

# THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ADVISORY COMMITTEE



## **Meeting Minutes**

Thursday, August 22, 2024

2:30 PM

Alachua County County Manager's Training Room

12 SE First Street, Second Floor

Gainesville, FL 32601

## **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ADVISORY COMMITTEE**

JEFFREY ARNOLD  
CARRIE BUSH  
MICHAEL CARNEVALE  
GRACE GLENNON  
RAMONA JACKSON  
LINDA JAMES  
PATRICIA LEE  
RICK SMITH  
TRACEY TODD  
DAVID WISENER  
ELLIOTT WELKER  
YING XU

# THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ADVISORY COMMITTEE

## Minutes

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**Members Present:** Jeffrey Arnold, Carrie Bush, Michael Carnevale, Ramona Jackson, Linda James, Rick Smith, Tracey Todd, David Wisener, Elliott Welker, Ying Xu

**Other Attendees:** Christina Brown, Triston Jefferson, Sean McLendon

**CALL TO ORDER – The meeting was called to order at 2:30 PM**

### **WELCOME TO NEW MEMBERS AND INTRODUCTIONS**

The Committee welcomed new member Ying Xu and CareerSource North Central Florida representative Christina Brown.

**REVIEW OF AGENDA –** Jefferey Arnold made a motion to approve the agenda. Ramona Jackson seconded the motion and it was approved unanimously.

### **APPROVAL OF MINUTES**

- June 20, 2024, Subcommittee Minutes (High Springs); Jefferey Arnold made a motion to approve the minutes removing the repeated phrase “proximity to world-class town charm,”. Michael Carnevale seconded the motion and it was approved unanimously.
- and June 27, 2024, EDAC Meeting Minutes; Jefferey Arnold made a motion to approve the minutes that was seconded by Elliot Welker. It was approved unanimously.

### **PRESENTATION: City of Alachua Economic Development Priorities, David Wisener, Economic Development Manager for the City of Alachua**

David Wisener presented background on the history of City of Alachua (Newnansville) and how it shaped the economic priorities of present-day Alachua.

#### **Summary of David Wisener's Presentation**

**David Wisener's presentation to the Alachua County Economic Development Committee** focused on the historical context and current economic development priorities of the City of Alachua.

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## Historical Context

- **Entrepreneurship and aspiration** have been consistent characteristics of Alachua's community since its inception.
- **Newnansville**, Alachua's predecessor, was once a thriving community but declined due to factors like the Civil War, railroad bypassed, and hard freezes.
- **Copeland Sausage Company** was a major employer in Alachua but its closure in 1978 devastated the city's economy.

## Economic Development Goals

- **Diversification:** To avoid over-reliance on a single industry and ensure stability.
- **Infrastructure development:** Investing in water quality improvements and transportation infrastructure.
- **Downtown revitalization:** Enhancing the downtown corridor through market analysis and action plans.
- **Partnership with UF Innovate:** Collaborating to strengthen the bio-life science and emerging technology hub.
- **Tourism development:** Promoting recreational activities and cultural events.

## Challenges

- **Industry downturn:** The impact of the downturn in the bio-life science sector.
- **Downtown revitalization:** Struggling with vacant storefronts and historic building repairs.
- **Competition for UF's attention:** Competing with other UF-affiliated initiatives for funding and resources.

**Overall, Alachua is well-positioned for future growth due to its diverse economic base, strong partnerships, and commitment to entrepreneurship and aspiration.**

David Wisener Presentation in full: How do we determine what the identity of a community is? It's ultimately decided by the people who live there at any point in time and the folks they choose to represent them in local government, but we also learn about the character of a place by knowing its history and what the people who have called it home have left as a legacy. As two famous adages correctly state, you can't really know where you're going until you know where you've been, and those who don't learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

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With that in mind, let me very briefly share some highlights with you about where Alachua has been to set the context for where Alachua is going.

When we look at the long story of the community of Alachua, a consistent characteristic shows up among the many thousands of people who have called the area home, and that characteristic is aspiration.

Alachua's American heritage traces back over 200 years to a community called Newnansville, which, along with Micanopy, was the first settlement in the interior of Florida, and the first distinctly American community in the state. Farming entrepreneurs eager to take advantage of the rich soil in the area began settling here before Florida was ceded to the U.S. by Spain, so from the very beginning, the first Americans here were aspiring for economic opportunity.

From the 1820s to 1850, Newnansville would become the largest and most important community in North Central Florida, at one point being the fourth-largest city in the state with a population over 2,000 people. It was the center of commerce for all of North Florida, it housed the only land office in Florida outside of St. Augustine and Tallahassee, and it was the first primary county seat for Alachua County, home to the first county courthouse. Newnansville was even very close to becoming the home of East Florida Seminary in the 1850s, the school that first located in Ocala and later Gainesville, and was a precursor to the University of Florida.

But in 1853, everything changed for Newnansville because of one major industry: the first railroad to cross Florida from east to west bypassed Newnansville to the south, and the county commission very narrowly voted to move the county seat to a brand new city being built on the rail line, a place that would become known as Gainesville.

Over the next 40 years, Newnansville declined rapidly: the Civil War devastated the economy of the South; a hard freeze destroyed the citrus crops that were a major part of the local agricultural economy; and two more railroads bypassed Newnansville because the terrain was too hilly. But the last of the railroads built a line about a mile and a half southwest of Newnansville in 1884, and over the next twenty years, businesses and residents relocated on this rail line, forming a community that was first called Newnansville Station, but which would become incorporated in 1905 as the City of Alachua.

Alachua grew modestly on the periphery of the county in the early 1900s, though it was very much a small town hovering around a population of about 1,000.

In 1928, once again everything changed for the community through a single industry: Copeland Sausage Company opened its doors, and eventually it would become the single largest employer in the city. By 1978, the company employed nearly 500 workers and

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accounted for more than 40 percent of city utility revenues and half of the tax revenue. When the plant closed that year, the city was financially devastated and had a difficult time recovering through the 1980s.

So what does all of this history have to do with what Alachua is today and what it wants to be tomorrow?

First, it's important to know that entrepreneurship and high aspirations are in the DNA of Alachua since its beginning. They have always been integral to how the community understands itself and what it seeks to be. It is, in fact, not an exaggeration to state Alachua would not exist without these characteristics. Looking to continued economic expansion is consistent with and, indeed, requisite to, the character of the City.

Second, Alachua has twice nearly collapsed because of over-reliance on a single industry or business: once, its predecessor community, Newnansville, actually did cease to exist because of the negative effects of the railroad industry, and once, the closing of a single industrial plant nearly bankrupted the town. The lesson here is that a successful economic base must be diverse, connecting with multiple industries and multiple business partners to ensure stability and growth remain possible when unforeseen circumstances strike.

That's what Alachua leaders sought to do in the late 1970s and 1980s, launching the City's Community Redevelopment Agency and redesigning Main Street to assist local downtown businesses. By 1995, Alachua was named the Florida Department of Commerce's Outstanding Rural Community of the Year.

That same year, the University of Florida Innovate | Accelerate's Sid Martin Biotech Incubator opened in Progress Park along the eastern US Highway 441 corridor, and what has now become one of Florida's largest bio and life science business hubs was born. Multiple businesses have successfully graduated from Sid Martin and established themselves in the Progress District – in fact, 12% of all Florida biotech companies started with UF Innovate, primarily through Sid Martin. Combined with the several distribution centers that began establishing themselves on the western edge of the city at the same time, Alachua is now a leading job producer within North Central Florida.

Population has skyrocketed commensurately, more than doubling from 4,500 at the time of the 1990 Census to 10,500 in 2020, making Alachua the second-largest city in the county and third-largest in North Central Florida. With the continued development of the Progress District (including the completion in 2020 of the San Felasco Parkway, which opens up hundreds of acres for further development within the Progress District), the formation in 2019 of San Felasco Tech City's mixed-use business and residential ecosystem, and the growth of Santa Fe College's Perry Center for Emerging Technologies,

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Alachua is poised to further grow into a leading city within the region and state throughout the 21st Century.

But what are the most current updates about what is going on in Alachua, and what are our economic development goals? To note, Alachua continues to provide one of the top-5 lowest electric utility rates in the State, this year in fact offering the lowest. Our millage rate is set to remain the same from last fiscal year, which is the fourth-lowest rate among municipalities in the county.

Continuing the City's focus on infrastructure growth and anticipation of future community growth, the Alachua Water Quality and Resiliency Improvement Project has been underway since last October, an \$8 million project that will increase the City's ability to meet growing water demand by adding another wellfield and water treatment plant.

Tower Hill Insurance's new corporate headquarters, a 65,000 square foot facility that will employ over 300 people and will be the nexus for a larger development that will include residences, retail, and a golf course, has also been under development since November. It is scheduled to be complete within the next two years.

Alachua partnered with Retail Strategies to conduct a new Downtown Market Study, which is an update from the last market study conducted in 2016. This Downtown Revitalization Partnership was finished in March, and a 5-Year Action Plan and Market Analysis for the broader region surrounding the city was completed. The goal is to steadily work toward accomplishing several of the tasks outlined in the Action Plan to enhance our downtown corridor.

We at the City remain very committed to strengthening our partnership with UF Innovate and the several bio and life science companies within our community: we have been working toward formalizing a partnership between the City, UF, SFC, and as many local corporations as are willing in order to unify a shared vision and collaborate to overcome shared challenges to position the Greater Alachua region even more intentionally as a leading bio-life science and emerging technology hub.

Our distribution and warehousing district, which has been home to Wal-Mart, Dollar General, and Sysco for several years, continues to grow. Three projects are currently in different stages of development in the area: Lane Enterprises and G&C Foods are building distribution centers, while Ben E. Keith is constructing a regional corporate headquarters and distribution center. These projects promise to provide several hundred jobs to the area.

One of my personal goals is beginning to form a previously largely-untapped tourism market within the City, highlighting the many recreational activities available at San Felasco Hammock Preserve State Park, Mill Creek Preserve, Santa Fe River Preserve, the

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facilities at both Hal Brady and Legacy Park Recreation Complexes, and highlighting cultural events such as the annual Largest Small Town Fireworks Display in America on Independence Day, the Alachua Main Street Festival, and the Christmas Tree Lighting.

Lastly, what are the challenges Alachua is currently facing? The largest issue is the local impact of the industry-wide downturn in the bio-life science sector. In hindsight, one of the key factors contributing to the boom felt in the industry throughout the early 2000s and 2010s were low interest rates that made research funding more affordable for investors, so as interest rates have risen to help combat inflation, funding has dried up. That combines with some questionable corporate business decisions in some companies to result in a dramatic impact for Alachua workers – Thermo Fisher, formerly Florida Biologix and Brammer Bio, has closed its Alachua site, which at its height employed over 300 people; National Resilience, formerly Nanotherapeutics and Ology Bioservices, has had several recent rounds of layoffs; and Lacerta Therapeutics has ceased operations. Additionally, the City recognizes that it is facing an increasingly-challenging situation in competing for UF's attention in continued investment in the Sid Martin Incubator and Alachua ecosystem – the Hub Innovation District in the heart of downtown Gainesville, which is the newer sister site of Sid Martin under the UF Innovate umbrella, effectively draws a decent bit of attention away from Sid Martin, and the UF Scripps Institute for Biomedical Innovation & Technology in Jupiter is likewise a UF funding emphasis.

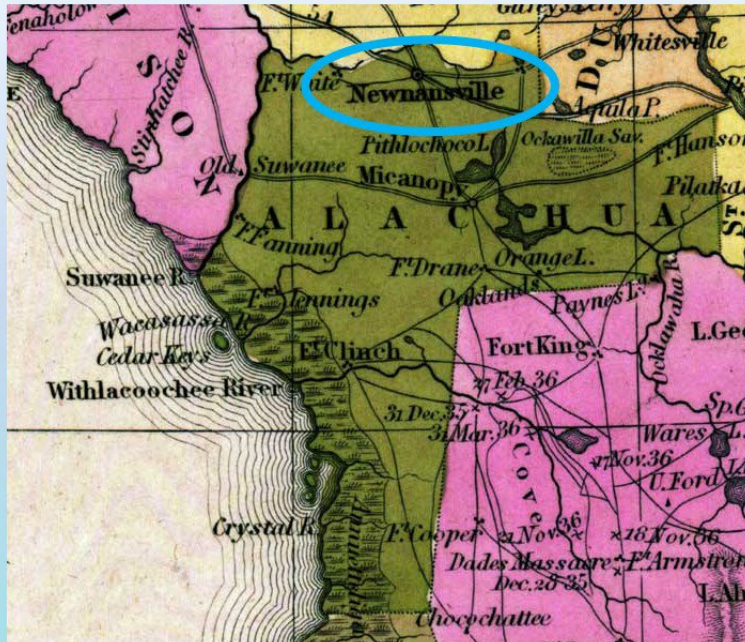
Our other core challenge is breathing life into our Main Street and downtown corridor. While our community as a whole is growing and doing well, Main Street is struggling with several vacant storefronts and several historic buildings in need of repair. There isn't an anchor tenant in the downtown sector that drives traffic its way, so our focus is on attracting an anchor and investigating the possibilities of finding outside funding to purchase some downtown real estate to rehabilitate the property and spur development, both commercial and residential.

Despite these challenges, Alachua is well positioned to weather unexpected twists and turns because of the diversity of its economic base and the good relationships and commitments of several partners, including many of you here today, for which we thank you. We intend to continue investing in a broad range of industries to ensure we are always able to offer our residents high-quality jobs across the education spectrum, from GED to Ph.D. We will remain true to the character our community has always had, one that embraces entrepreneurship and aspires to ever-increasing heights.

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Alachua County, 1839





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Alachua, c. 1910s



- Alachua's character:
- Entrepreneurship
  - High aspirations

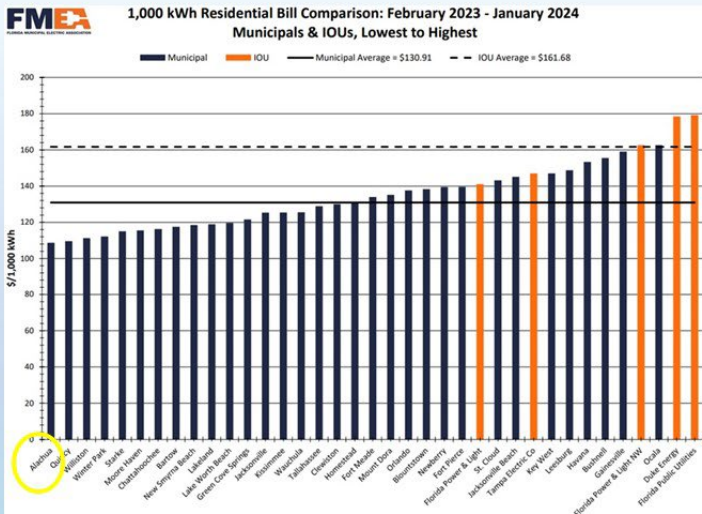
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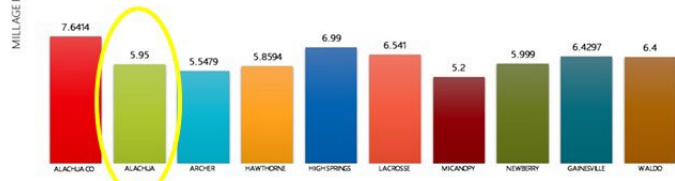
Diverse economic base  
is crucial



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Proposed Alachua County Millage Rates FY 2024



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City of **ALACHUA**  
the good life community

downtown strategies  
Alachua, Florida  
**Downtown Revitalization Partnership**

retailstrategies.com | [205] 314-0386 | info@retailstrategies.com | 2200 Magnolia Ave South, Suite 100 Birmingham, AL

A graphic for the City of Alachua Downtown Revitalization Partnership. It features the City of Alachua logo and the text "City of ALACHUA the good life community". Below that, it says "downtown strategies", "Alachua, Florida", and "Downtown Revitalization Partnership". At the bottom, there is contact information: "retailstrategies.com | [205] 314-0386 | info@retailstrategies.com | 2200 Magnolia Ave South, Suite 100 Birmingham, AL". The background is a photograph of a street scene with trees and buildings.

EST. 2020

**SAN FELASCO PARKWAY**

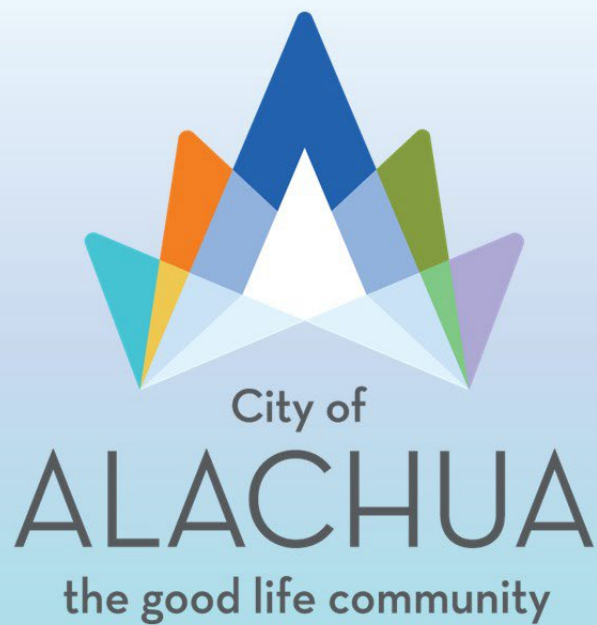
City of **ALACHUA** **CHW**  
Professional Corporation

A banner for San Felasco Parkway. It features the text "EST. 2020" and "SAN FELASCO PARKWAY". Below that, there are logos for the City of Alachua and CHW Professional Corporation.

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After the presentation David answered questions from the Committee on how the County could be a better partner to it on the following topics:

CRA and Tourism Enhancement

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For the CRA area, the City would like to attract an anchor business that could support the smaller shops and restaurants. They would prefer a brewery but may need to first change an ordinance to allow it.

### **Biotechnology Downturn**

Biotechnology firms affiliated with Sid Martin/Progress District were big drivers of the City's economy. Recent changes to interest rates have impacted investment in this sector and caused a downturn in employment opportunities for some of these businesses. UF remains an important financial anchor in this sector and if interest rates improve over the near to mid-term the industry sector may bounce back. To facilitate emerging companies, the City is offering economic development incentives to incubated and graduating companies coming from UF Innovate.

### **Quality of Life and Tourism**

Legacy Park and its bike and pedestrian connectivity to local businesses was discussed. The City's Alachua 2.0 strategic guide identified more pathways to address this. The Committee discussed the City looking into the State's Trail Town designation in support of this effort. Trail Town designation can also support regional, multi-day bicycle tourism.

The City desires assistance from the County in better promotion of tourism to the city and outlying areas. The County will be exploring these ideas with the City and EDAC over the next year as Economic Development and Tourism merge functions.

The Committee requested information about how the County uses technology to support tourism. This can be part of the October presentation by Tourism staff.

### **Update on EcoLoop Negotiations**

Sean McLendon updated the committee on negotiations with Sunshine State. Staff is awaiting feedback from them on the County's offer of terms for the lease rate and their management practices adjacent to the airport. The County is open to being flexible in scaling the acreage of the lease and the financial terms so long as the County's cost to maintain the property is covered by the lease payment. The County is pursuing other industrial users at the site and has reserved approximately five acres of the EcoLoop for Solid Waste and Resource Recovery building needs.

### **MEMBERS COMMENTS - none**

**ADJOURN** – The meeting adjourned at 3:35 PM.

### **Upcoming 2024-2025 EDAC Meetings**

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September 26, 2024 (Grace Knight – Workforce Jobs Pipeline Presentation; Draft Workplan and Accomplishments)

October 24, 2024 (Economic Impacts of Tourism; Tourism Approval of Workplan and Accomplishments)

January TBD, 2025 (Joint Tourism and EDAC Meeting)