates and release them to complete a year-long workforce training program at least once a week to continue the credentialing journey. This approach orients workers toward continuous upskilling. A boosted tax credit would compensate companies for reduced productivity. It would also cross-subsidize workforce training modalities most employers are reluctant to finance without a market incentive.

Meeting workers' needs is an essential element of human infrastructure development. Jasper County's institutions have done an admirable job of acknowledging workers' various needs and responding to gaps with impactful solutions. According to Census 2019 LEHD Origin-Destination Employment Statistics (LODES), 22.5% of Jasper's residents work in the affluent Hilton Head and Bluffton communities. Framed differently, roughly 2,200 workers commute to Hilton Head and Bluffton to work in low-wage service jobs. Mr. Owens reflected on the hardships this commute imposes on workers and their children: "These families are being separated from as early as four or five o'clock in the morning to go an hour and a half away to work, leaving their kids at home unattended. And by the time they get home, the kids are already in bed." AEC recently started the Antioch Express work shuttle program as an alternative to public transportation. The program is intended to significantly reduce workers' commutes and extend the amount of time spent at home with their children.

With generous support from the Community Foundation, AEC purchased two passenger buses to operate a commuter shuttle service between Jasper and the Hilton Head employment center. The free shuttle service leaves Jasper at 6:00 am and puts money back into the pockets of already financially stretched families—in addition to saving them from a nearly four-hour commute each day. Beyond the extraordinary compassion demonstrated in this pilot program, AEC's work underscores what meeting workers' needs looks like. Understanding that excessively long commutes shear the fabric of family togetherness, and responding to this need with urgency and authenticity, is workforce development innovation at its best.

Superintendent Dr. Anderson is similarly attuned to the needs of her teaching workforce, many of whom live as far away as Savannah, GA, and commute to the school district daily. Affordable housing that is accessible to Jasper's public servants is a mission-critical issue deserving super-priority status on the county's strategic economic development agenda. While new housing developments are coming online in Jasper, these homes are not affordable for the county's essential civil servants, including teachers. The adage that leadership matters implies that the solutions flowing from their inspirational vision can yield remarkable impacts in unexpected ways. Dr. Anderson's willingness to think outside the box to cater to the well-being of the district's teaching workforce demonstrates that workforce development could be effectively shared with multiple stakeholders. Dr. Anderson's recognition of affordable housing as a barrier to raising the quality of Jasper's schools motivated her innovative use of some of Jasper's federal Every Student Succeeds Act funds to provide mileage incentives to offset teacher commuting costs. She indexed the incentive according to teachers' commuting distance; the stimulus makes working in Jasper County more affordable. Coupled with an attendance incentive, Dr. Anderson has created a robust package of financial incentives that speak to the pocketbook issues of her teaching workforce.[28]

Jasper County's workforce development is inextricably linked to its housing affordability crisis. Jasper's leaders need to radically change their approach to building an affordable housing inventory that is accessible to residents earning working-class salaries. This accessibility is central to the county's ability to retain its growing population. Radical changes include introducing manufacturing and home-building technologies that developing countries are trialing and scaling to meet the needs of their growing middle classes. Here at home, Habitat for Humanity has showcased the transformative potential of 3D printing manufacturing technologies in constructing beautiful, modern homes with significant labor and production cost savings. This form of manufacturing could bring a game-changing dynamic to Jasper's housing crisis, allowing the county to meet the housing needs of its essential civil servants.

Owning a single-family home is the ultimate expression of the American homeownership dream. However, it is just one form of homeownership that has historically disproportionately served the housing needs of affluent households. Many communities across the United States are experimenting with alternative models of homeownership, including cooperative ownership models and community land trusts that leverage lengthy ground leases to make homeownership affordable for working-class families. Jasper should embrace the panoply of approaches to housing development to address the problem of housing affordability.

Folks get to college age, and maybe they move out of the community because there's not a job opportunity here for them that they can use to provide for their family. It very much ties in with closing that loop of the population loss. Jasper County has made some good gains in the last couple censuses when it comes to population. So we've got some indications that our strategies are working.

Brantley Strickland
Senior Project Manager
Southern Carolina Alliance

Jasper County's leaders have secured the foundation on which sustainable growth can take root. The durability of this nascent progress requires an unambiguous commitment to inclusive economic development that improves life opportunities in marginalized communities scarred by disinvestment.

THE PATH AHEAD
SUPPORTING CAPACITY BUILDING

Jasper County leadership has successfully executed on its strategic vision to construct a concrete foundation on which sustainable growth can take root.

Building a broadband framework has been a cornerstone of Jasper's speculative economic development. Regionally vested stakeholders such as the Palmetto Electrical Cooperative and Palmetto Rural Telephone Company created a critical partnership to extend broadband connectivity and layer high-speed fiber optic service onto the county's existing utility pole infrastructure that generations ago electrified the third industrial revolution. The industrial parks are fully wired with bleeding-edge fiber optic capability. These anchor institutions play an integral force-multiplying role: Through their broadband networks, scaling high-quality broadband to less developed areas of the county becomes cheaper and thus realizable for lower-density areas.

Creative public-private partnerships have enabled Jasper County to pass the perfunctory due diligence checks of SCA's firm recruits, who assume broadband to be a given and interrogate the county's representatives on specialized capacity. Common questions include "Can I get 100 Mbps download speed or upload speed? Is fiber available? Is dark fiber available?" Such inquiries indicate that next to capital, labor, and land, broadband has become the fourth factor of production. Broadband is also paramount to worker recruitment.

Population growth electrifies declining areas; it sparks a sense of revitalization that restores the intrinsic value of rural minority communities. However, signs of growing income inequality and friction in infrastructure development should remind the casual observer that nullum gratuitum grandium—growth imposes costs. Movers create new costs for the county in terms of additional public services and other administrative functions needed to support county residents. According to a 2020 Clemson University study on Jasper's fiscal condition, the marginal cost of a new household relocating to the county ranges between $862 and $908.[29] In other words, population growth has real costs and requires a steady, diverse, and growing tax base to compensate. Jasper County has confronted numerous growth pressures, including environmental impacts and an expanding affordable housing crisis. The Clemson University study estimates that homes in the less affluent town of Ridgeland need to average between $370,000 and $411,000 to sustain the town's portion of Jasper's population growth. The property tax dynamic, with roots in Act 388, contextualizes affordable housing issues that shove essential public servants to the outskirts. Longer commutes effectively erode the purchasing power of their salaries relative to residents who can afford to live within the county's developing communities.

Jasper County has a long way to go to complete its infrastructure overhaul. Back-of-the-envelope forecasts suggest the county needs an additional $220 million to complete its water, sewer, and road construction. Moreover, JOT requires a $550 million investment to lift the project from conceptual drawings into brick and mortar. The county needs support to strengthen its capacity as a technically equipped partner capable of executing the most critical projects in the county's history. Jasper County is an Obama Promise Zone. The county should have prioritized access to robust technical assistance from the Biden administration to compete for infrastructure funding allocation.

The terminal has significant national food security implications and would catalyze economic growth in the Low Country region. However, Jasper County needs executive agency expertise to navigate the maze of federal funds to fill gaps in the capital stack needed to finance these transformative projects. Federal technical assistance in the terminal's development could extend to issues such as de novo taxation models that consider the opportunity to generate passive tax revenue from the tremendous inventory volumes passing through industrial parks, which could produce higher general fund revenues than property or corporate taxes.

All of this suggests that Jasper's value proposition depends on its capacity to develop and train a competitively skilled workforce. However, the business of developing human capital is dynamic, expensive, and entails a durable public good from which all employers benefit. New company transplants import a pool of untapped expertise that could contribute to the county's K-14 workforce development training programs. But the goal is to create good jobs and facilitate skills development for current residents, rather than consigning those residents to low-wage jobs while importing talent. And Jasper's leaders cannot lose sight of the fact that job quality matters as much as job quantity. Jasper must be emphatic that companies moving to Jasper should see themselves as civic partners who can serve as tactical advisors to steer Jasper's cluster of workforce development programs. Such cooperation ensures high school students and young college graduates receive future-oriented skills-based training that is fully articulated with firms' talent acquisition strategies and that ensures economic development benefits everyone.

One final word on the need for regional coordination in the Low Country region: Jasper County is 1 of 17 counties struggling to burnish an identity embossed by industrial decay and defined by persistent poverty. Despite the gallant efforts outlined in this ethnographic review, Jasper's success is intricately linked to the fates of its poorer neighbors, like Hampton County, that need urgent revitalization. Jasper's leadership has the power to shape Low Country prosperity. Ongoing discussions led by the Southern Low Country regional advisory board to form a regional housing trust fund to address affordable housing issues reflect the strength of Jasper's leadership power. Low Country leaders must co-create a shared vision of well-being for their communities that transcends fictive political boundaries and reaches through to the region's most vulnerable and chronically poor.

We have all [these industries] coming. We need to be more attentive than ever, not only to the road needs that we are going to create but also to how we develop environmentally. It's critical that everything we do, we must pay more attention to the impact on the environment. We always did. But now it's going to take an even higher level of importance because we're in a Low Country. Whether the ecology, the water ways, the rivers, the ocean—they're all affected by this kind of growth.

Henry Williams
Mayor
Hardeeville

This case study has navigated a maze-like chronicle of decay to renewed possibility. It draws a roadmap for well-intentioned policymakers mired in static narratives that shape a negative mindset about rural minority communities. Problematically, these portrayals often include ready-made solutions repeatedly offered to these communities and often miss dynamism unfolding at the local level.

Pivoting to an ethical rural policymaking framework that acknowledges the latent value of rural minority communities like Jasper County facilitates a crucial asset re-appraisal process. This re-valuation creates a mechanism that alters the hierarchical paradigm of rural policy formulation; it allows federal and state policymakers to appreciate the indigenous knowledge and expertise of county-level decision-makers. Together, the three layers of government can design appropriate economic development policies that appreciate the heterogeneity coursing through rural minority America. Such an approach celebrates and enhances the authenticity of their assets. It further demands that the federal government ethically engage with these communities to design bespoke renewal strategies aligned with local economic and sociopolitical architecture.

ENDNOTES

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