

Alachua County Economic Development Advisory Committee (EDAC)

Accomplishments Report FY2024-25

Date: August 2025

Board/Committee Name: Economic Development Advisory Committee (EDAC)

Chair: Sarah Rockwell

Vice-Chair: Alexander Hamilton-Sanchez

Board Liaison: Sean McLendon

Staff Assistant: Nephtali Dzubin

Brief History of Committee: The County Commission approved the reconstitution of the Economic Development Advisory Committee on August 12, 2008. Its purpose is to develop and provide policy recommendations to the Board of County Commissioners for promoting sustainable economic development activities within Alachua County.

Mission Statement: The Economic Development Advisory Committee's responsibility is to develop and provide policy recommendations to the County Commission regarding the promotion of sustainable economic development activities within Alachua County.

In FY2024-25, the Economic Development Committee continued to provide policy recommendations and guidance on economic development activities in Alachua County. The committee's focus was on key initiatives supporting the department's mission and aligning with the community's economic goals.

Significant Accomplishments in FY2024-25:

1. Municipal and Stakeholder Outreach and Engagement

- The committee held a joint workshop with the Tourist Development Council (TDC) to foster a more unified approach to economic development and tourism. The workshop included a SWOT analysis of various topics to identify shared priorities and opportunities. This collaborative effort helped to guide the newly formed Department of Tourism & Economic Development.

- The committee engaged directly with key institutional stakeholders through presentations from UF Innovate. The presentation provided an in-depth look at their role in fostering business growth, technology transfer, and startup support initiatives, which have created over 2,500 jobs and generated \$2 billion in capital.

2. Committee Guidance on Departmental Changes

- The joint workshop with the TDC served as a foundational meeting to provide guiding principles and outcomes for the new Department of Tourism & Economic Development. Through a series of rotating small group discussions, committee members provided insights on workforce development, infrastructure investments, partnerships, and key focus areas, helping to inform the new department's priorities during its formative years.
- During the February meeting, the committee discussed the ongoing effort to establish a partnership between the Department of Tourism & Economic Development and the Greater Gainesville Chamber of Commerce, Alachua Chamber of Commerce, institutions and organizations in the community that significantly contribute to the economy and how they can help guide the County's Economic Development Organization (EDO). In June 2025, the County approved itself as the EDO and submitted this to FloridaCommerce.

3. Economic Development Project Oversight and Recommendations

- The joint workshop provided a forum for discussing key infrastructure and project areas. The committee discussed the strengths and opportunities related to airport expansion, which was noted as a significant infrastructure asset. The committee also identified the need for more designated development areas, particularly in rural parts of the county, and discussed strategies for improving utility resilience and affordable housing incentives for builders.
- The committee received a comprehensive presentation on the "Forward Focus Eastern Alachua County" project. This multi-phase study is designed to identify community service needs and economic development opportunities to attract grant funding and inform future County initiatives. The committee was briefed on the project's purpose, scope, and timeline, which will continue through 2027.
- The committee also received a preliminary analysis of the community comments from the "Forward Focus" listening sessions in Montecocha. The report noted that residents value their close-knit community and natural environment, but seek clearer communication, infrastructure improvements, and controlled development.
- On April 24, the committee met in a workshop format and received a tour and presentation on the Alachua County Sports Events Center. The discussion

focused on the facility's operations and the significant impact of sports tourism on the local economy.

4. Aerospace, Aviation, and Space Economy Initiatives

- The committee took significant steps to support the growth of the aerospace and space economy in Alachua County. During the March meeting, the committee discussed the challenges of having a narrow focus for recruiting new industries to the Alachua County EcoLoop. In a unanimous vote, the committee recommended that the Board of County Commissioners amend the EcoLoop's Planned Development to allow for non-smokestack industries such as high-technology, aerospace, aviation, and semiconductor manufacturing, broadening the site's potential for a range of new business.
- The committee was briefed on the Astraeus Space Institute's mission to serve as a hub for space-related research and industry. The presentation highlighted the Institute's work in building partnerships with government, academia, and industry, and its role in a new space universities consortium with the Kennedy Space Center. The discussion provided insight into the development of a space workforce, including new certificates, internships, and partnerships to prepare students and professionals for careers in the growing space economy.
- The committee also inquired about the Institute's efforts to engage with K-12 students and high school counselors to promote educational pathways. The Institute's leadership indicated they are developing new certification programs and special interest courses and will be creating a campus-wide handout to distribute to the school board to raise awareness and distinguish UF's focus on space biology from other universities.
- These initiatives directly tie into the ongoing work on the **Airport Gateway Project**, which seeks to promote a unified vision for 21st-century light industrial and commercial property opportunities around the Airport. The committee's focus on the space economy and related industries, such as aviation and semiconductors, directly supports the long-term goals of this multi-phase project.

5. Other Key Initiatives

- The committee engaged in a broad discussion on leveraging county partnerships for inclusive growth, noting the strength of numerous local organizations and strategic plans. They also explored key focus areas for impact, including agribusiness, biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and logistics and distribution centers.
- During the June 26 meeting, the committee received a detailed presentation on the county's new **Climate Action Plan (CAP)**. The presentation, led by

Resiliency Specialist Jennison Kipp, outlined the CAP's development and its goal for Board of County Commissioners approval in November. The committee provided substantial feedback, recommending that the "Green Industries" chapter be renamed "**Green Opportunities**" to reflect a broader, more inclusive approach. Discussions focused on the importance of inclusive and resilient language to prevent future political resistance, the need for vision and strategic partnerships, and how to structure the chapter like a business plan. The committee emphasized the importance of community engagement through accessible, solution-oriented communications and the use of multimedia content to increase public awareness of the CAP's goals. The presentation also highlighted that Alachua County is the first inland Florida county to create a CAP, giving it the potential to serve as a resource for other rural counties in the region. The committee learned that the primary sources of emissions in the county are transportation and electricity use in buildings, and that strategies to address this include vehicle and transit electrification and solar energy solutions for public buildings.

Alachua County Economic Development Advisory Committee (EDAC)

2026 Workplan

Date: August 2025

Board/Committee Name: Economic Development Advisory Committee (EDAC) **Chair:** TBD **Vice-Chair:** TBD

Board Liaison: Sean McLendon

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The 2026 Workplan outlines the EDAC's strategic priorities for the upcoming fiscal year. Building on the accomplishments of FY2024-25, the committee will focus on providing guidance on key policy areas, fostering strategic partnerships, and advancing initiatives that support economic growth and resilience in Alachua County.

Strategic Priorities for 2026

1. Advising the County as the Economic Development Organization (EDO)

- **Opportunity Area:** Provide guidance and support to the Department of Tourism & Economic Development as the County formalizes its role as the EDO.
- **Deliverable:** Regular updates and policy recommendations to the County Commission on EDO-related activities and partnerships.

2. Guiding Key Economic Development Projects

- **Opportunity Area:** Review and advise on the amendment to the Alachua County EcoLoop Planned Development to allow for non-smokestack industries such as high-tech, aerospace, and semiconductor manufacturing.
- **Opportunity Area:** Continue to receive updates and provide guidance on the "Forward Focus Eastern Alachua County" project, with a specific focus on its implications for economic mobility and opportunity.
- **Opportunity Area:** Provide recommendations and support for the **Airport Gateway Project**, aligning committee efforts with the long-term vision for light industrial and commercial property development.
- **Deliverable:** Formal committee recommendations on the EcoLoop PD and a continued advisory role for the "Forward Focus" and "Airport Gateway" projects.

3. Cultivating the Technology, Aerospace, Aviation, and Space Economy

- **Opportunity Area:** Strengthen and formalize partnerships with key institutions like the Astraeus Space Institute to guide the growth of the space economy.
- **Opportunity Area:** Explore opportunities to engage with the K-12 school system to promote educational pathways that support the development of a local space workforce, including new certification programs and curriculum awareness.
- **Opportunity Area:** Host a workshop to discuss the intersection of local aviation assets, academic research, and industry to identify actionable opportunities for business recruitment and talent retention.
- **Deliverable:** A report on potential opportunities for K-12 engagement and a summary of workshop findings on the aerospace and aviation industry.

4. Strategic Communications and Partnerships

- **Opportunity Area:** Act as a forum for the County's institutional and organizational partners, facilitating collaboration on key issues that create economic opportunities.

- **Opportunity Area:** Assist the EDO in developing and telling the story of Alachua County's unique advantages for economic development and business recruitment.
- **Deliverable:** A strategic communications framework or narrative that highlights our community's strengths, such as our talent pipeline, innovation ecosystem, and quality of life.
- **Deliverable:** Regular collaborative sessions or roundtables with institutional partners to identify shared goals and actionable strategies.

5. Guiding Comprehensive Plan Updates

- **Opportunity Area:** Provide guidance and recommendations to the County Commission on the **Evaluation and Appraisal Report (EAR)** process for the Comprehensive Plan's Economic Element. This guidance will focus on three core pillars for the element's update.
- **Pillar 1: Building on Core Competitive Advantages (Education & Healthcare):**
 - **Opportunity Area:** Advise on policies that recognize and leverage education and healthcare as a driver of economic development, prioritizing industries such as life sciences, bio-sciences, and medical research to attract and retain higher-wage employers.
 - **Opportunity Area:** Recommend policies that formalize partnerships with educational institutions like UF and Santa Fe College to align workforce pipelines with industry needs, especially for higher-wage, certificate, and technical programs.
 - **Opportunity Area:** Provide input on policies that recognize and support research and technology parks as valuable community assets.
- **Pillar 2: Cultivating a Unique Market Differentiator (Food and Food Systems):**
 - **Opportunity Area:** Advise on policies that elevate local food systems to a central pillar of the County's economic identity.
 - **Opportunity Area:** Recommend strategies for supporting local producers through agricultural entrepreneurship and value-added opportunities, such as local food processing.
 - **Opportunity Area:** Provide guidance on a policy framework for critical infrastructure investments, including a Food Hub, and on formalizing the connection between food culture and tourism.
- **Pillar 3: Leveraging Quality of Life ("Where Nature and Culture Meet"):**
 - **Opportunity Area:** Advise on policies that recognize arts, cultural events, and ecotourism as significant economic drivers and business attractants.

- **Opportunity Area:** Recommend policies that acknowledge the importance of sports tourism and the County's investment in assets like the Sports Events Center.
- **Opportunity Area:** Provide input on empowering the new Tourism & Economic Development (TED) Department to serve as the community's overall EDO, including using marketing and data-driven decisions to tell the community's story.
- **Deliverable:** A formal response to staff on the EAR findings and a comprehensive set of recommendations for amendments to the Comprehensive Plan's Economic Element.

6. Fostering Workforce and Technical Education

- **Opportunity Area:** Promote the value of certificate and technical education programs as a key component of economic development, especially for communities not dominated by PhD and master's degrees.
- **Opportunity Area:** Support the promotion of key workforce partnerships, such as the Heavy Diesel Mechanic Training program with CareerSource and Santa Fe College at the Public Works Fleet Facility.
- **Opportunity Area:** Engage with Santa Fe College on opportunities related to its new Ralph Cella Institute for Advanced Manufacturing and its tie-ins to aerospace, aviation, and semiconductor business recruitment and development.
- **Deliverable:** Recommendations for promoting technical education and a formal acknowledgment of key workforce development partnerships.