

A Joint Comprehensive Plan for  
Dodge County, Chauncey, Chester,  
Eastman, Milan, and Rhine, Georgia

# Dodge County: An Exception to the Rural

October, 2021

# **Dodge County**

## An Exception to the Rural

A Joint Comprehensive Plan for  
Dodge County, Chauncey, Chester, Eastman, Milan, and Rhine, Georgia in accordance with  
the Georgia Planning Act of 1989 and the Minimum Planning Standards and Procedures  
established by the Georgia Department of Community Affairs  
with an effective date of October 1, 2018

Prepared By:

The Dodge County Joint Comprehensive Plan Coordination Committee  
The Dodge County Local Governments  
Heart of Georgia Altamaha Regional Commission



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# INTRODUCTION & EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



*Dodge County: An Exception to the Rural* -- The Dodge County Joint Comprehensive Plan is a comprehensive plan prepared under the current Minimum Planning Standards and Procedures of the Georgia Planning Act of 1989 adopted by the Georgia Department of Community Affairs (DCA) with an effective date of October 1, 2018. It is a joint plan for Dodge County and its municipalities – the City of Chauncey, the Town of Chester, the City of Eastman, the City of Milan, and the City of Rhine.

Dodge County is a rural county of about 20,000 persons located in the heart of central south Georgia. The community today boasts an impressive array of top-notch facilities and services which would be the envy of much larger, and even metro, communities. Even more impressive, the community has a progressive, can-do attitude



from leaders and citizens alike to work together for continuing improvement and advancement, to adapt to change and move forward, to establish a unique and innovative identity, and to facilitate an extraordinary quality of life in a comforting and scenic rural environment. The community is now the focal point of Georgia's leading aviation and aerospace education and training university at a world-class level. Innovative agriculture growth has turned a once predominately cotton driven economy into diverse, scenic olive farms and large scale vegetable harvesting operations. Known in previous decades as the "South's Candy Capital," the community has overcome the loss of the legendary Stuckey's enterprise, and replaced it with an outstanding array and diversity of industry. Home to much local talent and homegrown bands, the Arts Guild is highly supported along with Music On Main. The show is held each year to increasing notoriety and attention. Tourism is based around historic aspects of the community, agricultural in nature and boasts of outdoor amenities for all. Historic landmarks from various periods of time and active trails align with the goal of increasing tourism in the community. Transportation serves all modes of travel within the community, including a rural public transit system, excellent pedestrian routes and multi-lane highways connect communities. The local airport has left far behind its humble general aviation beginnings and has been transformed into a facility with extraordinary physical features which accommodates modern business jets, serves as the centerpiece of world-class aviation and aerospace education and research, and attracts complementary and supportive business concerns. Local schools and the hospital boast award-winning facilities and services. All of this and more contributes to an extraordinary community and quality of life for local citizens



*Rural Scene, Dodge County*

The community continues to improve itself and move forward, nurture its many assets, and build upon its extraordinary amenities and quality of life. Its industry and agribusiness are expanding, and its educational offerings and status are growing. The community continues to invest in education, infrastructure, families, and its culture. Dodge County truly is an





exceptional rural community with innovative facilities and services, and a progressive spirit of cooperation. It wants others to see it as a unique, interesting, and especially attractive place for rural living, an opportunity for entrepreneurship and investment; an envious and coveted place to live, do business, work, or visit; and an inspired environment where many can participate and take flight.



**U** Downtown Eastman **L** Airplane **R** Rustic Pines

While there is much to celebrate and be optimistic about future growth and development within the community, there are issues to monitor and a continued need for improvement. Over seventeen (17.2) percent of Dodge Countians are 65 or older, compared to about 13 percent in Georgia. While down from 25.9 percent in 2015, 21.8 percent of the population lives in poverty, compared to 13.3 percent in Georgia. Incomes overall are low. Per capita money income in the county, as measured by the Census Bureau from 2015-2019, has increased (\$20,216 from \$17,771 in 2014) but remains about 65 percent that of Georgia (\$31,067). The county median household income for the same period (\$39,302) is also about 63 percent that of Georgia (\$61,980). Unemployment in the county lowed to 6.0 percent, as an annual average in 2021, lower than the surrounding area, and significantly lower than the national rate of 8.1 percent. Such statistics have resulted in Georgia still ranking Dodge County as a 2021 Job Tax Tier 1 county. While this ranking is for Georgia's bottom 40 percent or so of counties needing an economic boost, it has the advantage of offering Georgia's largest tax



breaks for job creation within Dodge County, and thus a big incentive for business job creator entities and further economic improvement. Dodge County does have significant assets and stimulators to utilize for future growth and development, including a Federal Opportunity Zone.



**L** Historic Railway Depot, Milan **R** Historic Residence, Eastman

The future Dodge County will continue to take advantage of its assets and opportunities, and address its issues. It will continue to be at the forefront of rural exceptionalism and a high quality of life with progressive leadership, and a recognized uniqueness of extraordinary rural Georgia life. Growth will be well managed and guided to locate near the existing infrastructure and services of Eastman, and will be respectful and protective of existing character, and the community's fields, forests, open spaces, and its unique and abundant natural and cultural resources. Many will enjoy living, working, studying, playing, and doing business in Dodge County, and reach new heights both personally and as a community.

The Dodge County community wants to protect its heritage and rural character; enhance its growing and diversifying economy, utilize its airport and aviation and aerospace educational offerings, conserve its fields and forests and natural splendor; improve its infrastructure; attract new residents and retirees; locate complementary businesses and compatible jobs; utilize and celebrate its natural resources and heritage; and grow tourism, among its guiding aims and principles outlined herein. The community truly wants to be a recognized exceptional bastion of extraordinary rural life and a widely known address for its unique and coveted overall high quality-of-life.

**Previous Plans.** This comprehensive plan is the fourth within the County prepared under the auspices of the Georgia Planning Act of 1989. The first was adopted in 1993, the second in 2010 and most recently in 2016. The first two previous plan efforts were intensively data and state requirement driven, although local objectives are outlined and portrayed. The second plan does contain some local information which may not easily be found elsewhere and may remain of use. These last plans should remain, at least in hard copy, available from the Dodge County local governments and the Heart of Georgia Altamaha Regional Commission. At the time of this plan preparation, the 2016 plan is available in digital format on the state ([www.georgiaplanning.com](http://www.georgiaplanning.com)) and region ([www.hogarc.org](http://www.hogarc.org)) websites.





**Data.** The emergence of the world wide web with its vast data repositories accessible through free search engines allows anyone easy access to significant amounts and a wide variety of data, and profiles of any jurisdiction, including Dodge County and its municipalities. For this reason, this comprehensive plan includes only limited data to depict or illustrate points. The current DCA planning standards actually encourage such non-inclusion of data. Almost any data depicted at a moment in time quickly becomes dated, and maybe irrelevant. The world wide web offers the opportunity of more relevant and up-to-date data at the time of access.



**L** *Pondtown Festival, Rhine*   **R** *Rural Scene, Dodge County*

There are a variety of reliable public and private sources of data. Of course, the traditional source of official community data is the U.S. Census Bureau. Data on Dodge County, its municipalities, or any other jurisdiction is quickly accessed at [quickfacts.census.gov](http://quickfacts.census.gov) which will provide a summary community profile on many popular data items, and links to even more data. Another quality source of data is the website, [www.statsamerica.org](http://www.statsamerica.org), which provides a compilation of primarily government data on many items for any county in any state of the U.S. The site is maintained by Indiana University in partnership with the federal Economic Development Administration. The University of Georgia maintains a website, [www.georgiadata.org](http://www.georgiadata.org), where county level data for nearly 1,300 variables related to a wide variety of subjects on population, labor, natural resources, government, health, education, and crime can be accessed. The data can be compared to other counties and the state as well as on a historical change basis, among various user options. The data is compiled from The Georgia County Guide and the Farmgate Value Report prepared by UGA's Extension Service. The Georgia Department of Community Affairs has available data for cities and counties under "Community Planning Resources," and will also prepare community data reports when requested under "Other Resources." The State of Georgia has official labor and economic data in its Georgia Labor Market Explorer as organized by the Georgia Department of Labor at [explorer.gdol.ga.gov](http://explorer.gdol.ga.gov). Additional state sponsored economic data is available at [www.georgia.org](http://www.georgia.org). Excellent overall private data sources include [www.city-data.com](http://www.city-data.com), [datausa.io](http://datausa.io), and [www.usa.com](http://www.usa.com), while [www.headwaterseconomics.org](http://www.headwaterseconomics.org) is an excellent source for socioeconomic information, including data and interpretation through its economic profile system.



**Population Projections.** The official 2020 Census population of Dodge County was 19,925, down by 8.5 percent from 2010's 21,796. This decline followed a general trend of rural Georgia counties losing population and was lagging behind the state's growth rate of 10.2%. The national growth rate for the same period was 7.3%. This population decline suggests a lack of attention to rural counties for new growth and an aging population. Dodge County's location; its rich history; exceptional community facilities and services; progressive community spirit, leadership, and cooperation; abundant and outstanding natural resources; many fields and pine forests; existing businesses and entrepreneurship; its significant education resources; high quality of life, and easy access to larger metro areas and Georgia's ports are positive factors and influences for future growth and development. The 2020 lower Census population is a concern for the community and will be addressed with talent retainment and industry development.



**L** First United Methodist Church, Eastman **R** Historic Peabody School

While past and present population levels are readily available on the world wide web, population projections are not so easily accessed. The Governor's Office of Planning and Budget (OPB) is responsible for generating official state population projections for Georgia counties. Current OPB projections for Dodge County from 2020 are 20,416 persons in 2030 and 19,936 persons in 2040, essentially expecting a loss of population and may be a cause for concern and further examination. The OPB 2040 projection is actually less than the Census 2019 estimate of 20,829. The Heart of Georgia Altamaha Regional Commission (HOGARC) also prepares population projections which have proven to be relatively accurate in the past. HOGARC's population projections for Dodge County, as noted in the 2017 Regional Plan, show significantly higher projection population levels than the current OPB projections. More recent Regional Commission projections, which take into account lower 2019 Census estimates continue to project significant growth. These latest Regional Commission projections include 24,883 in 2030 and 26,944 in 2040. The OPB projections indicating population loss do not seem realistic.



## Population Projections, Dodge County

	2010	2020	2021	2025	2030	2035	2040
OPB, 2020	21,796	20,489	20,445	20,446	20,416	20,239	19,936
HOGARC Regional Plan	21,796	22,047	-	22,815	23,610	-	25,284
Regional Commission	21,796	22,979	-	23,912	24,883	25,893	26,944

Sources: State Office of Planning and Budget, 2021; Heart of Georgia Altamaha Regional Commission Regional Plan, 2019; Heart of Georgia Altamaha Regional Commission staff projection using Microsoft Excel GROWTH formula, 2021; Excel Forecast method using the AAA version of the Exponential Smoothing (ETS) algorithm at a 95% confidence interval.

**Coordination with Other Plans.** Dodge County has an approved and adopted hazard mitigation plan prepared for the Federal Emergency Management Agency to remain eligible for federal disaster assistance. This Hazard Mitigation Plan’s preparation was coordinated with past comprehensive plan preparation. It is clear that the two most prominent hazards facing Dodge County that can be influenced by the comprehensive plan are the hazard mitigation plan goals to reduce damage from flood hazards and wildfire, and thereby protect life and health. The comprehensive plan objectives to conserve the county’s river and stream corridors, to maintain healthy working forests and fields (including employing proper management techniques), to improve fire/emergency management and other public safety services, and to enhance growth management/code enforcement regulation are generally consistent with, and offer implementation to, the hazard mitigation plan.

The Dodge County Joint Comprehensive Plan is also consistent with the Heart of Georgia Altamaha Regional Commission’s Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy. The Strategy’s goals and objectives to develop industrial parks; develop/improve local infrastructure; enhance telecommunications infrastructure; retain existing businesses/industry; attract new industry; and spur non-traditional economic development, like tourism and downtown development, are repeated as principal goals in the Dodge County Comprehensive Plan. The local plan is similarly supportive of espoused state economic goals.

**Regional Water Plan and Environmental Planning Criteria Consideration.** Dodge County is part of the Altamaha Regional Water Planning Council. The adopted regional water plan, *Altamaha Regional Water Plan* (2011, updated 2017), was considered by the Dodge County Local Plan Coordination Committee and the local governments in preparation of this plan. This local comprehensive plan’s objectives to maintain viable agriculture/forestry uses, protect/conservate natural resources, to enhance intergovernmental coordination and government/efficiencies, and upgrade local infrastructure all help implement, and maintain consistency with, the regional water plan. The vision of the regional water plan, “to wisely manage, develop and protect the region’s water resources...to enhance quality of life..., protect natural systems..., and support the basin’s economy,” is inherent in this comprehensive plan’s community vision and goals.





Similarly, the Environmental Planning Criteria were also considered in the development of this comprehensive plan. The local governments of Dodge County, including Dodge County, the City of Chauncey, the Town of Chester, the City of Eastman, the City of Milan, and the City of Rhine, are in compliance with the Environmental Planning Criteria, having adopted implementing, consistent ordinances in 1999. The local governments, with the assistance of the Heart of Georgia Altamaha Regional Commission, adopted the Region’s model “Environmental Conservation, On-Site Sewage Management, and Permit” Ordinance.

**Consistency with Quality Community Objectives.** In 2011, the Georgia Department of Community Affairs changed its Quality Community Objectives to a more general listing and summary of the 10 objectives. These include: Economic Prosperity, Resource Management, Efficient Land Use, Local Preparedness, Sense of Place, Regional Cooperation, Housing Options, Transportation Options, Educational Opportunities, and Community Health.

The Dodge County Joint Comprehensive Plan directly espouses (many of) these objectives and therefore, is very consistent with, and supportive of them. This comprehensive plan has goals to achieve a brighter future and better community for Dodge County, which is consistent with a quality community and the DCA Quality Community Objectives. The Dodge County Local Plan Coordination Committee reviewed and considered these Quality Community Objectives at one of its meetings.



**L** Eastman Industrial Building **R** Eastman City Hall

**Community Involvement.** Throughout the planning process, the City of Chauncey, Town of Chester, City of Eastman, City of Milan, City of Rhine and members of the plan coordination committee actively collected and incorporated input from community members. Creating civic engagement was an essential component to developing the comprehensive plan. Several opportunities, including stakeholder meetings, a community survey, and community drop-in session, were provided to the community in order to gain as much input as possible.

To accomplish this, they created a steering committee, the Dodge County Joint Comprehensive Plan Coordination Committee, of all local stakeholders who could be envisioned to help guide this plan’s de-



velopment, and make the community a better place to live, work, recreate, and learn. This committee did include elected and appointed members from the governing authorities, local economic development practitioners, and local government staff, as well as many others concerned with community and economic development and other issues within the entire community. This Coordination Committee had notable participation; was actively involved in the development of all facets of this comprehensive plan; and had numerous opportunities to both help develop, review, and revise all components. The first orders of business at any Coordination Committee meeting were review of any revisions to previous elements based on committee input, and chances to return to and modify earlier elements, if desired. The initial meeting of the Local Plan Coordination Committee included a formal identification of strengths and weaknesses of the community, including opportunities and threats (SWOT analysis). This identification was utilized in developing all plan elements. A total of five stakeholder meetings were held throughout the planning process.



**L** Pine Tree Forest **R** Old Stuckey Candy Company Postcard

In addition to holding regular stakeholder meetings, several other opportunities were given to the community to participate in the planning process. An initial public hearing was held on April 1, 2021 and was advertised in the newspaper in order to make citizens aware of the plan update and the planning process. On April 13, 2021, a community input drop-in session was held in order to provide citizens with another opportunity to discuss their opinions on what changes they would like to see with the plan and with their community. Several residents attended and an open discussion occurred. In addition, a final public hearing was held on September 1, 2021, in order to provide the public with the opportunity to review the updated final comprehensive plan draft.

### **1. Interactive Website**

In order to provide the community with a clear understanding of how the planning process would work and to keep residents updated throughout the process, an interactive website was developed. Through the website, citizens could access documents and notes from each stakeholder meeting and could submit responses to the survey questions at any time throu-





ghout the planning process. In addition, a planning timeline was made available on the website so that community members were always aware of when different meetings and planning sessions were occurring.

## 2. SWOT Analysis

An initial steering committee meeting was held on March 4th, 2021. During this meeting, members of the steering committee participated in a SWOT analysis where they identified strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in Dodge County. Figure 1 shows the results of the SWOT analysis. This activity provided a starting point in identifying the overall needs and opportunities of Dodge County, which are addressed in "Needs and Opportunities".



**L** Dodge County High School **R** Dodge County Public Library

The SWOT analysis showed that one of Dodge County's biggest strengths is its education system. The high graduation rate and the local colleges in the county contribute to creating a highly educated workforce. Other strengths that were identified included Dodge County's anchor institutions such as the local hospital and the airport. Dodge County also takes pride in its ability to be a historic and welcoming community where residents can enjoy a low cost of living while engaging in a variety of civic clubs, hunting organizations, churches, fishing, and performing art activities.

During the SWOT analysis, several weaknesses of Dodge County were discussed. A key concern for the county is the number of 18 to 35-year-olds who are leaving the area and choosing to reside elsewhere. A likely reason for this is due to the lack of amenities and entertainment options within the county. There is also a lack of housing options such as high-end units and housing for college students. Another concern for the county is the amount of infrastructure damage that occurs due to logging and commercial trucks.

The next portion of the SWOT analysis pertained to identifying opportunities in Dodge County. With the County having an airport and an aviation training program, there is the opportunity to attract more aviation industries. By attracting more industries and employers, there is the potential that more recent graduates will choose to stay within Dodge County and





contribute to the local economy. There is also an opportunity to create more housing options for college students and to revitalize downtown Eastman. Another opportunity for the county is to create a centralized park where community members can gather to socialize and relax. The final portion of the SWOT analysis included the discussion of possible threats to Dodge County. Several major threats that were identified included the lack of a paid fire department, the lack of broadband, and the need to upgrade sewer and water infrastructure. Each of these elements pose a threat to industries and residents looking to locate within the County.

### 3. Community Survey

With the help of the Heart of Georgia Altamaha Regional Commission, Dodge County, and its municipalities, developed a survey to distribute to community members. The survey consisted of nine questions and the goal of the survey was to gain additional public input on the needs and opportunities of the community, which are addressed in "Needs and Opportunities". The survey was distributed to community members through email, through paper copies, and was made available on the Dodge County Joint Comprehensive Plan Update webpage. Results of the survey were discussed at a later stakeholder meeting where the needs and opportunities community were being addressed. A copy of the survey can be found in Appendix A.

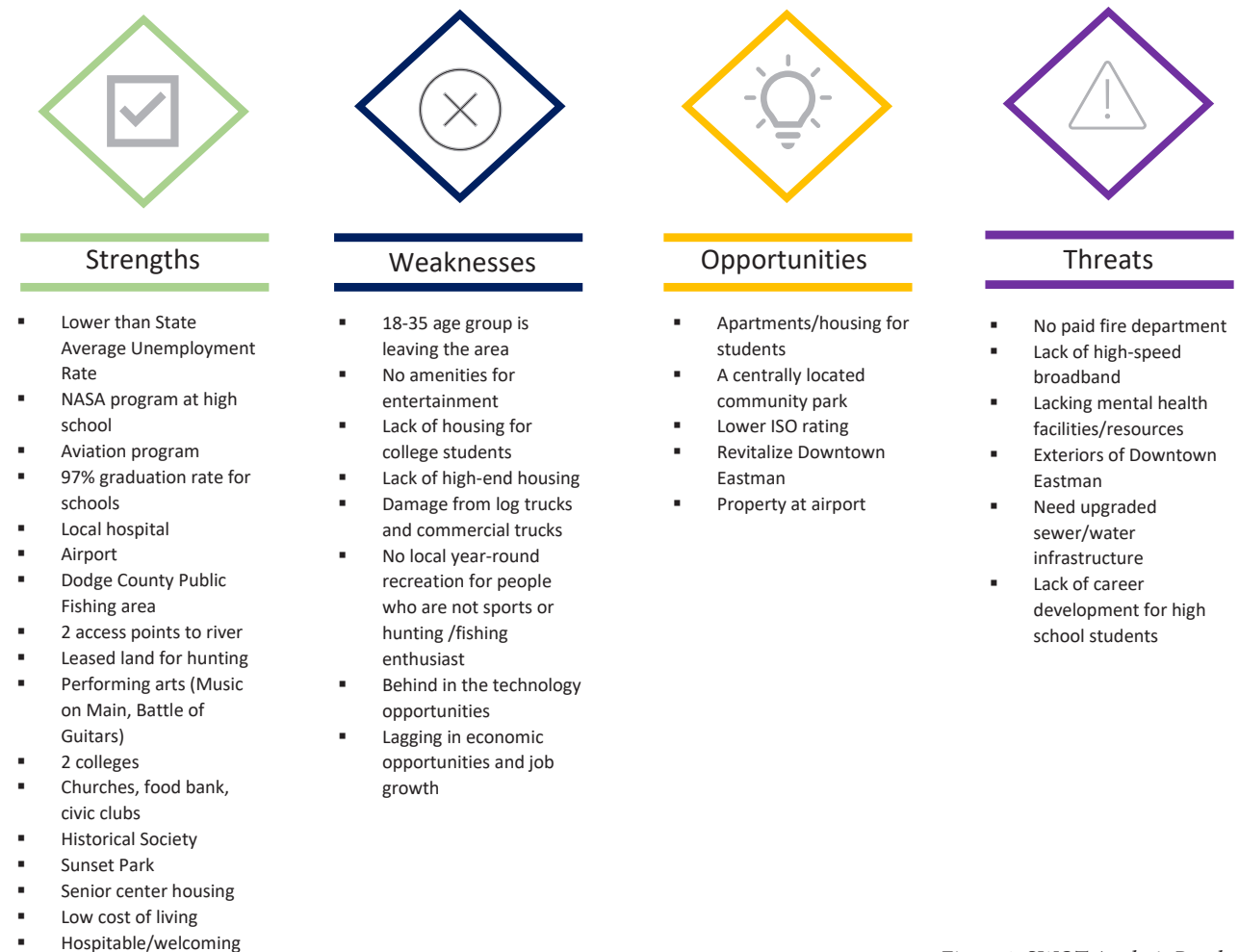


Figure 1. SWOT Analysis Results

