

INTRODUCTION

One of the tremendous strengths of Middle Georgia is its remarkable diversity. Not only is this diversity evident in race, ethnicity, and heritage, but also through the day-to-day social, economic, and political activities of the region. A traveler passing through Middle Georgia would see both the prosperous and the impoverished, those working with their hands, and those working behind a counter or a desk. Even around the dinner table, one would be struck by a range of backgrounds and viewpoints, each weighing in on regional decisions from their own unique perspective.

This diversity, while an enormous asset, can become a hindrance if differences among these sometimes divergent groups overshadow the common regional identity and prevent solutions to region-spanning challenges. To overcome this potential effect, a broad spectrum of individuals must invest in promoting the idea of Middle Georgia as one region, working collaboratively for a thriving community.

The Middle Georgia Regional Commission has been active in encouraging this investment in recent years. Over the years, a number of issues have forced the region to work across city and county lines for the betterment of the community. These challenges include, addressing encroachment around Robins Air Force Base, improving the air quality of the region, preserving the region's abundant natural resources, and working through regional transportation challenges. Recognizing the continued and emerging challenges for the region, and the importance of bringing diverse groups of Middle Georgians together to promote the regional identity, the Middle Georgia Regional Commission launched its first class of the Regional Leadership Champions program in 2015, with the goal of fostering regional prosperity, innovation, cooperation, and pride in the Middle Georgia community.

With this background, the Middle Georgia Regional Commission recognizes the need to involve a broad segment of the regional population that includes a diversity of interests in the planning process. No single individual or group of stakeholders can alone grasp and solve the many challenges that face residents of Middle Georgia. However, a robust program of outreach to a variety of individuals can assist the Middle Georgia Regional Commission in identifying these issues and the collaborative actions required to address them, while also respecting the diverse interests of all individuals.

Included in this Stakeholder Engagement Program are several items that detail the regional agenda setting process and the roles that stakeholders will have in developing this plan:

- Identification of Stakeholders
- Discussion of Participation Techniques
- Schedule for Completion of Regional Agenda

IDENTIFICATION OF STAKEHOLDERS

The Middle Georgia Regional Commission seeks to include a broad variety of individuals in the regional planning process. This initial list of individuals will be directly contacted through emails and other means of communication and will be the primary group to which the Middle Georgia Regional Commission conducts outreach. In addition to this group, MGRC intends to utilize social media sources and other less traditional methods of communication to open this process to all members of the public. This initial list is subject to change throughout the planning process as additional interested individuals are identified.

- Local Governments of Middle Georgia (11 Counties and 20 Cities)
 - Local elected officials
 - City/County managers, administrators, and clerks
 - Local planning and zoning staff
 - Local staff of metropolitan planning organizations
 - Economic development professionals and staff
 - Downtown development and Main Street program staff
- Middle Georgia Regional Commission Council
- Chambers of Commerce and Development Authorities
- Local Boards of Education
- Colleges and Universities
- Robins Air Force Base
- Community and Non-Profit Organizations
- State Agencies
- Other Major Regional Employers
- Citizens of Middle Georgia
 - Represented by Regional Leadership Champions program participants.

DISCUSSION OF PARTICIPATION TECHNIQUES

The Middle Georgia Regional Commission has selected a variety of techniques for stakeholder involvement, which will be used throughout the planning process. As additional methods are identified, or as methods are proven to be ineffective, this strategy will be adjusted to better fit the needs of regional stakeholders making it easier for them to be informed.

➤ **Steering Committee**

The Middle Georgia Regional Commission Council will serve as the Steering Committee for the regional plan's development. Steering Committee members will be present at each stakeholder meeting during the development of the plan, and will be responsible for voting on the inclusion of plan elements prior to transmittal to DCA or final plan adoption. The Council will continue their regularly scheduled meetings each month throughout the planning process in addition to additional stakeholder meetings held. At each regular meeting, staff from the Regional Commission will brief Council Members on activity within the past month and will actively solicit input from the Council. The MGRC Council will vote on transmittal resolutions at their September and February meetings, and on adoption of the Regional Agenda at the June 2016 meeting.

➤ **Large Stakeholder Group Meetings**

The Middle Georgia Regional Commission will hold a total of five large meetings to attract stakeholders and allow them opportunities to provide input towards the development of the regional plan. The first meeting will be a kickoff meeting in September 2015, at which time the Regional Assessment and Stakeholder Involvement Programs will be discussed and unveiled for the stakeholder group. Three regular stakeholder meetings will also be held in October 2015, November 2015, and January 2016 to discuss individual components of the Regional Agenda and to receive feedback before the final proposal is submitted to the Department of Community Affairs. A required public hearing will also be held in February 2016. Attendance at these meetings is open to any interested parties, and is broadly geared toward the local governments of the region and their component parts.

➤ **Small Community Meetings**

Regional Commission staff will also travel to each county at least once throughout the planning process for a general meeting to receive stakeholder feedback. These meetings will cover a variety of issues, and will be heavily focused on identifying the major challenges and opportunities for an individual county and the communities located therein. As with other stakeholder meetings, these will be open to members of the general public, and they will be held over the course of several months during the planning process.

➤ **Stakeholder Group Interviews**

Middle Georgia Regional Commission staff also recognizes the values of engaging with specific groups of stakeholders who may have more expertise in particular areas. These groups include chamber and economic development professionals as well as historic preservation commissions to name a few. Over several months in the beginning of the planning process, staff will arrange meetings with these groups to discuss items that may be of interest in the regional planning process, particularly those that pertain to their areas of specialization. These meetings will be narrowly tailored to these areas and will take place in convenient locations for the groups.

➤ General Interest Questionnaire

In addition to in-person meetings, a broad survey will be developed that is aimed toward the general public of the region. These surveys will gauge overall attitudes about Middle Georgia and will help identify issues that may otherwise go unnoticed. These surveys will be promoted via the Regional Commission's website and will be available for several months.

➤ Conventional Media

Recognizing the role of the media in shaping news and stimulating public interest, the Middle Georgia Regional Commission will engage members of the press at key points throughout the regional agenda setting process. This will mainly include press releases at these points. Additionally, MGRC staff will remain available to discuss the planning process as requested.

➤ Website and Social Media

In response to the emerging prominence of social media, the Middle Georgia Regional Commission will seek to harness this tool for additional public input. The Regional Commission has already updated its website to reflect the regional planning process, and individuals can easily find information about the planning process and plan-related documents. Beyond this, the Middle Georgia Regional Commission will make greater use of the organization's Facebook and Twitter accounts to spread news about the regional plan. Regular posts will be made that will direct interested parties back to the website and general interest questionnaire. Contact information will also be provided to direct citizens back to Regional Commission staff with questions about the plan. To keep a common theme, and distinguish information about the regional planning process, the hashtag *#ThrivingMiddleGeorgia* will be used on tweets and Facebook posts pertaining to the plan. To continue spreading news and information about the regional plan, MGRC staff will also look at other alternatives for social media.

SCHEDULE FOR COMPLETION OF REGIONAL AGENDA

<i>Middle Georgia Regional Commission -- Timeline for Regional Agenda Development</i>										
Event/Activity	Sep-15	Oct-15	Nov-15	Dec-15	Jan-16	Feb-16	Mar-16	Apr-16	May-16	Jun-16
Promote planning process via website and social media outlets										
Launch tab on MGRC website about regional plan development										
Kickoff meeting to present Assessment and Stakeholder Involvement										
MGRC Council transmits Assessment & Stakeholder Involvement to DCA										
DCA completeness check/review for Assessment & Stakeholder Involvement										
Hold county-by-county stakeholder meetings to discuss local issues										
Hold interviews with other key stakeholder groups throughout region										
MGRC staff work on regional vision, development map, & narrative										
MGRC publishes notice of availability for Assessment & Stakeholder Program										
Stakeholder meeting #1 on regional vision, development map, & narrative										
Development of general public questionnaire for region										
Distribution of regional plan questionnaire to general public										
MGRC staff work on finalized issues and opportunities										
Stakeholder meeting #2 on finalized issues and opportunities list										
MGRC staff work on implementation program for Regional Agenda										
Stakeholder meeting #3 on implementation program										
MGRC staff work on evaluation and monitoring component										
Required regional public hearing on Regional Agenda										
Complete revisions from stakeholder input and feedback										
MGRC Council approves transmittal of Regional Agenda to DCA										
DCA completeness check/review of Regional Agenda										
MGRC staff reviews final DCA report of findings and makes changes if necessary										
MGRC Council adopts finalized Regional Agenda										
MGRC staff notifies DCA of adoption and DCA certifies region eligible for funding										
MGRC staff begins promulgating the adopted regional plan										