



**Explore Georgia's
\$80 billion tourism industry**

GaBiz

The Magazine for Georgia Business

Visitors Welcome



Paddleboarding
at Vogel State Park

**Georgia's
Traffic by the
Numbers**

**New Logistics Link:
The Gainesville
Inland Port**

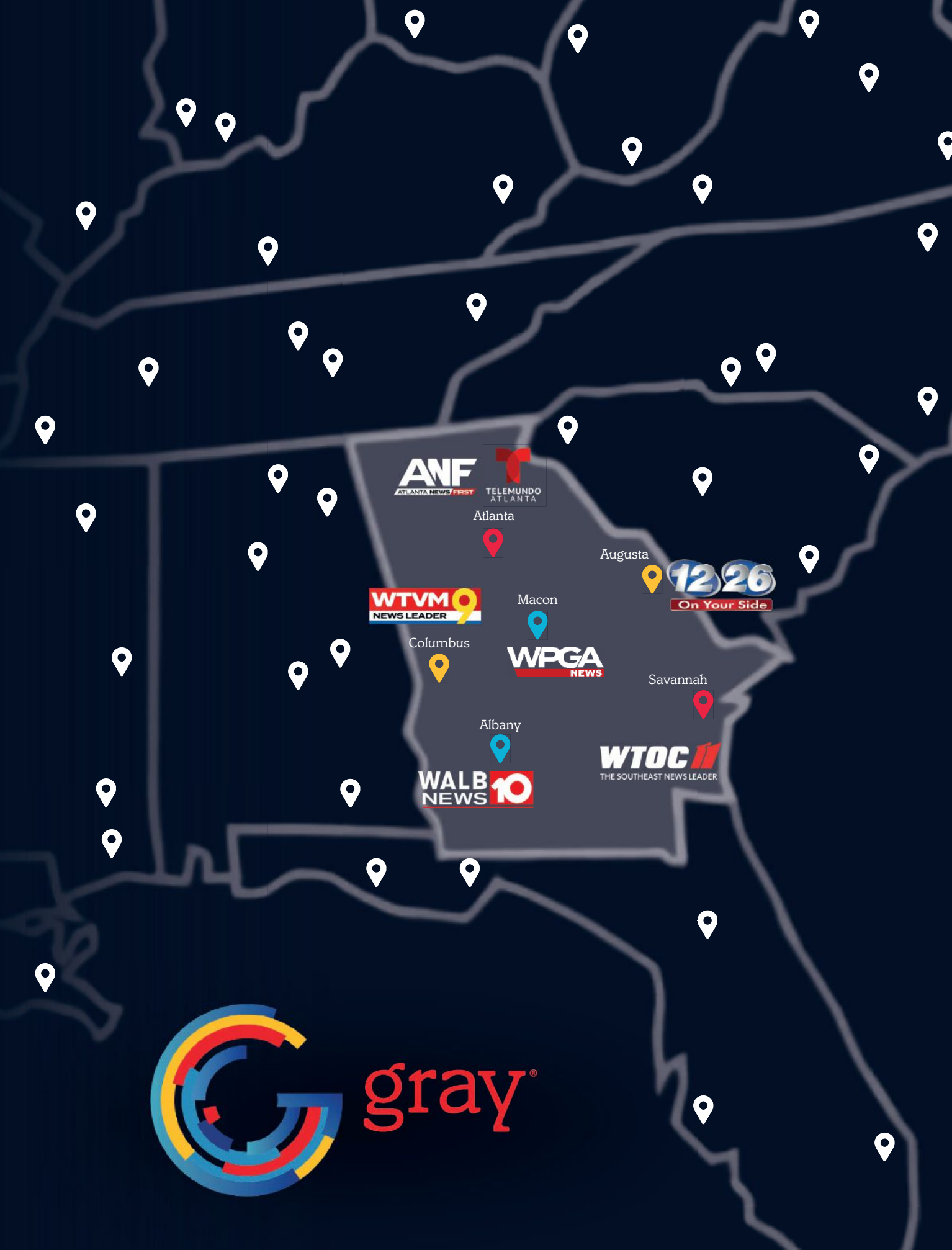
**Talking Shop
with Home Depot
CIO Angie Brown**

Local presence. **Georgia** strength. **National** reach.

Headquartered in **Georgia**, Gray Media has grown from its home state into one of the nation's leading local media companies, serving communities from Albany, Georgia, to Anchorage, Alaska. While our footprint spans the country, our commitment to local journalism remains the same—delivering trusted news, critical weather coverage, and meaningful community connections in the markets we serve.

For Georgia businesses, that scale creates a distinct advantage. Gray combines unmatched reach across every Georgia television market with the resources, expertise, and innovation of a nationwide media network. The result is a powerful platform that helps businesses build stronger connections with customers, expand their influence, and align with a trusted local brand that understands Georgia while operating on a national stage.

www.graymedia.com







GILDED AGE CHARM MEETS MODERN INNOVATION

Journey through wind-swept dunes, along oceanfront vistas, and through pristine maritime forest—all thoughtfully preserved to honor the natural beauty of the landscape. Experience a timeless course, elevated for today's game.



GREAT DUNES
JEKYLL ISLAND

Newly restored. Book your tee time:



CUMBERLAND ART FESTIVAL KICKSTART THE ART

This fall, nonprofit One Cumberland will add a vibrant new chapter to Atlanta's cultural calendar with the debut of the Cumberland Art Festival, a two-day celebration of art, community, and creativity taking place October 17–18 at Galleria on the Park.

The inaugural festival is expected to draw between 15,000 and 25,000 visitors, transforming the heart of Cumberland into an open-air gallery and gathering place.

More than 125 artists from across Georgia will showcase work spanning a wide range of mediums, including painting, photography, ceramics, jewelry, fiber art, metalwork, and more. The carefully curated lineup offers visitors the opportunity to meet artists, explore diverse creative styles, and purchase original works directly from makers.

Beyond the art, the festival is designed as a family-friendly weekend experience. An interactive Kid Zone will feature hands-on activities and creative programming for younger attendees, while festivalgoers can enjoy live entertainment, local performers, and a variety of food and beverage offerings throughout the weekend.

The event reflects Cumberland's continued evolution as one of metro Atlanta's fastest-growing destinations. Long recognized as a major employment and entertainment center, the district is increasingly investing in public spaces, placemaking, and community-focused experiences that enhance quality of life for residents and visitors alike. Organizers hope the festival will become an annual signature tradition that strengthens Cumberland's identity as a cultural destination.

The Cumberland Art Festival will take place at 100 Galleria Parkway on Saturday, October 17, from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., and Sunday, October 18, from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is free and open to the public.

ONE CUMBERLAND

404-210-8551

cumberlanddistrict.org



CUMBERLAND ART FESTIVAL

OCT 17-18

100 GALLERIA PKWY,
ATLANTA, GA 30339



MARK YOUR CALENDAR!

The Cumberland Art Festival
is a vibrant celebration of
creativity, community, and
culture.

- Local Artists
- Live Entertainment
- Artist Market
- Kids Zone
- Local Food Vendors



SAT October 17
10 a.m.-6 p.m.

SUN October 18
10 a.m.-5 p.m.

contents

Savannah's picturesque downtown is a prime spot to shop, sit, and stroll.



44

Destination Georgia

Georgia is definitely on visitors' minds. From major conventions to business meetings, family sightseeing trips, and youth sports tournaments, travel in Georgia generated \$82 billion in total economic impact in 2024, thanks to 174.2 million visitors who spent \$45.2 billion.

54

Tourism Flows in the Fountain City

We investigate how Columbus transformed from a post-industrial town into one of the state's most compelling tourism destinations, generating \$1 billion in annual impact and supporting more than 6,000 jobs.

58

On the Right Track

Located in the heart of Georgia's manufacturing and logistics corridor, the Gainesville Inland Port links northeast Georgia with the Port of Savannah, increasing business opportunities and decreasing traffic and CO2 emissions in the process.

JPMorganChase

Make Growth Happen

With more than a century serving Greater Atlanta, JPMorganChase knows that entrepreneurs here have a big impact. That's why we have backed more than **160,000 Atlanta small businesses**—such as Southern National restaurant in Atlanta's Summerhill neighborhood—with the credit, capital, and mentorship they need to grow. Because strong businesses help fuel the economy, and growing the economy is our business.

jpmorganchase.com/atlanta

JPMorganChase client was told in advance that they would be featured in advertising.
JPMorgan Chase Bank, N.A. Member FDIC.
©2026 JPMorgan Chase & Co. All rights reserved.

Reggie Washington
CEO of Southern National

64



34



contents

Departments

- 10 Interact
- 14 Publisher's Note
- 16 Editor's Note
- 18 Contributors

The Brief

23 Water Cooler
AT&T FirstNet nationwide network for public safety; development at DeKalb-Peachtree Airport; and statewide manufacturing ventures

24 The Conversation
Angie Brown, CIO of The Home Depot, talks AI, innovation, workforce, and legacy

27 Spotlights
Industry updates, including the latest news on labor unions and data center development

30 Balance Sheet
A look at traffic and transportation—from the number of cars on the road to highway improvement projects and public transit

32 Off Duty
William Shida incorporates lessons from his days on the PGA Pro Golf Tour into his role as president and COO of SaaS company Extu

34 Stamp of Approval
Three local leaders share business advice, healthy habits, media recommendations, mentors, mottos, and more

On the Cover
Paddleboarding in Vogel State Park; photographed by John McDonald

38 Family Business
How the Bland family has grown into one of the world's largest growers, packers, and shippers of Vidalia Sweet Onions

40 Fast Lane
Go behind the scenes with Patrick Chopson and Sandeep Ahuja, the husband-and-wife team behind Atlanta-based, AI-powered architecture firm Cove

64 My Georgia
Steve O'Shea, owner of 3 Porch Farm in Comer, shares his passion for flowers, nature, and community





ALPHARETTA IS YOUR *ultimate* MEETING DESTINATION!

Alpharetta, GA is a premiere meeting destination with **31 modern hotels** and unique venues accommodating 10 to 2,500 attendees. The **Alpharetta Conference Center** offers 44,000 sq. ft. of flexible meeting space in Avalon's walkable community. Indulge in chef-driven restaurants, satisfying all palates. Explore **three shopping districts** and group-friendly **entertainment venues**. Take advantage of **complimentary event planning resources** from Awesome Alpharetta professionals to enhance your experience.



SCAN HERE to start planning *your*
meeting in **Awesome Alpharetta**.

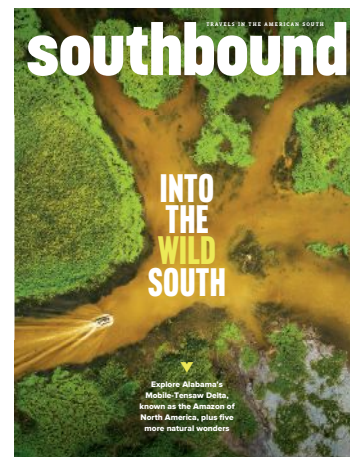


engage

@gabizmagazine

Travel is Their Business

Also under the banner of Atlanta Magazine Custom Media, *GaBiz*'s sister publication, *Southbound*, is an award-winning quarterly travel magazine covering 12 Southeastern states. The tagline, "Travels in the American South," says it all, whether the magazine is showcasing must-visit hotels, spotlighting favorite restaurant dishes, or speaking with fellow Southerners—from innkeepers and chefs to docents and tour operators. With more than 10 years in print, *Southbound* has garnered a host of national honors, including several Lowell Thomas awards, presented by the Society of American Travel Writers and considered the most prestigious in travel journalism.



For advertising and sponsorship inquiries, contact Sean McGinnis at smcginnis@gabizmagazine.com or (404)-527-5501.



Read All About It

Visit GaBizMagazine.com and stay current on Georgia's business landscape.

Order print copies and subscribe to future issues

To purchase single or bulk copies of the latest edition of *GaBiz*, or to change your address, contact circulation at 866-660-6247 or atlanta_service@hourmediagroup.com. To subscribe to future issues, visit atlantamagazine.com/subscribe-to-gabiz.



We're Here for Every Business in Georgia

Find more savings to keep helping your community.

Energy costs are a big part of any business budget. That's why Georgia Power helps to empower Georgia businesses with programs and tips to improve your energy efficiency. We don't just help your bottom line – we make it easier to be there for your employees.

Learn more and start saving at GeorgiaPower.com/upgrades.



© 2026 Georgia Power Company

What's your favorite Georgia vacation spot?



The Magazine for Georgia Business

Summer 2026

Editor in Chief **JENNIFER BRADLEY FRANKLIN**
President & Publisher **SEAN MCGINNIS**

We have a small cabin in Clayton and going up there never gets old. We alternate between lazy afternoons reading on the deck and hiking at Warwoman Dell.

Our family has a beach house on St. Simons Island—we go as much for the lifestyle as for the beach!

Executive Editor
Art Director
Senior Editor
Contributing Writers

I like to lazily bike around Savannah's squares, stopping for snacks and shaded benches, hoping to meet some friendly folks and cute dogs.

Contributing Artists

Blue Ridge has the perfect mix of a vibrant downtown with great shopping and restaurants along with plenty of outdoor activities and beautiful scenery.

Production Director

JEN R. COLTRIN
LIZ LOVASCO
SARA MCCABE
JAMIE ALLEN
KARINA ANTENUCCI
LAUREN FINNEY HARDEN
MICHAEL JACOBS
NICOLE LETTS
JENNIFER KLEE
KATJA RIDDERBUSCH
DON SADLER
ALLISON SHIRREFFS
CLÉMENT BARBÉ
ELEY
LINN FRITZ
JOHN MCDONALD
GREGORY MILLER
DAN PAGE

WHITNEY TOMASINO

A PRODUCT OF

ATLANTA MAGAZINE CUSTOM MEDIA

5901-A Peachtree Dunwoody Road NE, Suite 350, Atlanta, GA 30328
404-527-5500 | atlantamagazine.com

Editorial Director
Design Director
Associate Publisher
Senior Editors

Associate Editor
Art Director
Associate Art Director

PRODUCTION

Production Director

KEVIN BENEFIELD
CRISTINA VILLA HAZAR
JON BRASHER
JENNIFER GREEN
EMMA HUNT
BRADY NASH
MAURA DUPRÉ
BRIANNA BOWMAN

WHITNEY TOMASINO

ADVERTISING

Senior Account
Executives

MARY DERZIS
mderzis@atlantamagazine.com

CLINT SMITH
csmith@atlantamagazine.com

LAURA JACOBSON TURNER
ljacobson@atlantamagazine.com

Account Executive

DARBY JONES
djones@atlantamagazine.com

Business Manager

SUSAN YOST The Cloister at Sea Island—I always try to arrive at the resort in time to catch the trolley over to The Lodge for sunset.

NATIONAL SALES REPRESENTATIVES

New York, New England,
Pennsylvania, Maryland,
Washington, D.C.

CYNTHIA DONAHER
cynthia@donahermedia.com

California,
Pacific Northwest

SHANA WONG
shanawong@me.com

Hawaii

DEBBIE ANDERSON, Destination Marketing
debbieanderson@dmhawaii.com

Midwest, Southwest

CHERYL SCHULTZ, President, CS Media
cschultz@csmediainc.com

Florida, Caribbean

WHITNEY DICK, Accounts Director
wdick@atlantamagazine.com

DIGITAL

Digital Advertising
Campaign Manager

SHELBY WISDOM Nothing beats a cocktail while watching the sun set at Lake Burton after a day of boating and dock-sitting.

MARKETING

Director of Marketing
and Public Relations

ZAQUIS ROSS
zross@atlantamagazine.com

Director of Events

SUMMER JACOBS
sjacobs@atlantamagazine.com

CEO

President

HOURL MEDIA
STEFAN WANCZYK
JOHN BALARDO

To purchase single or bulk copies of the latest issue of GaBiz magazine, or to change address, contact circulation by phone at (866) 660-6247 or via email: atlanta_service@hourmediagroup.com.

PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.



NEW PERFORMANCE
STAGE on the SQUARE

Big Boi kicked off
Decatur Watchfest '26
in June.

DECATUR

WHERE IT'S GREATER

Our transformed Square is better than ever!

We shook up our Square with a major makeover, and now we invite you to check it out! Enjoy a festival on our expanded green space, take in a concert on our new performance stage, or have a picnic, stroll and relax. And, bring the kids – we thought of them, too!

We're easy to find, just **six miles east of Atlanta** with three MARTA stations and gold-level walkability.

Make it a stay, just steps from the Square!

Hampton Inn & Suites • 116 Clairemont Ave.

Courtyard By Marriott • 130 Clairemont Ave.



KIDS PLAY AREA



DESTINATION
DINING



Decatur Visitors Center
113 Clairemont Ave. Decatur, GA 30030



visitdecaturga.com
f @visitdecaturga

“Tourism Is Economic Development”

I HEARD STATE REPRESENTATIVE RON STEPHENS use the above phrase well over two decades ago, and since then, he has continued in his diligent efforts to help colleagues, constituents, the press, and other stakeholders understand how tourism's economic impact benefits Georgia.

It's much easier to see and understand the effect a new Hyundai plant has on the state. That kind of announcement comes with huge job numbers, tens of thousands of new vehicles each year, and a significant lift felt by the surrounding communities. After all, more jobs mean more money being poured into the local economy. More manufacturing plants mean more goods and services being bought, sold, and transferred all over the world. For a snapshot of how this impacts our state, take a tour of the Georgia Ports Authority terminal in Savannah. Seeing the orchestrated magic of how container ships are loaded, unloaded, and transported across the world makes it easy to connect the economic impact dots of how this sector benefits our state.

It can be harder to appreciate the economic impact of tourism. This is particularly true in smaller, more rural destinations in Georgia. Because tourism doesn't necessarily have a physical product to make and sell, we have to dive a bit deeper into the data to see the real outcome.

That story for Georgia is a very bright one. At the end of 2024 (the most recent year that tourism data is available), Georgia welcomed more than 174 million visitors who generated \$56.1 billion in local and state tax revenue. The tourism industry creates and supports 470,570 jobs.

There's no doubt that Georgia is a favorite destination of visitors from all 50 states and all corners of the globe. When discussing tourism's impact, however, we often overlook how these travelers also improve the quality of life for us as residents of Georgia. Their tourist dollars are a

significant driver of small business across the state. Think about the Main Street shop or restaurant that stays afloat through a combination of local support and out-of-town visitors. That's community economic development, as well as neighborhood revitalization, that often goes unrecorded, but it's real.

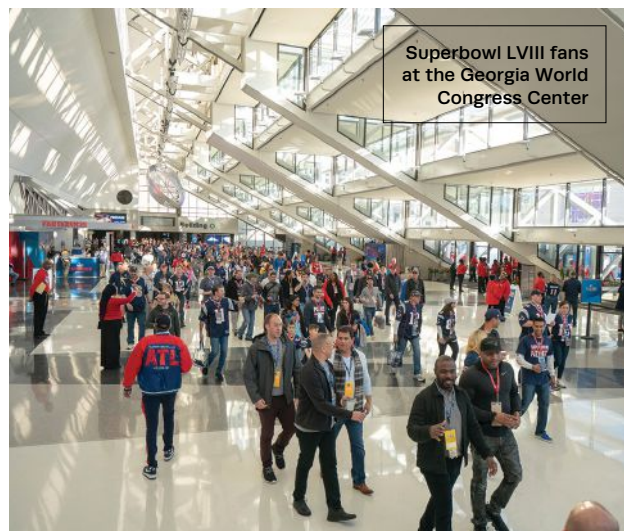
I see these positive effects firsthand every day, and my message is simple: Support Georgia tourism, and you'll help grow the Georgia economy.

SINCERELY,

Sean McGinnis

President & Publisher

smcginnis@gabizmagazine.com



Fulton Industrial CID FORMING THE FUTURE

With more than 55 million square feet of industrial space and more than 26,000 jobs, the Fulton Industrial area is the largest industrial corridor in the eastern United States. For over six decades, this vital economic engine has played a central role in the movement of goods throughout metro Atlanta and the Southeast, supporting businesses, jobs, and regional growth.

For the past 15 years, the Fulton Industrial Community Improvement District (CID) has helped guide the corridor's evolution. Led by Executive Director Gil Prado, the public-private partnership works on behalf of district property owners to enhance infrastructure, improve mobility, strengthen public safety, and foster an attractive business environment.

Today, with more than \$10 million in active projects underway, the CID continues to invest in the corridor's future. One of the most significant opportunities for growth lies around the I-20

interchange, where five long-vacant, blighted properties were recently demolished, creating opportunities for redevelopment, new investment, and expanded amenities.

As supply chains evolve and industrial demands change, the CID remains focused on keeping the corridor competitive. Strategic investments in truck parking, staging areas, EV charging infrastructure, and other logistics-support facilities are helping businesses operate more efficiently while positioning Fulton Industrial for continued growth.

FULTON INDUSTRIAL CID

404-368-4929

boulevardcid.org

Fast Moving. Forward Thinking.



CELEBRATING 15 YEARS OF INVESTMENT, TRANSFORMATION & IMPACT

The Fulton Industrial Corridor – Atlanta's Industrial Hub for More Than 60 Years

Rising property values. Falling crime rates. World-class freight connectivity. The Fulton Industrial corridor isn't just keeping up with tomorrow – it's building it.

FULTON
INDUSTRIAL



BOULEVARD
IMPROVEMENT
DISTRICT

boulevardcid.org



LATE THIS SPRING, my husband and I spent a weekend at our family's cabin in Blue Ridge. As we sat at the bar of our favorite downtown restaurant, we struck up a conversation with some others having dinner around us. We chatted about how the mountain town has grown exponentially over the past decade, with new hotels and eateries. One gentleman marveled at the array of license plates from neighboring states, which made me realize that my favorite mountain metropolis could be viewed as a microcosm of how the state's tourism sector is thriving.

With that in mind, our team at *GaBiz* knew that a cover theme focused on tourism—one of the state's top economic drivers—would be a crowd-pleaser.

While I often write about travel, it's rare to get a glimpse behind the scenes, so I jumped at the chance to research and pen the "Destination Georgia" feature (page 44). I spoke with local business owners who have seen the impact of travelers firsthand, and I consulted with some of the state's top leaders to learn how Georgia is laying the groundwork for future growth. It was fascinating to learn that, in 2024 alone, Georgia welcomed 174.2 million visitors who spent a collective \$45.2 billion. Columbus is one of the cities that has seen a substantial change in its fortunes thanks to tourism.

Writer Nicole Letts explores its rise from a dwindling manufacturing hub to a serious travel draw, both for business and leisure, in her story, "Tourism Flows in the Fountain City," on page 54.

Beyond the cover stories, this issue is chock-full of interesting reads. Reporter Michael Jacobs does a by-the-numbers exploration of Georgia's traffic—including some mitigation strategies on the horizon—in "Balance Sheet" on page 30. Don Sadler shares insights about the newly opened Gainesville Inland Port, the \$134 million, 104-acre intermodal rail terminal that connects the Port of Savannah with northeast Georgia, adding significant efficiency to Georgia's logistics network on page 58. Katja Ridderbusch spent time with the cofounders of Cove, an AI-powered architecture firm that is pioneering new efficiencies in the industry. Read all about it in her story, "Rethinking Architecture," on page 40.

Whether you're poring over this issue during some downtime between meetings or on a personal getaway to recharge, we hope you'll feel inspired and encouraged as you page through this issue of *GaBiz*.

Jennifer Bradley Franklin
Editor in Chief
jfranklin@atlantamagazine.com

Mercier Orchards is one of the many year-round attractions that allure travelers to Blue Ridge.



PORTRAIT: HAROLD DANIELS; BLUE RIDGE: EXPLORE GEORGIA



McLEMORE
THE RESORT ON LOOKOUT MOUNTAIN

Experience Cloudland at McLemore Resort, Curio Collection by Hilton, atop Lookout Mountain. Offering 245 rooms and over 20,000 square feet of event space, the magnificent landscape is the perfect backdrop to ensure your next meeting, retreat, or conference is a soaring success.

Visit StayCloudland.com or call 800-329-8154 for more information.

Meet the Team



John McDonald

PHOTOGRAPHER, COVER

» Atlanta-based photographer John McDonald found his passion in high school—he has always had a creative itch and a desire to be outside. He specializes in both commercial and editorial photography, with a focus on environmental portraits and outdoor lifestyle images. A self-described “working dad,” he is also a Little League coach, dog lover, vinyl collector, beer guy, and avid hiker.

» **Vogel Vacation:** “My wife’s family has been visiting Vogel State Park for over 45 years, usually every 4th of July. It is a stunning park in a stunning part of Georgia. The camp area is full of family-friendly activities that keep the kids entertained and worn out. The trails are well-maintained, and the hospitality from the park rangers is second to none. A midweek journey helps cut down on the crowds, and the comfortable cottages are perfect for families.”

» **SEE MORE OF HIS WORK:** johnemcdonald.com



Nicole Letts

WRITER, TOURISM FLOWS IN THE FOUNTAIN CITY, PAGE 54

» Nicole Letts is an Atlanta-based freelance journalist focused on the modern American South. Her work has been published by some of the country’s top magazines and digital publications, including *AAA Explorer*, *Architectural Digest*, *BBC Travel*, *Garden & Gun*, *Good Grit*, *Southern Living*, *Southbound*, and many more. She is also the author of the book *Unique Eats and Eateries of Alabama*.

» **Modern Explorer:** “I’ve been nerding out about Columbus since I first visited as a tourist a few years ago. The city has some of my favorite museums, including the Bo Bartlett Center, which showcases many large-scale works by the prolific artist; the Ma Rainey house, a landmark honoring the blues legend; and the Smith-McCullers House, the former home of the author Carson McCullers, who wrote *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*.”

» **FOLLOW HER ON INSTAGRAM:** @nicolemelv



Jennifer Klee

WRITER, FAMILY BUSINESS, PAGE 38

» Jennifer Klee is a freelance writer and the author of *Some Such Whatnot*, a weekly lifestyle newsletter on Substack. A lifelong devotee of Southern literature, particularly Pat Conroy, she followed her love of the region’s storytelling to earn a master’s in English from Conroy’s own alma mater, The Citadel. She’s never found a small southeastern town she doesn’t love.

» **A Sweet Story:** “I could’ve talked to Troy Blaud about farming all day. There’s something life-affirming in learning how much produce shapes our lives in ways we never consider. Most of what I thought I knew about Vidalia Sweet Onions came from the 1996 Sammy Kershaw song. Troy set me straight: A sweet onion grown outside those 20 Georgia counties is the equivalent of sparkling wine made outside of Champagne, France.”

» **READ MORE OF HER WORK:** somesuchwhatnot.substack.com



Jamie Allen

WRITER, MY GEORGIA, PAGE 64

» Jamie Allen is the author of the humor collection *We Are Very Important Cavemen*, and the novel *The Dashing Diner*. His writing appears in the *Oxford American*, the *Missouri Review*, the *Paris Review*’s “The Daily,” *McSweeney’s*, and other outlets. He is also the creator of the Squirrel Census, a multimedia science and storytelling project that was featured in the *New York Times*.

» **Sympathy in Bloom:** “When my mom passed away in 2022, a friend mailed Icelandic poppies from 3 Porch Farm. As our family transitioned to a new phase of life, the poppies filled our space with stunning, melancholic blooms of red, pink, coral, and yellow. I eventually looked up the farm and learned of Steve and Mandy’s inspiring story of love and hard work. I loved sharing their story.”

» **READ MORE OF HIS WORK:** jamiewashere.com



STRONGER CONNECTIONS START IN NORTHEAST GEORGIA.

Getting freight out of Northeast Georgia just got simpler. With the Gainesville Inland Port Service, shippers now have a direct intermodal connection to the Port of Savannah through our 19,200-mile rail network and 260+ short line partners.

By reducing truck miles through the Mason Mega Rail link, we're helping shippers build a supply chain that moves as fast as they do.

NorfolkSouthern.com/Totally-Connected



NS INTERMODAL
TOTALLY CONNECTED



THE VOICE. THE RESOURCE. THE CONNECTION.

STRONGER TOGETHER.

Better for Georgia.



LEGISLATIVE
ADVOCACY



INDUSTRY
LEADERSHIP



EDUCATION &
INFORMATION



NETWORKING &
CONNECTIONS

Working together to elevate hospitality,
strengthen our industry, and drive
economic growth across Georgia.

ONE STATE. ONE INDUSTRY. ONE VOICE.



LEARN HOW YOU CAN BE A PART OF *Georgia's Hospitality Community.* WWW.GHLA.NET

THE BRIEF

Economic News, Industry Trends, and Business Profiles

Bland Farms's success is rooted in Georgia soil. Located in Glennville, the farm got its start in 1948, but owner Raymond Bland and his son, Delbert, didn't plant onions until 1980. Today, they are the largest growers, packers, and shippers of Vidalia Sweet Onions in the county—and beyond (Bland Farms also has operations in California, Texas, Mexico, and Peru). The business is a family affair: Delbert's oldest son, Troy, serves as CEO; younger son, Landis, is sales manager; and Delbert's wife, Sandra, founded sister company Vidalia Brands, which manufactures onion-flavored treats. The next generation is invested as well, including grandson Cashton Bland (pictured with Delbert). Read more about the family business in "How Sweet It Is" on page 38.





Lose the crowds

FIND THE WILD

ALASKA • MEXICO • HAWAII • GALÁPAGOS • COSTA RICA

UnCruise Adventures takes you deep into the heart of nature with award-winning small-ship cruises to five breathtakingly remote destinations. With just 22 to 86 guests onboard, every journey feels personal, immersive, and unforgettable. Your fare is all inclusive with guided excursions led by expert naturalists, adventure gear, fresh farm-to-table cuisine, and handcrafted cocktails that taste like celebration. And yes—adventure is always on the menu. Ready to go where the big ships can't? **Don't cruise, UnCruise.**



Scan, go to **UnCruise.com**, or call
888-862-8881 for more details.





Statewide Service

AT&T FIRSTNET is the only nationwide network for public safety, giving first responders such as EMS, police, fire, and medical professionals access to secure, reliable, and always-on communication channels.

AT&T Georgia has increased its commitment to the network with the creation of a fleet of 150 free, portable network assets, which played a large part in Hurricane Helene's emergency response in 2024. It has also expanded 5G capabilities within the Savannah city limits and in large gathering places like Truist Park and Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta. FirstNet even has a therapy initiative, called ROG the Dog,

which sends trained therapy dogs to comfort the FirstNet Response Operations Group during emergency operations. This year, it will add satellite connectivity to its suite of products to help cover even more rural areas that ground-based towers can't reach via a partnership with AST SpaceMobile.

"We are honored to stand alongside the men and women who protect our communities, providing the reliable connectivity they depend on," says President of AT&T Georgia Riley Blount. Between 2020 and 2024, AT&T Georgia invested almost \$17 billion in overall state infrastructure, including FirstNet and increased access to fiber and 5G.

JOINT VENTURES

Manufacturing companies of all sizes are investing in Georgia's communities.



Commercial Bank & Business Equipment, above, a provider of architectural millwork, is expanding in Cherokee County. The 130,000-square-foot headquarters will create 70 new jobs and represents a \$25 million investment.

Dongwon Autopart Technology, a South Korean auto supplier, continues to expand in Georgia with a new \$30 million facility in Emanuel County. It is expected to create 200 new jobs and will begin hiring this year.

Screven County will be home to a new \$17.6 million facility for **Preciball USA**, an industrial precision ball bearing supplier. It will complement the company's existing offices in Pooler. Hiring will begin in 2027.

In Flight

» In late 2025, the DeKalb County Board of Commissioners voted to approve a \$45 million development by aviation infrastructure development company **Sky Harbour** at DeKalb-Peachtree Airport (PDK). The company will add eight additional hangars to serve the growing area. It's estimated to generate \$576 million in economic impact over the 50-year lease, including \$66 million in direct ground lease revenue to PDK. Sky Harbour plans to break ground in late 2027.

Angie Brown

is Always Building on Success

WHEN ATLANTA BUSINESS LEGENDS Arthur Blank and the late Bernie Marcus founded The Home Depot in 1978, they helped pioneer the big box store model, leveraging nascent technology to manage their large staff and massive inventory. Fast forward nearly five decades, and technological solutions drive nearly every aspect of the business, including attracting top talent, shoring up security, and meaningfully leveling up the customer experience, both in-store and online. Overseeing it all is Chief Information Officer Angie Brown, who started her career at The Home Depot in 1998 as an associate systems engineer and has helped drive those technological advancements ever since.

But even in our ever-evolving digital age, Brown says the company maintains an “inverted pyramid” culture, where the executive team prioritizes supporting frontline associates and customers, spending time in the stores, and using the same systems those individuals use. Here, we learn about her approach and what keeps her inspired.

The Home Depot has long been synonymous with scale and operational excellence. As CIO, what’s different about leading technology strategy today compared to five years ago?

The rate of change is happening at an amazing pace. We used to say that retail had changed more in the last five years than it had in the previous 40. I don’t know what the exact numbers would be if you tried to use that analogy for technology, but we are in such a step-change moment—both the industry and technology at large with AI. It’s a lot to take in, to bring your resources up to speed and turn them into even bigger strategies than what we had dreamed of even last year. This constant evolution and pace is exciting, but it can also feel very frenetic.

How is The Home Depot using artificial intelligence?

There are a number of different places—some that customers can easily see and some that are behind the scenes. On our website, we have a feature called Magic Apron that is all about bringing the expertise of our store associates into the digital world. Think of it as a virtual home improvement expert. You can communicate with it and ask it questions. We’ve also changed the interactive voice response systems that frustrate people because they can

feel trapped [in a loop]. It asks, “How can we help?” and you can speak to it in natural language. It can understand a customer’s need in [about] 10 seconds, compared to what was probably four times that previously, and it frees up our associates to focus on problem-solving for the customers who are in the aisles. We also make it really easy for customers to say, “No, I want to talk to a human.”

There are other ways that are a little bit behind the scenes, things like route optimization. Sometimes we have big, bulky stuff that we’re delivering. If we run into a road closure or can’t get a flatbed [delivery truck] through, then future routes will know that we’ve had an issue and reroute based on what we’ve run into. That type of real-time feedback with routing logic to increase on-time delivery has been really impactful. Also, if you’re a pro, building a new house, and you bring in a blueprint, we’re using AI now to go from weeks to days of estimation work on the materials you need.

What role does technology play in defining The Home Depot’s competitive advantage?

When I think about our strategic priorities, technology plays a key role in a vast majority of them. It is truly an enabler to our strategy and underpins the work that we’re doing to drive the company forward.

How has Atlanta’s technology ecosystem influenced your ability to recruit and retain top talent?

The state’s university system is a great feeder. We’re blessed with some superior educational systems, with students who identify with hometown brands like ours. We think about early workforce members coming out of college. It’s great to have pipelines like that around. At the same time, Atlanta continues to grow its overall tech ecosystem. It’s a vibrant community that’s now nationally recognized as having depth and talent. It’s absolutely a great asset for us.

How is the company balancing legacy systems with the new demands of the digital age?

Deciding what we are going to work on or not work on is always the hardest part. When you are grounded in what’s going to drive the business forward and create an excellent experience for customers and associates—when that is your North Star—it really becomes clearer how to navigate



The Home Depot's CIO
Angie Brown at one of
the company's Atlanta-
area stores

**“If we are
fast and
innovative,
but we are
not secure,
we have
not been
successful.”**

—ANGIE BROWN

either what legacy systems you should decommission or what emerging technology you should pursue. It all comes back to how something solves the business problems and advances the strategy.

How do you weigh the odds between security and the need for speed and innovation?

It's absolutely table stakes. With security, there are so many different facets. If we are fast and innovative, but we are not secure, we have not been successful. I never view it as slowing us down, because we haven't done our jobs if we

haven't made sure [a new innovation is] secure.

What keeps you excited and engaged in leading the technology charge for The Home Depot?

Two things always come to mind. First, the beginner's mindset—the opportunity to learn new things is [constant] in the technology industry. Second, it's really cool to be doing so for a company that is grounded in our value system and constantly being competitive in the market. To continue to grow means there's a never-ending list of opportunities that we get to tackle together.



Explore Georgia's
\$80 billion tourism industry

GaBiz

The Magazine for Georgia Business

Visitors Welcome



Paddleboarding
at Vogel State Park

Georgia's
Traffic by the
Numbers

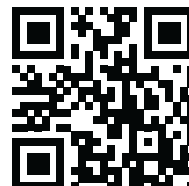
New Logistics Link:
The Gainesville
Inland Port

Talking Shop
with Home Depot
CIO Angie Brown

Order print copies and subscribe to future issues

To purchase single or bulk copies of the latest issue of *GaBiz* magazine, contact circulation by phone at **(866) 660-6247** or via email: **atlanta_service@hourmediagroup.com**.

To subscribe to future issues, scan the QR code and hit the subscribe button. —→



INTERACT WITH US @GABIZMAGAZINE

Power Play

Georgia has emerged as a leading destination for data center development



QTS's data center campus in Fayetteville



Must Compute!

\$4.5 billion

invested in AI-related ventures in Georgia since 2019

20

pieces of legislation aimed at the data center industry introduced by Georgia lawmakers this past session; none passed

AS OF APRIL 2026, Georgia has 61 operational data center facilities, 57 under construction, and roughly 350 in the pipeline, notes data and analytics firm Aterio—ranking it third in the U.S. behind Texas and Virginia.

Beyond housing the IT infrastructure—servers, storage, and networking equipment—that powers the digital economy, cloud computing, and AI, data centers can boost communities by increasing tax revenues and providing grid and utility upgrades. But critics say they also strain municipal water supplies and power grids.

Georgia's existing data centers require about 1,460 megawatts (MW) of power capacity to operate—roughly 1.6 times the City of Atlanta's approximately 925 MW, per Clean Energy Atlanta. Projects under construction will demand an additional 2,076 MW.

Last December, Georgia's Public Service Commission granted Georgia Power the authority to add nearly 10 gigawatts of generating capacity “to serve new large customers such as data centers”—nearly a 50 percent increase.

In late April, U.S. Senator Jon Ossoff (D-Ga.) asked the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to investigate the impact data centers will have on everyday Georgians. “Without proper safeguards, higher prices and capital costs from increased generation could be passed onto Georgia

families,” Sen. Ossoff wrote in a letter to the FERC.

Beyond power bills, neighbors of data centers often face quality-of-life impacts like increased low-frequency noise, all-night lighting, and habitat loss.

But for some communities, landing a data center is a deliberate economic development strategy. “These are generational investments in these communities that are going to provide value for a very, very long time,” says Georgia Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Chris Clark.

In Newton County, Amazon will pay “hundreds of millions” in taxes and PILOT fees over the next 16 years for its planned 430-acre center in Covington, says Newton County Industrial Development Authority Executive Director Serra P. Hall. The project is part of the tech giant's \$11 billion investment in Georgia to expand its AI and cloud infrastructure, including \$100 million to build a reclaimed water system.

According to data center research company Baxtel, QTS leads all operators in Georgia with 25 sites, including Fayetteville's \$1 billion Project Excalibur. Two proposed projects—Project Bunkhouse, a \$19 billion data center in Stilesboro, and Project Sail, a \$17 billion campus planned for Coweta County—would dwarf anything previously built in the state.

State of the Unions

Georgia labor groups are organizing and hoping to increase membership

JUST ONE IN 20 WORKERS in Georgia carries a union card—though the state’s labor movement is fighting hard to change that. But organizers must navigate Georgia’s right-to-work landscape as well as an executive order that curtails bargaining rights for federal employees. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics pegs Georgia’s union membership at 5.1 percent, roughly half the national rate.

“On some level, the whole point of ‘right to work’ is to discourage unionization—and it’s effective,” says Aaron Sojourner, senior economist and deputy director of research at the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

Organizers are pushing back. Late last year, members of IAM (International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers) Union Local 2789 voted overwhelmingly to ratify a four-year collective bargaining agreement at a John Deere facility in Augusta. And in 2024, after employees at Blue Bird, a bus manufacturer in Fort Valley, voted to join the United Steelworkers, they ratified a collective bargaining agreement that raised wages, strengthened retirement plans, and improved health and safety. Around the same time, the United Auto Workers launched a \$40 million campaign to organize non-union auto and battery plants across the South.

Georgia’s Republican-led government moved to counter that momentum. Senate Bill 362, passed in 2024, bars companies from receiving state economic incentives if they voluntarily recognize a union.

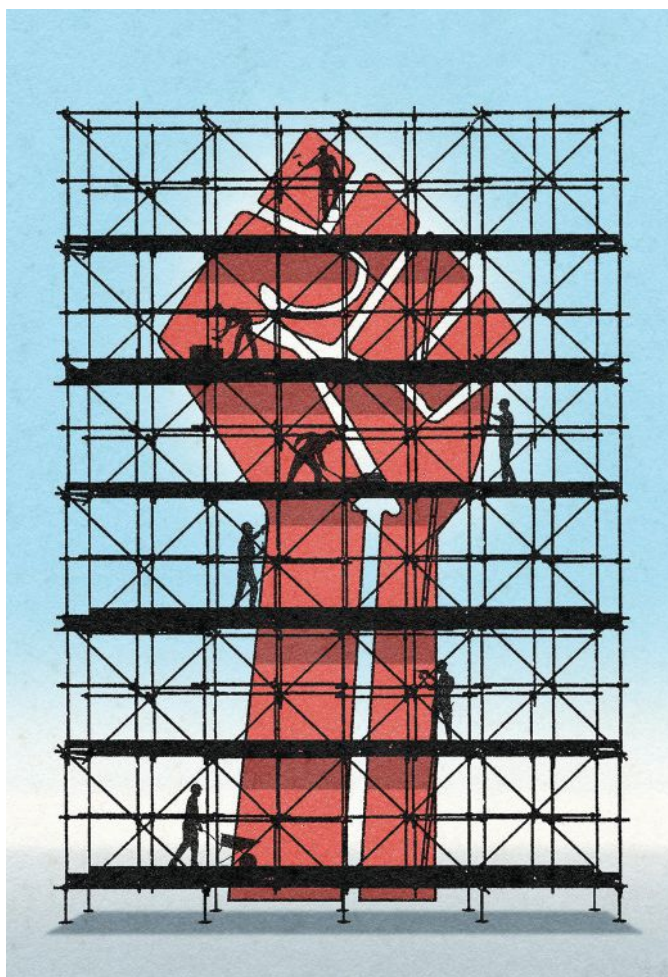
“Because we’re not a pro-union state doesn’t mean we’re not pro-worker,” says Georgia Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Chris Clark, who credits the state’s right-to-work status as central to its economic development strategy.

Labor organizers see it differently. “It’s about time Georgia workers and all the workers in the Southern region got the freedom, fairness, and security that we are owed, and we refuse to back down,” said Yvonne Brooks, president of the Georgia State AFL-CIO, the

largest federation of unions in the U.S., during a Workers Over Billionaires rally last year.

Despite recent wins, organized labor in Georgia faces a steep climb. In the most recent legislative session, Senate Bill 417—which would have allowed the state’s public employees to unionize and bargain collectively—failed to advance beyond committee. Lawmakers instead favored workforce training and one-time pay increases, reaffirming the state’s preference for economic development tools over structural labor reform.

“There’s interest and support for unions in Georgia,” says Sojourner. “But it’s difficult to translate into actual union contracts on the ground.”



**Workers
Unite**



almost
500
union and labor
organizations in
Georgia, mostly
in the Atlanta
metro area

approximately
236,000
union members
in Georgia

REAL IMPACT. REAL FAST.

TROY
UNIVERSITY™

Eric Sloan ('00, '05), MBA
President **CEO**



At Troy University, we believe the path to leadership is paved with purpose and persistence. In just one year, you can earn a Master of Science in Management, Human Resource Management, or an MBA from the Sorrell College of Business and fast-track your career with real, lasting impact.

Join a global network of more than 177,000 alumni who lead with integrity, resilience, and purpose. TROY doesn't just prepare you for the business world — we prepare you to lead it.

ALL WAYS REAL. ALWAYS TROY.



troy.edu/fasttrack | 1-800-586-9771



Unlocking the Grid

The railroad put Atlanta on the map, but the state's highways and interstates are the keys to its commerce and growth. That said, congestion cumulatively costs Georgians millions of hours and billions of dollars a year. Here, we break down the numbers and share some solutions on the horizon.

27

percent of Georgia traffic travels on interstates, which make up 3 percent of the state's road capacity.



3,200

traffic signals across 12 Atlanta-area counties are coordinated to improve vehicle flow through the state Transportation Department's Regional Traffic Operations Program.



\$3.375 MILLION

has been committed through 2029 to a multi-state research project led by the Georgia Transportation Department to connect vehicles and infrastructure through technology for better safety and less congestion.

327,000

vehicles on average drove daily on I-75 outside I-285 in Cobb County in 2024.

90,700

vehicles on average drove daily on I-95 near I-16 in Savannah in 2024.



32.5

miles of I-16 west of I-95 will be widened to three lanes in each direction beginning in 2027 at a projected cost of more than \$500 million.



75

hours per Atlanta driver were lost to congestion in 2025, the seventh-highest total in the country. The national average was 49 hours.

127

billion miles were driven in Georgia in 2024.



\$168 BILLION

is allocated through 2050 for the Atlanta Metropolitan Transportation Plan, including \$10 billion for transit systems and \$3.9 billion for pedestrian and bicycle networks.

GEORGIA: WHERE MEETINGS *INSPIRE*

Georgia's connectivity, climate, and diverse locations from the mountains to the coast make it an easy draw for bringing people together for the moments that matter. Every gathering creates opportunities—for new ideas, stronger partnerships, thriving local businesses, and memorable experiences that keep attendees talking long after they return home. It's why meetings in Georgia go beyond the agenda—they create lasting impact.

Plan your next meeting at georgia.org/meetings





Second Shot

Extu President and COO William Shida channels the focus and resilience of his pro golf days into leadership and business operations

LONG BEFORE HE BEGAN leading operations at SaaS company Extu, William Shida measured performance in scorecards, not spreadsheets. An all-American golfer at Georgia College & State University, Shida turned professional in 2011, competing on what is now the PGA Pro Golf Tour, a major developmental tour. For a few years, the dream felt within reach—until a 2014 wrist injury forced an abrupt pivot.

“Golf had become my entire identity, but I was smart enough to have a fallback plan with an accounting degree, which I had already leveraged in running my personal golf brand as a business,” Shida says.

He recalls a conversation with former Atlanta Braves pitcher Greg McMichael, who told him failure teaches far more than success. “That stayed with me,” Shida says. “You learn to pause, reassess, and come back stronger.”

Indeed, the most significant lessons from his time on the greens weren’t about winning; they were about losing. “There was no teammate to blame if I lost. Failures immediately went public with a posted scorecard. You had to

own your outcomes.”

Shida carried these takeaways into business at Extu, where he rose from staff accountant to president and COO over the past decade at its Brookhaven headquarters outside Atlanta. He brings the same discipline and calm forged under pressure on the course into C-suite decision-making and mentoring staff members, starting with punctuality. “You can’t be late to tee time,” he quips.

Several of Georgia’s courses hold meaning for Shida. He grew up in Norcross playing Berkeley Hills Country Club and also loves Druid Hills Golf Club, where a memorable round included a birdie followed by a hole in one.

These days, Shida plays when he can, including an annual trip with friends and on weekends with his son, who rides along in the cart and is beginning to swing a club of his own. Shida still maintains a scratch handicap, but the motivation has shifted.

“I used to love the grind and competition,” he says. “Now it’s about being outside and spending time with people who matter.”



William Shida outside
his Brookhaven-
headquartered company

Stamp

of



Approval

Walmart founder Sam Walton said, "Outstanding leaders go out of their way to boost the self-esteem of their personnel. If people believe in themselves, it's amazing what they can accomplish." Here, three Georgia leaders share their media diets, mentors, how they encourage their teams, and more.





Neal Thurman

Vice President
& General Manager,
Callaway Gardens



TAKING FLIGHT

His Favorite Pastime

"My dad gets the credit for sparking my love of flying. When I was 17, I received two introductory flight lessons for Christmas. On my second flight, a night flight around Atlanta, I was hooked. Since then, **flying has been both a passion and a way to give back.** My goal is to fly with Angel Flight, an incredible organization of volunteer pilots who provide transportation for medical-related charitable needs."

DAY TO DAY

Flexibility is Key

"After more than 30 years in themed entertainment and hospitality, I've learned that there's really **no such thing as a typical day.** Each morning begins with a plan and a full schedule, but flexibility is key. Things change quickly when you work with the public, and being ready to pivot is part of the role."

RÉSUMÉ

Callaway is Calling

Callaway Resort & Gardens has welcomed guests for nearly 75 years. In 2026, the 2,500-acre resort in Pine Mountain—home to a lake, gardens, a butterfly center, golf courses, and more—also welcomed Neal Thurman, a **Georgia hospitality veteran** who has been tasked with leading the property into its next chapter. One way he's doing that is through "Callaway is Calling," a brand refresh that includes new seasonal events, experiences, menu items, and services. "Alongside these new offerings, the heart of Callaway remains unchanged. It's a place where guests are immersed in the beauty of nature, sparking a sense of adventure for all who visit," Thurman says.

Callaway's
Butterfly
Pavillion



NEXT GEN

Leading by Example

"The most rewarding part of my job is seeing potential turn into leadership. There's nothing quite like watching someone join the organization, grow in confidence and capability, and ultimately step into a leadership role of their own. Being able to spark that growth, inspire, guide, and play even a small role in someone's journey is incredibly meaningful."



MEDIA DIET

What He Likes

"I'm a continuous learner, so I regularly tune into a range of leadership podcasts and follow a few industry icons on social media for fresh perspectives and ideas. That said, **the most used media on my phone are my weather apps.** Having spent my career in theme parks and outdoor attractions, staying ahead of the weather isn't just a habit, it's essential."

INDUSTRY INSIDER

His Best Advice

For those in the industry, his advice is simple:

» "First, **do what you love.** Hospitality isn't just a job, it's a calling that requires passion, energy, and a genuine desire to serve others."

» "Second, **seek out diverse experiences.** Work across different departments and learn from a variety of leaders. The broader your perspective, the stronger and more effective you'll become."



Miriam Lewis

Executive Director,
Visit Dublin GA

RÉSUMÉ

Hospitality Whiz

Miriam Lewis joined Visit Dublin GA in 2015 and became executive director in 2021. A tourism pro, her responsibilities include **overseeing the Dublin Visitors Center, handling marketing and communications, building community partnerships, and developing strategic initiatives to strengthen local tourism.** But it's the under-the-radar work that she really loves. From sampling local fare to mentoring students and even serving as Honorary Leprechaun on the Dublin Laurens St. Patrick's Day Committee, her number one goal is to make Laurens County shine. "I'm especially proud of how intentional we've been about enhancing the visitor experience," she says.

MENTORSHIP

Relationships Matter

"I am grateful to have a strong network of tourism peers who don't see each other as competition but as collaborators. We lift each other up, share ideas, and exchange resources. It's been incredibly valuable both professionally and personally."

TEAM SPIRIT

Sharing the Wealth

"With all the negativity floating around, I think it is so very important to **recognize wins and positive feedback.** We have a folder each month dedicated to 'Good Things,' as Martha Stewart would say. I fill it up and share it with my team and our board."



ON THE JOB

Her Craziest Day

"Crazy is just every day in the tourism world, right? I once grilled steaks, to order, on a portable gas grill in the middle of a park, in the middle of summer, in the middle of a music festival. It was a thank you meal for our local safety officers, and I was told **they were all cooked perfectly.**"



FLOWER POWER

Her Favorite Pastime

"I love spending my downtime in the garden surrounded by flowers and plants. Getting my hands in the dirt is my way of unplugging. It's grounding, creative, and **a great balance to the buzzing pace of my work.** Every year I plant specific herbs to attract swallowtail butterflies—I have since I was a child."

FAVORITE MOTTO

"Genius has no color, no creed. The world loves a contributor to civilization."

—Herbert "Hub" Dudley (a Dublin entrepreneur who developed motels, restaurants, and gas stations for African American travelers during segregation)

STORY TIME

Spreading the Word

"I'm always working on becoming a stronger storyteller. Whether that's through video, social media, or in-person experiences, real stories are what resonate. In tourism, storytelling is not just about promoting a place, **it's about helping people feel something they want to be part of.**"





Dr. Ronald McNeill

President & CEO,
Georgia Campaign
for Adolescent
Power & Potential



READING LIST

What He Recommends

"I'm drawn to books that focus on leadership, inclusion, and the well-being of young people. These offer valuable insight into leadership, resilience, and the importance of investing in the next generation."

» *The Measure of Our Success* by Marian Wright Edelman

» *The Deepest Well* by Dr. Nadine Burke Harris

» *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen R. Covey

RÉSUMÉ

Unleashing Potential

Dr. Ronald McNeill worked with the Boys & Girls Clubs of America for 16 years before joining the Georgia Campaign for Adolescent Power & Potential (GCAPP), a nonprofit founded by actress and activist Jane Fonda, in 2018. "At its core, **GCAPP is about improving adolescent health outcomes across Georgia**," Dr. McNeill says. The organization's key programs are teen pregnancy prevention, comprehensive sex education, and youth empowerment experiences. This year, GCAPP is doubling down with Healthy Life 2028, a strategic plan to positively impact even more young people across the state.



Dr. McNeill (right) at GCAPP's 2025 Empower Party

SUPPORT SYSTEM

The Next Generation

"Young people today are navigating a complex and fast-moving world—constant access to information, rising mental health challenges, and social pressures that can be difficult to manage. What's often missing is **trusted guidance and accurate information**. GCAPP is working to ensure young people have both the knowledge and the support they need to thrive with confidence."

ROLE MODELS

His Mentors

McNeill is inspired by leaders who "combine vision with action and remain deeply committed to serving others."

» **THERESA SHAW**
(FORMER PRESIDENT
AND CEO OF BOYS
& GIRLS CLUB, COLLIER
COUNTY, FLORIDA)

"I admire her unwavering dedication to helping other professionals expand their skillset and her work offering opportunities for young people and families."

» **DR. RONALD L. CARTER**
(EXECUTIVE COACH)

"His leadership reflects a strong commitment to academic excellence and preparing students to lead and create impact in their communities."

» **GCAPP BOARD
OF DIRECTORS**

"They show up every day with purpose and a deep commitment to supporting young people in Georgia."

SUPERPOWERS

What He Wishes For

"The ability to slow down time—so there's more opportunity to listen, learn, and be present in the moments that matter most."

FAVORITE MOTTO

“Leave it better than you found it.”

It's a guiding principle in both my personal and professional life, and it reflects GCAPP's commitment to creating opportunities for future generations to build upon."



2025 Empower Party

RAYMOND BLAND planted the first seeds of a modest farm on 50 acres of land in 1948. He sowed peanuts, corn, and tomatoes, keeping every detail in his head. “Granddaddy was a dirt farmer. He couldn’t read or write,” says his grandson and current Bland Farms CEO Troy Bland. “But he could tell you how long it took to do anything on the farm.” Today, the Glennville-based farm represents roughly a quarter of all Vidalia Sweet Onion volume sold nationally.

» Raymond’s son, Delbert, joined him on the farm after graduating high school in 1974. Six years later, they planted their first five acres of Vidalia Sweet Onions, a modest bet that would ultimately define the business. By 1995, with 2,600 acres under cultivation, Delbert wasn’t just farming Vidalias, he was advocating for them, even hiring a private investigator to catch Texas growers who were passing off imitations.

» Delbert’s efforts built on the 1986 Vidalia Onion Act and a federal marketing order, established in 1989, which together ensure that only onions grown in one of 20 Georgia counties can carry the name (the extremely low sulfur content in the soil gives them their unique flavor profile). The *Wall Street Journal* declared them “the caviar of onions,” a description that stuck.

» Troy knew early that he’d follow in those footsteps. “I’ve

wanted the job that I have today since I was two,” he says. He came up through quality control and operations, learning under CEO Bryce Edmonson, formerly of Del Monte, before taking the reins in 2021. Today, Troy runs the operation with his brother, Landis, who is sales manager, in addition to 200 full-time employees and 700-plus H-2A seasonal contract workers.

» Bland Farms moves 1.5 million boxes of Vidalias annually, with domestic operations in Texas, Washington, Pennsylvania, and California. They also export internationally to Peru and Mexico. Bland Distribution Services, a cold storage and distribution center, opened in 2008.

» Aside from Vidalias, sweet potatoes are the farm’s fastest-growing division, with 1,500 acres under cultivation and increased demand, thanks in part to the GLP-1 weight loss medication trend. “The most nutritionally dense meal you can eat is a sweet potato and a lean steak,” says Troy, who notes that it’s also his favorite.

» Troy keeps the future simple: “My father built the greatest customer base, and that allowed me to grow really quickly. I just had to build the infrastructure underneath it.” As for the next generation: “I hope that my kids can do whatever they want to in this life. And if that’s growing onions, even better.”

How Sweet It Is

Three generations of the Bland family have turned a dirt farm into an onion empire



COURTESY BLAND FARMS

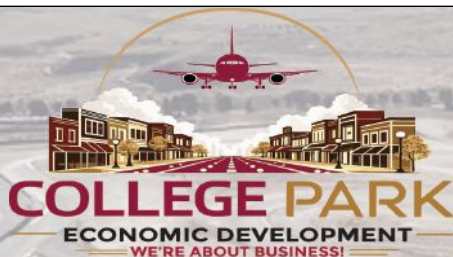
One of the nation's premier hospitality programs.

SERVED RIGHT HERE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA.



Hospitality and Food Industry Management
College of Agricultural & Environmental Sciences
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

Infinite Development Possibilities



Corporate Headquarters (no industrial uses)
Life Sciences- research and development.
Bio-tech research and development
Medical research facilities

Sports Center, Aquatic Center, Professional
sport fields
Museum, Aquarium, cultural center, Art
galleries
Hospitals, colleges, university campuses
Boutique hotels

Main Event, Dave N Busters, Top golf, I-fly
Indoor skydiving
Brewery, Parking deck ...

With 300+ acres of developable property,
Tax incentives -(2) Enterprise Zones, easily
accessible by planes, trains and trucks- 100
million passengers annually
There are endless possibilities...

Contact Us Today!

CPAbout.Business@collegeparkga.gov

Rethinking Architecture

Atlanta-based Cove blends machine learning with human creativity to deliver buildings faster, smarter, and at scale

ONE OF THE THINGS that stands out about Sandeep Ahuja and Patrick Chopson is the casual ease with which they drop big words and sketch a grand vision—disrupting architecture, driving a new Industrial Revolution, even making the world a better place.

Ahuja and Chopson are the cofounders of Cove, an “AI-powered, human-centered architecture firm of the future that delivers higher-quality buildings significantly faster.” That’s the description the pair delivers jointly, one finishing the other’s sentence, as both sit down in the company’s airy, loft-style office in downtown Atlanta’s Truist Plaza building.

The confidence is in part rooted in the firm’s unconventional history and approach to doing business. Cove, which stands for “cost versus energy,” was founded in 2017 as a software start-up by the two Georgia Tech graduates, who both trained as software developers and architects.

Chopson coded a cloud-based building optimization platform called cove.tool, and the company went on to sell subscriptions to architecture firms worldwide, eventually raising more than \$36 million in venture capital funding.

In 2024, Cove transitioned to using its own AI-powered tool to design buildings. Today, the company is a full-service architecture firm with 50 employees. Ahuja, who serves as CEO, has earned multiple accolades including *Inc.* magazine’s Top 100 Women CEOs and *Forbes*’s 30 Under 30. Chopson, Cove’s president and chief product officer, is a licensed architect with more than 20 years of experience.

Along the journey, the pair got married, and their second child was born this spring.

Building Something New

Cove’s architecture work spans multifamily, commercial,

Concept rendering of a multifamily infill project in Atlanta’s West End, steps from the Atlanta Beltline

and mixed-use buildings. Currently, Cove is involved in 10 high-profile projects across the U.S. and in Costa Rica, including an adaptive use of a former mall in Ohio, working with an Indigenous nonprofit to transform a college campus in upstate New York, and rebuilding a community in Southern California that was destroyed by wildfires.

The company is spearheading a trend that’s shaking up the traditional world of architecture, and not just by their own account. Cove was just added to *Fast Company*’s 2026 list of the world’s most innovative companies.

“Today, most architecture firms use AI ‘as a bolt-on’ [an added external component] to the traditional design process,” says Cas Esbach, a licensed architect and architecture professor at the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) with a focus on AI integration. “And it serves as an efficiency power tool,” he adds.

For example, a common application of AI in architecture is creating visuals and simulations. AI can also help speed up material testing and explore multiple building options based on regulatory and structural requirements, costs, and aesthetics.

But the real differentiator is whether architecture firms are willing and able “to reevaluate their complete design process to make it AI-forward,” says Esbach. Young, small, and agile firms like Cove can make these changes quicker, he adds.





“
We want to
help bring
the art
back to our
profession.”

—PATRICK CHOPSON

Passing the Test

While most architecture firms customize open-source AI tools to match their workflows, processes, and business needs, Cove uses its own proprietary AI platform called Vitras.ai which was named after the 1st century B.C. Roman architect Vitruvius.

Vitras.ai is constantly updated and supports every part of the design process, says Chopson, whether that's assessing site conditions, zoning codes, and environmental factors; creating blueprints and feasibility studies; generating cost estimates and schedules; or addressing unforeseen challenges during construction. Chopson calls it “the ontology of design,” and says it is core to how Cove's business model works.

Deploying AI alongside a human can help streamline the complexities of the design and building process. One advantage of leveraging AI is the rapid delivery on large projects, says Ahuja. On average, Cove completes the work 40 percent faster than traditional architecture firms, she adds.

Another benefit is early risk mitigation. Precision and



Chopson, left, and Ahuja, middle, reviewing project plans at the company's Atlanta office

accuracy are key in the architecture profession, and the firm typically takes on liability for any errors that could be made in the drawings.

Recently, Cove had Vitras.ai take the standard architecture licensing exam. It passed with 94 percent accuracy, 24 percent higher than the average human score. “Reducing the risk of errors is critical for a stable business,” says Ahuja.

Sustainability is another key value for Cove and considered an inherent part “in the pursuit of creating the best building possible,” according to Ahuja.

Cove’s AI works behind the scenes to optimize the outcome, playing out various trade-offs by suggesting, for example, different combinations of materials, such as wood, concrete, rock, steel, and glass. “As a result, the most cost-effective building often is also the most sustainable building,” says Chopson.

Time is Money

Speed, scale, risk mitigation, and sustainability—Cove’s core promises are on display in the heart of Atlanta’s historic Kirkwood district. The company is the lead designer for a mixed-use redevelopment on Hosea L. Williams Drive with 52 small apartments, offices, and retail. The building will feature solar panels, EV charging stations, and an amenity deck on the roof. The project is on track to be completed in late 2027.

So far, the biggest advantage of working with Cove has been the turnaround time, says Stan Sugarman, CEO and cofounder at Stryant, the project’s developer. It’s been about 70 percent quicker than more traditional architecture firms he’s worked with, he notes.

“For a developer, speed is money,” says Sugarman, “and shortening the cycle is huge.”

Cove helped more than triple the original unit count from 16 to 52 apartments, increasing the profitability for Stryant.

But deploying AI in architecture comes with challenges. One is managing client expectations, which rise with AI’s growing capabilities, says SCAD’s Esbach. Soon, it will be the norm to request “a video of the planned building with every detail, every angle, and various options for each room,” he adds. “And people will want to see what the building looks like in five, 10, 20 years.”

There’s also concern about job loss. For example, AI can better handle construction drawing and 3D-modeling groundwork traditionally done by early career architects. Some fear AI will lead to the loss of creativity and authenticity—and to more cookie-cutter, template-driven building designs.

Cove’s founders are adamant that human agency is still at



the core of the design process. The architect maintains full control, says Ahuja, while the software serves as a powerful support mechanism.

AI can take over some of the repetitive, rules-based work—what Chopson calls “assembly-line type of work”—such as generating door and window schedules, checking code compliance, or producing standard construction details like wall sections.

If deployed this way, AI can free time for architects to fully focus on their creative skills—“which allows for individual styles to shine,” says Chopson. The result is more unique, not more uniform, designs, he adds. “The AI tool is becoming a translator, not an impediment to creativity.”

Cove’s leaders expect AI to fundamentally reshape the workforce but not necessarily eliminate jobs. The company is hiring more architects, and Chopson thinks further integration of AI will lead to an increased demand for creative talent.

His vision is deeply rooted in architecture’s long and rich history. “We’ve atomized people into smaller and smaller subdomains to cover the ever-growing complexity,” he says. AI can serve as a centrifugal force—by restoring the master apprentice model of the late 1800s and early 1900s.

“We want to help bring the art back to our profession,” he says.

Concept rendering of a solar-shaded rooftop amenity at a mixed-use redevelopment in Atlanta’s Kirkwood neighborhood

Ready to go all out? Conquer the world's longest natural whitewater course, zip line over the Chattahoochee, and explore scenic trails on two wheels, including Standing Boy Trails, named one of Georgia's top 5 mountain biking trails by Singletracks. Then shift gears with a stroll along the 15-mile Chattahoochee RiverWalk, where 35+ restaurants and entertainment spots are waiting. It's no wonder Columbus has been named an official **Trail Town** by the International Mountain Bicycling Association.

ALL OUT **Surf.**

ALL OUT **Turf.**



 VisitColumbusGA Go All Out

VisitColumbusGA.com



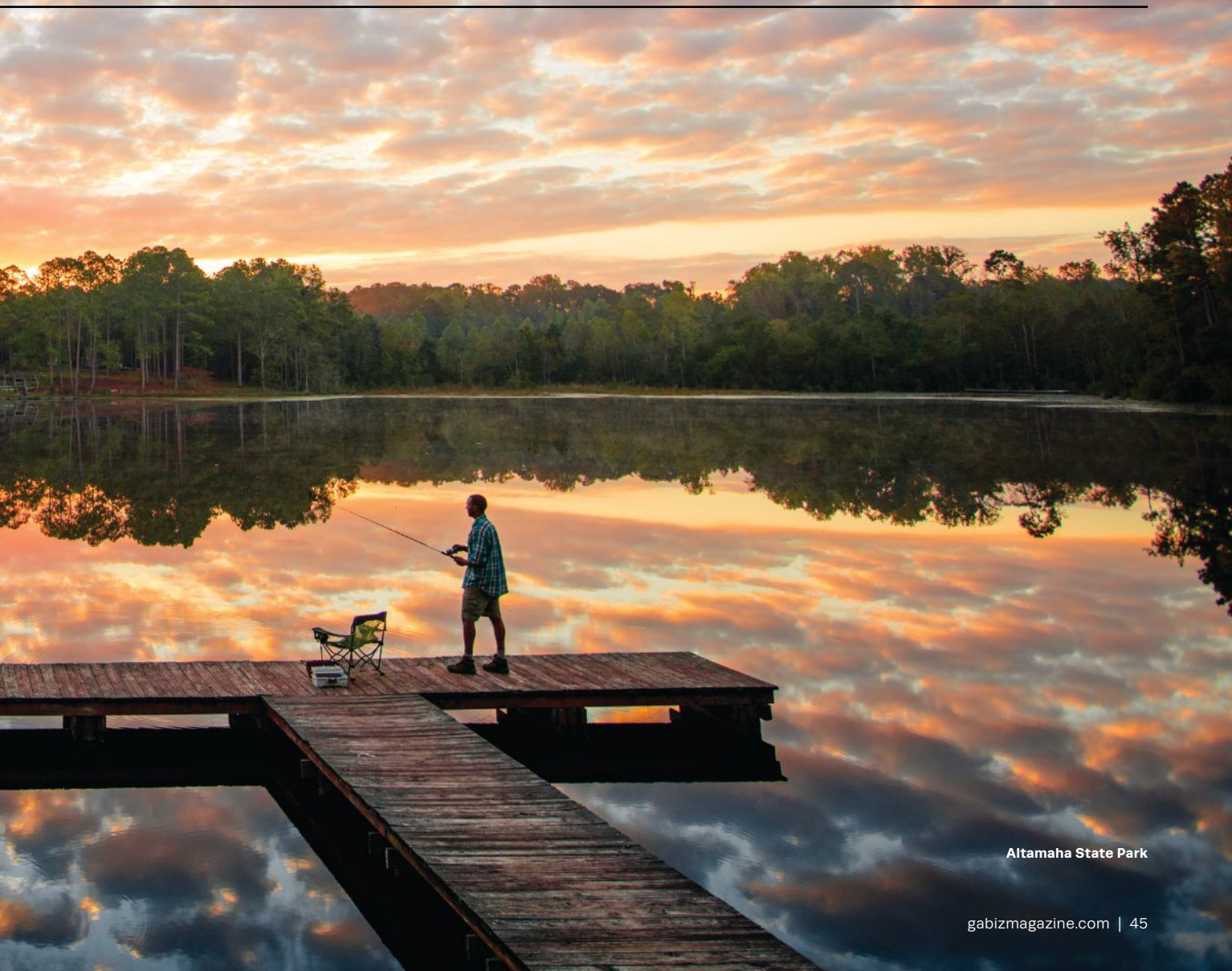
DESTINATION

Travel—for both business and pleasure—

COURTESY EXPLORE GEORGIA

GEORGIA

is a major economic driver BY JENNIFER BRADLEY FRANKLIN



Altamaha State Park

ON ANY GIVEN DAY

at his three Chick-fil-A locations in Rome, Greg Major can tell when a tournament is in town. “We’re busy pretty much all day—for breakfast, lunch, and dinner,” says the operator, who has owned stores in the area for 32 years.

Major says sports tourism provides a meaningful boost to business, and he credits local leaders for investing in facilities that attract events to northwest Georgia.

From major conventions and business meetings for a handful of executives to family sightseeing trips and youth sports tournaments, travel is one of Georgia’s top economic engines. Whether it’s due to the state’s infrastructure, distinct seasons, ample lodging options, meeting space of all shapes and sizes, or the staggering diversity of landscapes, Georgia draws multitudes.

Wide Appeal

The state will release the 2025 tourism numbers at the annual Georgia Governor’s Tourism Conference in September, but if the 2024 trends are any indication, those figures are likely to continue growing. 2024 was record-breaking all around, with Georgia welcoming 174.2 million visitors, who spent a collective \$45.2 billion. “To put that in perspective, that is how much it would cost to build 450 Delta jets,” says Jay Markwalter, who serves as the deputy commissioner of tourism for the Georgia Department of Economic Development (GDEcD). “Those visitations generated \$5.1 billion in state and local tax revenue. That keeps the economic engine flowing, funding essential services that benefit all Georgians, including infrastructure and public safety.”

The tourism arm of GDEcD maintains a staff that helps field requests for proposals to host major meetings, purchases advertising domestically and internationally, maintains nine visitor information centers around the state, and works with local communities and their tourism entities to create compelling programs to draw visitors.

It’s not just about the state’s largest metropolitan areas. “We hear all the time, ‘We want to get off the beaten path, and we want to see everything Georgia has to offer,’” says Markwalter. It’s no surprise that, in 2024, Georgia’s state parks drew more than 14 million visitors.



Economic Home Run

Top-tier sporting events, such as the FIFA World Cup 2026 games hosted in Atlanta in June and July, the Super Bowl, and college football bowl games, bring scores of visitors to Georgia’s capital along with affiliated windfall poured into the economy—both in the host city and around the state.

When Truist Park, the home stadium of Major League Baseball’s Atlanta Braves, opened in 2017, the city of Cumberland in Cobb County saw a significant boost, and not just in sports-related business. The stadium anchors The Battery Atlanta, a year-round mixed-use district with a hotel, music venues, shopping, restaurants, and office space. Cobb Travel & Tourism Chief Operating Officer Lindsey Burruss calls Truist Park a “transformational economic driver for Cobb County.”

Nearly 9 million people visited the complex in 2025. “This consistent influx benefits surrounding hotels, restaurants, and retailers throughout Cobb County,” Burruss says. “For visitors, Truist Park often serves as an introduction to Cobb County, but many extend their experience by exploring other parts of Cobb, including visiting Marietta Square, spending a day at Acworth Lake, hiking at Kennesaw Mountain, and enjoying our growing culinary scene. It has created a rising-tide effect that strengthens the broader local economy.”

Investors and businesses are taking notice: The Battery



Atlanta Braves game days draw a crowd, but The Battery Atlanta serves as a year-round attraction, with restaurants, music venues, shopping, and a hotel.





Youth sports, such as flag football, are a significant economic driver in Rome.



Atlanta is now home to the corporate or regional headquarters of brands including Papa Johns, Truist Securities, TK Elevator, Comcast, Gas South, and others. The area is seeing significant growth in the intersection of business and leisure—dubbed “bleisure” in the industry. “Sports and entertainment are playing a major role in that shift, and Cobb’s meeting and convention offerings are growing alongside that demand,” Burruss says. “Cobb Convention Center Atlanta is currently undergoing a major renovation and expansion, giving the destination an even stronger platform to attract meeting attendees and corporate groups.”

Going the Distance

Beyond the events that make it onto major networks, amateur sports—youth sports, in particular—are an ever-increasing economic driver. Rome provides a compelling case study. The city with a population shy of 38,000, drew 220,000 visitors last year, 75,000 of whom were there to experience or participate in a sporting event. Those sports-related visitors accounted for approximately 65 percent of the total tracked economic impact, to the



tune of \$17 million (out of the total of \$25.9 million).

Those visitors don't arrive by accident. Rome's Office of Tourism, which celebrates its 50th anniversary this year, has played a role in propelling the city's sports infrastructure forward. One marquee project is the Rome Tennis Center at Berry College. The 30-acre site is one of the nation's largest tennis facilities, hosting dozens of tournaments annually.

Rome also hosts regional baseball, softball, basketball, soccer, volleyball, and cheerleading tournaments. When gas prices rise and the economic outlook feels uncertain, these kid- and teen-focused events tend to go forward without a hitch. "Sports, especially youth sports, are more inflation-proof," says Ann Hortman, director of Rome Sports. "Parents are going to do what it takes to make their kids happy."

Meet and Greet

Thanks to its array of meeting spaces, exhibition halls, and lodging accommodations, Georgia is primed to play host to large-scale events. Some of Atlanta's biggest include Dragon Con, one of the world's largest gatherings of sci-fi and fantasy enthusiasts, drawing 80,000 attendees each year; the annual International Production & Processing Expo that hosts nearly 33,000 attendees to see displays of technology, equipment, and services for the egg, meat, and poultry industries; and MODEX, a biennial event for more than 50,000 billed as a premier supply chain and manufacturing trade show with hundreds of exhibitors. All of these happen at the Georgia World Congress Center (GWCC) in downtown Atlanta, which offers more than 4 million square feet of space.

For some events, Georgia has become the de facto host state. The Wire Association International (WAI), headquartered in Madison, Connecticut, has held its biennial Interwire Conference & Trade Exposition at Atlanta's GWCC since its inception in 1981.

"The city is a great location for the show in terms of accessibility to our international attendees and exhibitors. The staff at both the GWCC and the Atlanta Convention and Visitors Bureau are proven professional partners," says WAI Director of Marketing and Corporate Communications Janice Swindells of the choice to host in Georgia's capital city. "Atlanta also offers much in the way of entertainment, sports activities, and restaurants. In fact, WAI has held receptions at the College Football Hall of Fame and Mercedes-Benz Stadium. Atlanta has become so familiar to our audience that many refer to Interwire as the 'Atlanta show.'"

The 2025 event brought together nearly 3,500 attendees from 42 states and 46 countries. "WAI continues to find Atlanta a pleasing and welcoming host city. The rest is history," says Swindells, who has already confirmed dates in spring 2027.

For would-be event hosts who wish to scout locations around the state, the GDEcD tourism team can serve as the conduit to help meeting planners find the right fit for their gathering or convention. "We have dedicated website resources, but we also have a regional team. If we get an RFP, we help get that to a local destination that has the facilities and product they're looking for," says GDEcD Deputy Commissioner Markwalter. "We like to highlight what's new and exciting in the meetings and convention space, but we mainly serve as a connector to those sales teams. They, in turn, send the RFPs to their local hotels



The biennial Interwire conference has been hosted in Atlanta since it started in 1981.

"Atlanta offers much in the way of entertainment, sports activities, and restaurants."

— JANICE SWINDELLS

and convention centers to work in tandem to hopefully attract and bring that business to them.”

Hospitality in Action

In Georgia, the tourism industry is a significant employment driver, supporting more than 470,000 jobs. That figure accounts for one out of every 15 jobs in the state, from people who work to plan meetings and at airports to those who serve in restaurants and keep hotels up and running.

As a result, building the hospitality workforce necessary to welcome visitors is vital. Degrees in higher education—such as Georgia Southern’s Bachelor of Science in Recreation & Tourism Management, the Bachelor of Business Administration in Hospitality Administration offered by Georgia State University, and the University of Georgia’s Parks, Recreation, & Tourism Management—dot the state’s educational landscape, and on-the-job training gets many employees up to speed.

Still, it’s never too early to encourage interest. “Supporting the next generation of hospitality professionals means investing in the future of our communities and the continued growth of not only Athens, but of Georgia,” says Shannon McCullough, vice president of talent success for The Classic Center Authority in Athens, which puts on the Hospitality Career Academy (HCA) each summer. During the weeklong course, high school students from around the state gain exposure to various facets of hospitality, including the culinary arts, marketing, operations, and event planning. The Classic Center can host events for up to 8,500 attendees and, thanks to its network of partners including international organizations such as Levy, Onsite, and Oak View Group, students are encouraged to make meaningful connections that can foster future professional growth.

Since its inception in 2003, more than 250 students have graduated from the HCA. “One recent alumnus found both a love for hospitality and for Athens during his time

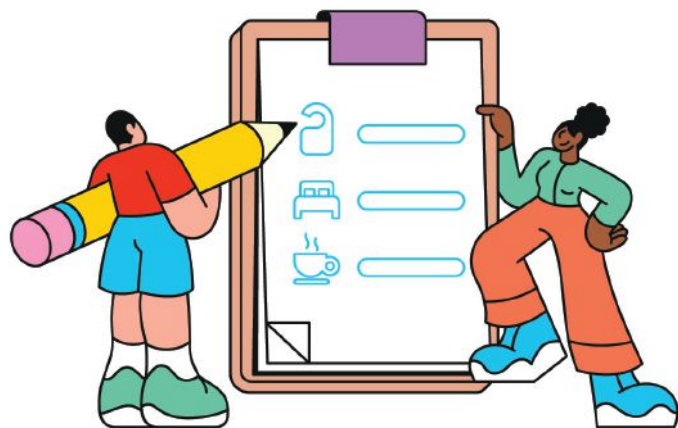


ILLUSTRATION BY LINN FRITZ; JEKYLL; COURTESY JIA



Q&A

TO THE COAST

Jekyll Island's natural charm draws business and leisure travelers alike. Here, Jekyll Island Authority (JIA) Executive Director Mark Williams shares insight about how his team balances conservation with promoting tourism.

How has tourism shaped the local economy on Jekyll Island?

Jekyll operates under a unique model as a self-supporting state park, which means that tourism is what funds not only the guest experience, but also the infrastructure, conservation, and preservation work required to steward the island responsibly. In recent years, tourism has allowed us to make meaningful reinvestments in the island, including the new Public Safety Complex, the District Shops, and the restoration of Great Dunes Golf Course.

How does the JIA strike a balance between development and conservation?

Our responsibility is to ensure that economic growth and environmental preservation work in tandem. Every decision is guided by the understanding that the long-term health of the island is what makes its economic success possible. That means being deliberate about where and how we invest, prioritizing projects that enhance the visitor experience while also reducing environmental impact and preserving the character of the island. By law, only a limited portion of the island can be developed, which ensures the vast majority of Jekyll remains in a natural state.

What strategies have proven most effective in attracting both leisure and business travelers?

Our strength is in offering a more intentional, laid-back experience, rooted in history and natural beauty. For leisure travelers, that means leading with the things that are hardest to replicate elsewhere: unspoiled beaches, outdoor experiences, and a place where nature is central to the experience. For meetings and group business, our convention center speaks for itself as the only beachfront facility south of New Jersey. Attendees can stay anywhere on the island and still be less than 10 minutes from the convention center, dining, recreation, and the beach.





LET'S GO GEORGIA TOURISM BY THE NUMBERS

*Statistics courtesy Tourism Economics, with data from 2024.

**\$5.1
BILLION**

in visitor-generated state and local taxes
(saving each Georgia household \$1,285 they would otherwise pay in additional taxes)

**\$82
BILLION**
**in total annual
economic impact**

470,570
**total jobs
supported—or 6.6
percent of all
jobs in Georgia**

**174.2
MILLION**
**visitors per
year**

**\$23.9
BILLION**

total personal income, or the equivalent of \$5,959 per resident household, regardless of whether those residents have any connection to the visitor economy

in the program,” says McCullough. “He enjoyed the experience so much that he returned the following year as a mentor. He later joined The Classic Center as an event planner, where he has become a valued member of the team.”

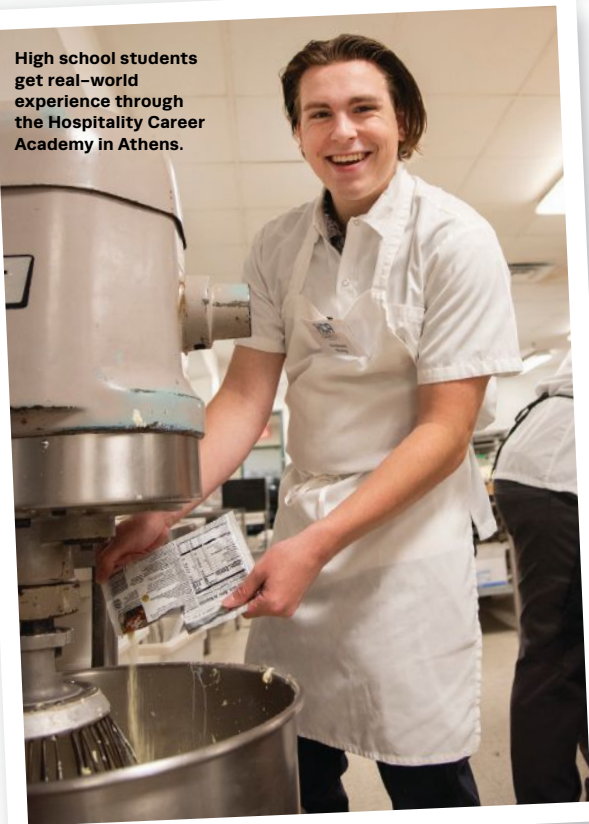
Ongoing Advocacy

Keeping Georgia's thriving tourism industry on the ascent takes the cooperation of a variety of individuals and organizations. One such leader is Chris Hardman, president and CEO of the Georgia Hotel and Lodging Association (GHLA), the membership-based advocacy organization representing the industry that includes Georgia's 2,298 hotels. “We exist to be the watchdog, to lobby, and act on their behalf, whether that's state, local, or federal issues impacting the industry.”

Hardman calls the last 10 years “dramatic,” thanks to the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent recovery. “In 2020, we went through one of the worst times in history with the pandemic, which was just devastating to all our economy, but especially the tourism sector,” he says. “We're grateful for Governor Brian Kemp and his leadership. He made sure that we were last to close and the first to open. So that gave us a little bit of a competitive edge against our surrounding states to be able to draw in some additional visitors. That allowed us to have steadier growth coming out of the pandemic.” The steady year-over-year post-pandemic growth in the state's tourism numbers is encouraging, Hardman notes.

Lodging constitutes a key component of the state being ready to host—and house—visitors. Last year, the GHLA helped pass the Commercial Property Assessed Clean Energy bill to help facilitate long-term, low-interest loans for any new developments or renovations that are sustain-

**High school students
get real-world
experience through
the Hospitality Career
Academy in Athens.**





Atlanta Botanical Garden



able; this year it was instrumental in passing the Georgia Human Trafficking Prevention Training Act, which requires all hotel employees and short-term rental operators to be trained in human trafficking prevention.

The work is ongoing. Earlier this year, the GHCLA helped promote Georgia House Bill 61, often dubbed the “No Pay-No Stay” bill, which would allow hotel and motel operators to immediately remove residents for nonpayment by classifying them as criminal trespassers rather than tenants. “I spoke to one hotelier who said that, at one of his properties, 40 percent of his rooms were being occupied by individuals who refused to pay and refused to leave.” Though the bill didn’t become law in the 2026 legislative session, Hardman calls it a “top priority” for next year.

One of his other priorities is lobbying Georgia’s leaders to

allocate more money—to the tune of \$50 million—to market the state’s tourism offerings. “That puts us in line so that we can compete with Tennessee, South Carolina, North Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, and Florida, to bring people to Georgia instead of surrounding states.” He says Tennessee, for example, spends “well over \$50 million” each year to market their destination, noting that “for every dollar spent on marketing, you get \$8 in return, at a minimum.”

Regardless of how the state gets there, the message is clear: Georgia is open for business and hospitable to the millions of visitors who come over its borders. “It’s fun and easy to sell Georgia because of the diversity of the geography and natural landscape. Georgia appeals to leisure travelers, conventions, meetings, and group events because of its range of destinations and venues,” says Markwalter.

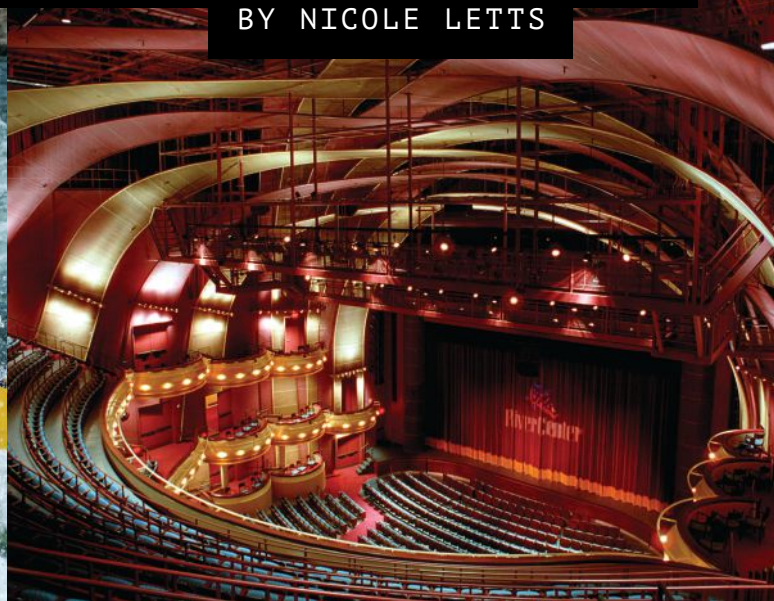
Tourism Flows in the Fountain City

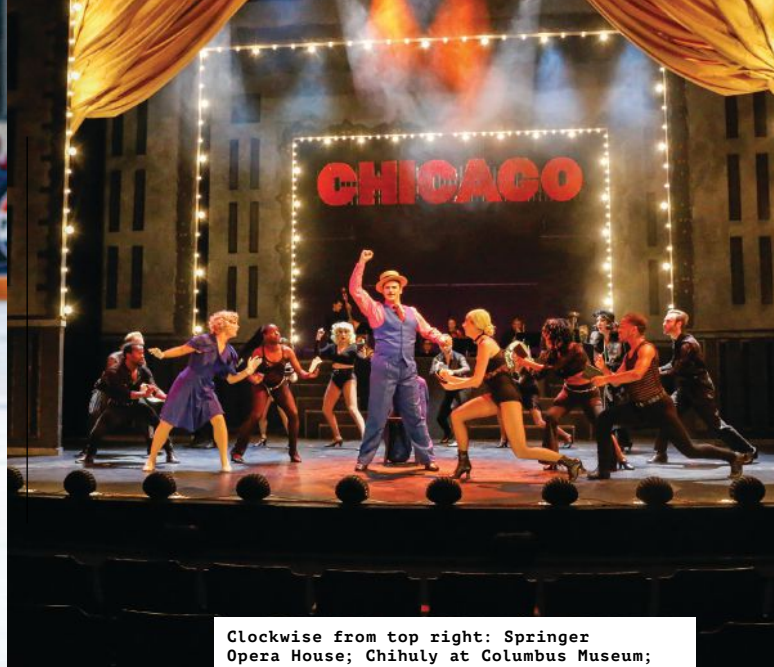
How Columbus transformed from a post-industrial town into one of the state's most compelling tourism destinations

BY NICOLE LETTS



Clockwise from top right: RiverCenter for the Performing Arts; whitewater rafting; Clingstones game; whitewater rafting





Clockwise from top right: Springer Opera House; Chihuly at Columbus Museum; Chattahoochee RiverWalk; River Dragons game



"IF YOU HAVEN'T BEEN TO COLUMBUS in the past five years, you haven't been to Columbus," says Ashley Woitena, president and CEO of VisitColumbusGA, the city's convention and visitors bureau that serves as a marketing entity. It's the same refrain you hear from developers, civic leaders, and visitors alike. A city that watched its downtown hollow out after the textile mills closed has spent the last two decades methodically reinventing itself into one of the South's most surprising destinations. The question is no longer whether Columbus has arrived; it's *how much farther is it going?* Today, tourism in Columbus generates \$1 billion in annual economic impact, supports 6,269 jobs, and draws more than 3 million visitors a year. Those numbers would have been unimaginable when the last major textile mill was shuttered in 1998.

A Solid Foundation

Founded in 1828 by the Georgia General Assembly as a planned trading town on the Chattahoochee River, Columbus grew quickly from a cotton-trading center into an industrial hub. Businesses harnessed the river's power to develop textile mills, and by 1853, Columbus was the largest manufacturing city in the South. The industry dominated the regional economy for more than a century, but foreign competition after World War II started a long decline, and by the 1990s, most of Columbus's mills had gone silent. What remained was a powerful river, a grid of historic buildings, and a community that would spend the next several decades figuring out what to do with both.

Those bones turned out to be among Columbus's greatest

assets, and few companies understood that earlier or acted on it more deliberately than the W.C. Bradley Co., a family-owned company focused on real estate development, land management, and outdoor living. Rather than retreat, the company made a calculated bet on downtown, investing in empty, boarded-up buildings and vacant lots before anyone else believed it was worth the risk, explains Pace Halter, president and COO of W.C. Bradley Co. Real Estate. “At the time, our downtown was largely a mill town that had fallen into disrepair,” Halter says. “You talk to people who grew up here, and they remember the days when they were kids, when you just didn’t go downtown because there was no reason to.”

The W.C. Bradley Co. Real Estate development team began with the Synovus Headquarters in 2004 and later began the transformation of Eagle & Phenix Mills, a renovated textile mill-turned-luxury apartments along the Chattahoochee River. This restored part of Columbus was dubbed “Uptown” by Jimmy Blanchard, who served as Synovus chairman from 2005 to 2006. According to Halter, Blanchard coined it with deliberate intent. The city was no longer going down; it was going up. “It’s been Uptown ever since,” Halter says.

Cultural Comeback

In the early 2000s, Columbus residents turned their attention to the city’s local arts and culture scene by launching an ambitious public-private fundraising initiative called the Columbus Challenge, which raised more than \$100 million to invest in the city’s cultural infrastructure. The centerpiece, the RiverCenter for the Performing Arts, a world-class performing arts complex, received \$86 million of those funds. It houses three state-of-the-art performance venues (Bill Heard Theatre, Legacy Hall, and Studio Theatre), along with Columbus State University’s Schwob School of Music and six nonprofit arts organizations. This is in addition to the Springer Opera House, Georgia’s official state theater, in operation since 1871, that is also located downtown.

Beyond the performing arts, the Columbus Museum recently completed a \$32 million renovation, earning it recognition as the top new museum in the country in 2025, while the National Infantry Museum ranks among the nation’s best history museums, both according to *USA Today*. The city’s walkability ties these experiences together. “You can hang out on the RiverWalk, see a performance at the Springer or the RiverCenter, and go to dinner, all without having to get into a vehicle,” says Woitena of VisitColumbusGA.

A River Runs Through It

The same river that powered Columbus’s mills would prove equally transformative as it morphed into a tourism destination. “We took two dams out of the Chattahoochee River and restored it to its natural flow,” says Halter. “In doing so, we [were rewarded with] a significant two-and-a-half-mile-long whitewater rafting course that literally finishes in the middle of downtown Columbus.”

The RushSouth Whitewater Park—the longest urban whitewater course in the world—opened in 2012. In the 14 years since its debut, the park has grown to deliver family-friendly offerings such as lazy river floats and ziplines; outdoor recreation such as fly-fishing and guided kayak tours; and a 22-mile linear park, RiverWalk, with walkability to nearby boutiques, restaurants, and hotels.

“[RushSouth] put us on the map, and we became known for it. It was a major catalyst for the downtown area that really kicked everything into high gear,” Halter says. “It’s not just something that we sit and look at. We use it. It really is a living, breathing asset.”

The next chapter is already in the works. “We’re in the process of building a surfing wave that will bring river surfing to Columbus. [It will be] the only one in the Southeast,” says Woitena. But the river is just the beginning. Columbus has also built one of the most diverse outdoor recreation portfolios in the Southeast. The city was recently selected as a 2026 International Mountain Biking Association Trail Town, the only designation of its kind in Georgia, anchored by the Standing Boy Creek trail system and more than 60 miles of interconnected trails.

Minor Leagues and Major Developments

With an attitude of *If you build it, they will come*, sports tourism has become another significant thread in Columbus’s visitor economy. In 2025, the city welcomed an Atlanta Braves affiliate, the Columbus Clingstones, to a \$50 million renovated stadium that drew 231,000 fans through the gates in its first season. The Columbus United FC soccer team, the River Dragons ice hockey team, and the Columbus Lions indoor arena football team also call the Fountain City home.

Perhaps most unexpectedly, the Columbus Ice Rink next to the Columbus Civic Center serves as home ice for Auburn University’s hockey program. The school sits less than 35 miles from Columbus. The rink also regularly hosts women’s college and club hockey tournaments. At the Civic Center itself, temporary ice is produced for each Columbus River Dragons game. “We’re one of the only destinations in the Southeast that has two sheets of ice,” says Woitena. “We do a lot of hockey here.”

For sports tourism planners looking for a midsize Southern city with year-round event capacity, Columbus is increasingly making a strong case, particularly thanks to its more than 4,500 hotel rooms scattered throughout town. The numbers tell a compelling story, but Halter is clear about what tourism means to Columbus. “It is absolutely not a byproduct,” he says. “Tourism is an engine.”

The proof is in the city’s continued growth. The Springer Opera House debuted the Pierce Anderson Theater in the Outdoors (PATIO) this spring. South Commons, a 40-plus-acre development opportunity around Synovus Park, the Clingstones’ stadium, is being reimaged as Columbus’s answer to The Battery Atlanta, home to the Atlanta Braves. “We’re not just a place to come and have a meeting or visit,” says Woitena. “We’re a destination that people want to plan trips around.”

COLUMBUS TOURISM
BY THE NUMBERS

\$1 billion

of total economic
impact in 2025

\$650 million

spent in the local
economy each year

500+

hotel rooms in
the Uptown district

3.1 million

total visitors annually



Clockwise from top right: Pace Halter;
historic photo of Eagle & Phenix Mills;
Eagle & Phenix today; Ashley Woitena



TOURISM
TRANSFORMATION

Four Georgia communities
exemplify how tourism
is reshaping and redefining
local economies across
the state.

SENOIA

According to the Georgia Screen Entertainment Coalition, before ***The Walking Dead*** came to town, Senoia had five operational businesses. Today it has **more than 100** in the downtown area, with a waitlist for available space. The long-running AMC series didn't just put Senoia on the map; it rewrote its story, making it one of the state's clearest examples of **film-driven economic growth**.

CLAYTON

Tucked in the northeastern corner of the state, this town with a population of 2,000 has emerged as a **younger, scrappier alternative** to mountain towns like Dahlonega, Helen, and Blue Ridge. **Bridge Creek Inn**, a boutique hotel, opened in 2023, along with a slew of new restaurants and boutiques, securing the town's tourism footing. Its proximity to Highlands, North Carolina, broadens its reach, while nearby **Tallulah Gorge State Park** attracts approximately 900,000 visitors annually.

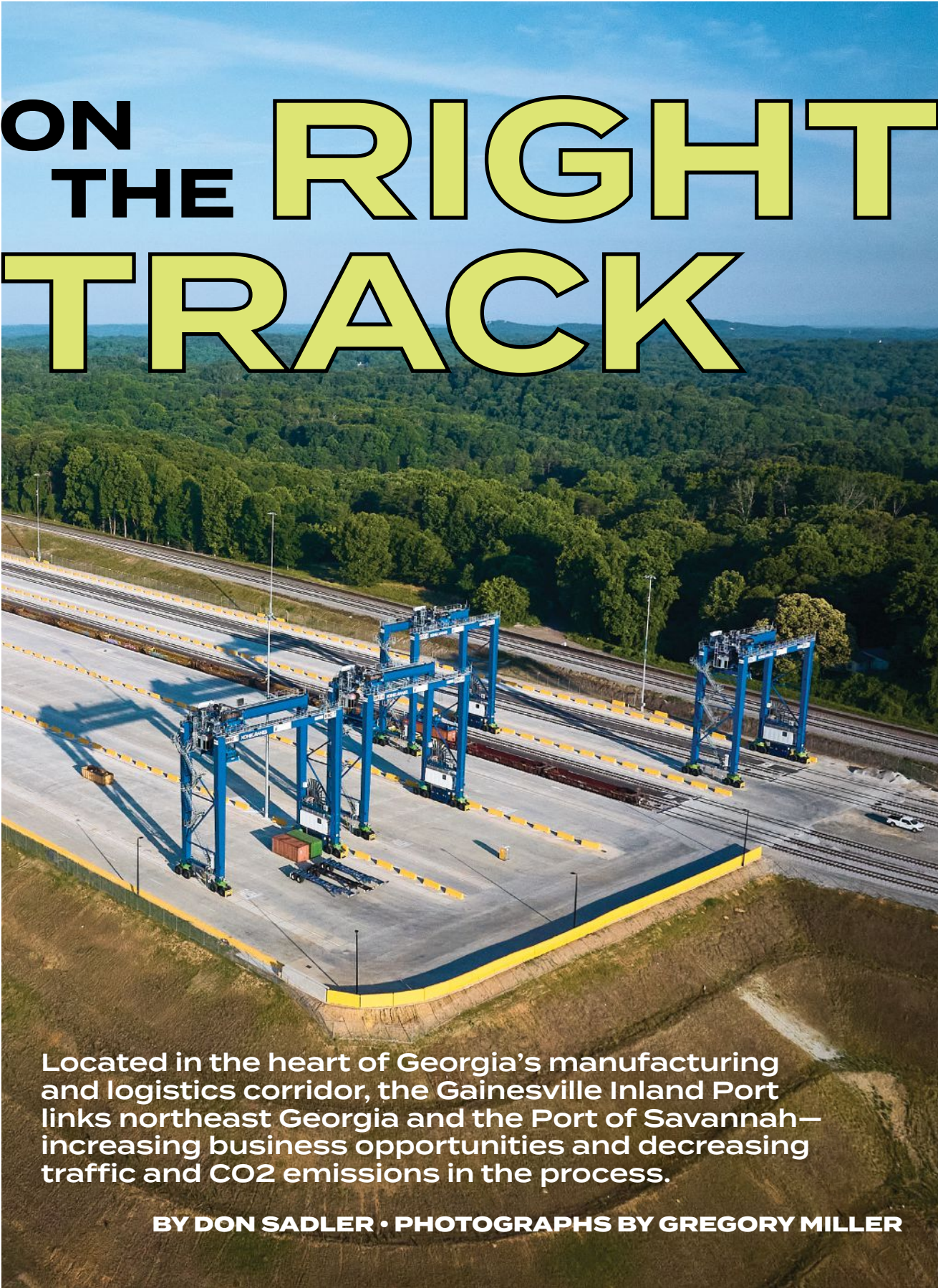
MADISON

High-end dining and distinctive lodging reflect the town's shift from day-trip stop to overnight destination. Tourism now contributes more than \$63 million annually to the local economy. Its appeal extends beyond city limits, too, as the nearby **Ritz-Carlton Reynolds, Lake Oconee** puts golf, lake recreation, and luxury hospitality within a short drive.

ST. MARYS

Founded in 1787, St. Marys is among the **oldest continuously occupied towns** in the country. Its walkable waterfront downtown is filled with locally owned shops, eateries, and inns. The town also serves as the gateway to **Cumberland Island National Seashore**, which welcomes 60,000 tourists annually.

ON THE RIGHT TRACK

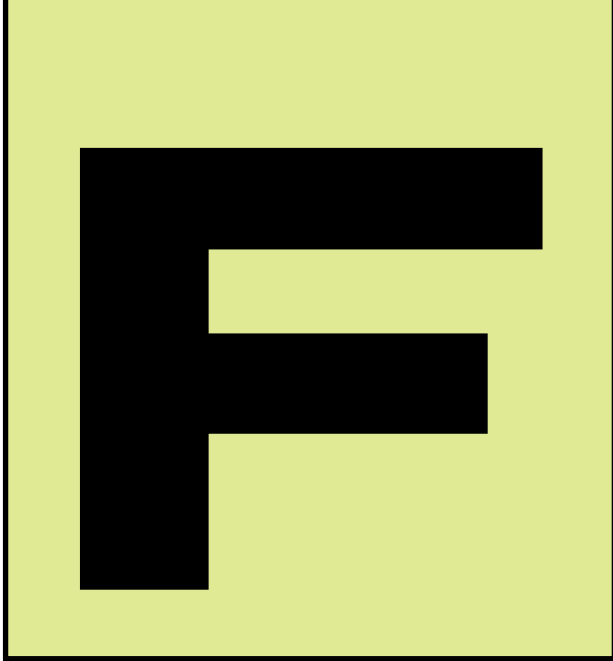


Located in the heart of Georgia's manufacturing and logistics corridor, the Gainesville Inland Port links northeast Georgia and the Port of Savannah—increasing business opportunities and decreasing traffic and CO2 emissions in the process.

BY DON SADLER • PHOTOGRAPHS BY GREGORY MILLER



Wesley Barrell,
GM of inland
operations for
the Georgia
Ports Authority,
at the Gainesville
Inland Port



For decades, goods arriving at the Port of Savannah bound for northeast Georgia have been shipped by truck along a 300-mile, one-way route. As a result, more than 50,000 truck trips are made through the Atlanta region each year, adding to traffic woes and filling the air with thousands of tons of carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions.

But thanks to the recent opening of the Gainesville Inland Port (GIP), a new inland rail terminal on 104 acres of land in Gainesville, all of that is about to change. Located on an existing Norfolk Southern Class I rail line in the heart of the manufacturing and logistics corridor along Interstate 85, the GIP serves as a direct rail link between northeast Georgia and the Port of Savannah.

According to the Georgia Ports Authority (GPA), which owns and operates the terminal, the site was chosen based on market research and site selection criteria that included its connections to Norfolk Southern and proximity to the National Highway Freight Network.

Advantages of Inland Rail Terminals

Inland rail terminals allow containers to be trucked for shorter distances and held at an intermodal rail yard. From there, they are loaded onto trains that can move hundreds of containers in a single trip. Terminals like the GIP extend the reach of the Port of Savannah, one of the most connected ports in the country, while creating new inland markets for products. In this way, they act as a magnet for private investment and job creation.

By eliminating the need to ship goods between the Port of Savannah and northeast Georgia via truck, the Gainesville Inland Port will reduce CO₂ emissions by more than 22,000 metric tons during its first year of operation. In addition, it will lessen traffic congestion, cut transportation costs, and reduce road maintenance expenses by nearly \$16 million. The GIP will also eliminate costly empty container moves to and from the coast and free up capacity at marine terminals due to the additional off-site container storage.

According to the GPA, the Gainesville Inland Port will eliminate 52,000 truck trips through Atlanta and 18 million

truck miles from Georgia highways during its first year of operations. These numbers are projected to grow to 200,000 truck trips and 43 million truck miles by 2045, based on the GPA's demand estimates and service availability.

"The Gainesville Inland Port will expand logistics capacity for the more than 330 manufacturers located in northeast Georgia by helping them build a stronger, more affordable supply chain," says Wesley Barrell, general manager of inland operations for the Georgia Ports Authority. Industries served include consumer goods, plastics, food processing, automotive suppliers, forest products, and heavy equipment.

The GIP links regional shippers to 39 global container ship services at the Port of Savannah. "This project is about building logistics infrastructure that's efficient, resilient, and sustainable for decades to come," says Alex Luc, group vice president of International Intermodal and Automotive for Norfolk Southern. "Just as important, it will reduce traffic congestion and carbon emissions by eliminating a roughly 600-mile truck round trip for every container moved by rail."

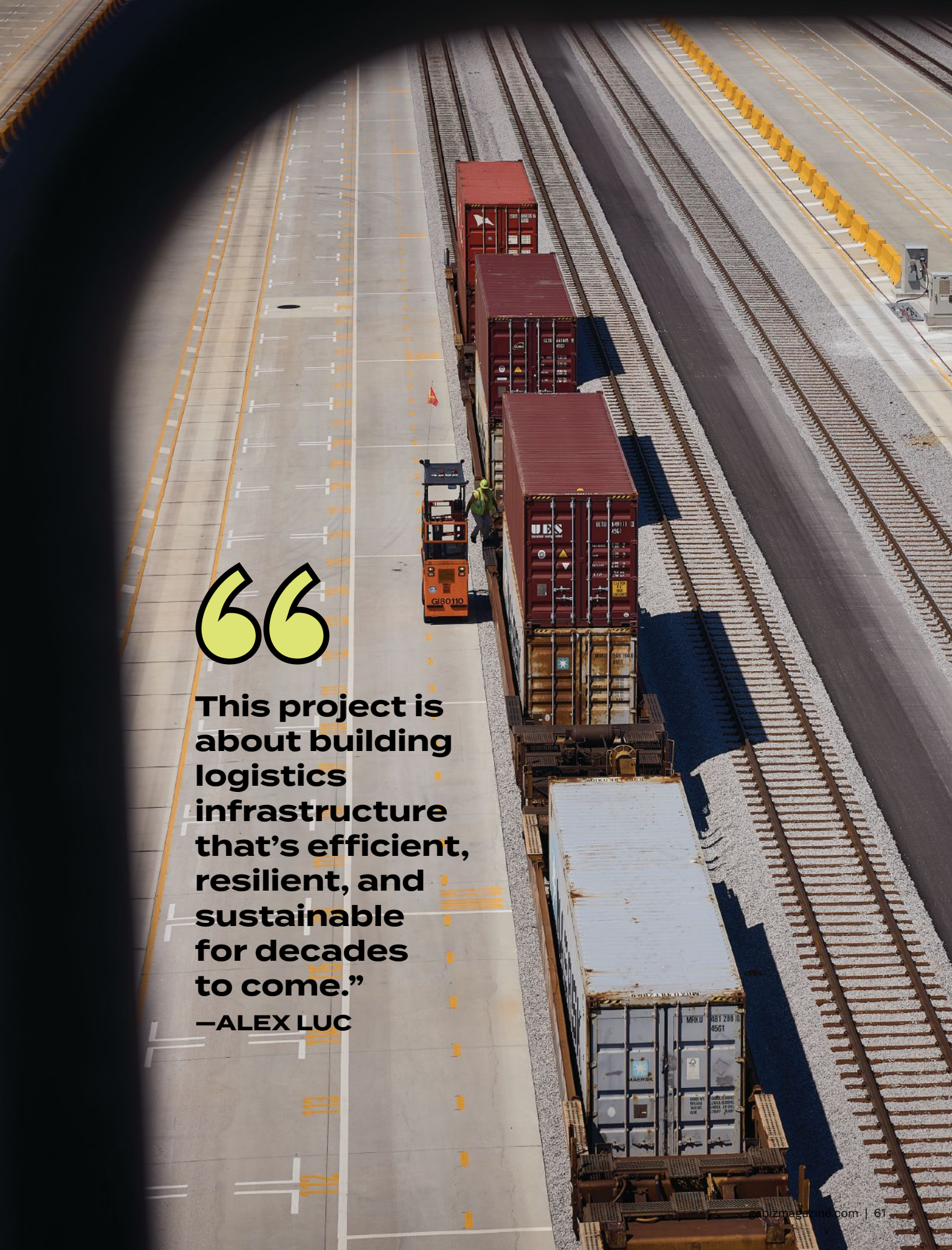
"[The Gainesville Inland Port] is a long-term, public-private investment designed to meet the needs of a growing region," Luc says. "As the rail provider to the new inland terminal, we're helping connect northeast Georgia to global commerce in a smarter, more sustainable way."

Growing Logistics Corridor

The Gainesville Inland Port serves the growing manufacturing and logistics corridor in northeast Georgia with its consumer market of more than 2 million people. It has the capacity to lift 200,000 containers annually on 18,000 feet of working track. After opening in May with seven electric rubber-tire gantry (RTG) cranes, the GIP has the capacity to expand to 14 cranes as demand increases. Unlike rail-mounted cranes, RTGs operate on rubber tires, providing high mobility and flexibility, and the ability to maneuver across paved surfaces. Additionally, they are equipped with "smart" alarms that automatically adjust their decibel levels depending on the surrounding environmental noise. This ensures the alarm is audible to workers on-site without being unnecessarily loud to neighbors, particularly during nighttime operations.

According to GPA's Barrell, the Gainesville Inland Port is the second inland rail terminal in Georgia—the first was the Appalachian Regional Port (ARP) in Crandall, near the Tennessee border, which opened in 2018. Several large businesses, including GE Appliances, Huali Floors, and SK Battery, have located or expanded within the ARP service area since it opened. "The success of the Appalachian Regional Port was one factor leading to construction of the Gainesville Inland Port," says Barrell.

Compared to the Appalachian Regional Port, which sits on 42 acres in Murray County and has an annual container capacity of 75,000, the GIP is a much larger terminal with greater capacity. Trade through the GIP is expected to eventually grow to three to four times the volume of the ARP, which handled nearly 46,000 containers in 2025.



“

This project is about building logistics infrastructure that's efficient, resilient, and sustainable for decades to come.”

—ALEX LUC

The Gainesville Inland Port created 20 new jobs and indirectly supports 63,000 jobs in the nine-county region.





On the Move

TRACKING THE GIP

During its first year of operations, the Gainesville Inland Port will result in:

18 million

truck miles removed from Georgia roadways

80%

reduction in emissions compared to trucking

22,510

less metric tons of CO₂ emissions in the air

52,000

fewer truck trips through Atlanta

\$15.9 million

in pavement maintenance savings

200,000

annual container capacity

20

new direct jobs in Hall County

15,169

jobs supported in Hall County

\$687 million

in net public benefits

Source: The Georgia Ports Authority



The GIP was funded by investments from the Georgia Ports Authority (\$127 million) and Norfolk Southern (\$7 million). In addition, the GPA invested \$4.8 million in road upgrades near the terminal to reduce the traffic impact on residents. “The Gainesville Inland Port represents exactly the kind of investment Norfolk Southern seeks to make—one that strengthens the supply chain, supports regional economic growth, and delivers meaningful benefits to the communities we serve,” says Luc.

A Major Employment and Economic Boost

Governor Brian Kemp is a strong supporter of the Gainesville Inland Port. In January, he touted its economic, logistics, and infrastructure benefits at the 2026 Eggs & Issues Breakfast, an annual kickoff to the Georgia General Assembly regular session.

“Through improved connectivity, developments like the Gainesville Inland Port maximize the impact of Georgia’s extensive logistics network,” Kemp stated when announcing the project in 2023. “Inland terminals have a proven track record of powering economic development for rural Georgians by extending port services to the doorstep of manufacturing and supply chain operations.”

In addition to 20 new jobs that were created at the terminal, the GIP indirectly supports another 15,000-plus jobs in Hall County and more than 63,000 jobs in the nine-county region of northeast Georgia. According to the GPA, the terminal will provide \$687 million in net public benefits to the region.

“Our role at Georgia Ports is to support economic development and prosperity across the state,” says Georgia Ports Authority President and CEO Griff Lynch. “The Appalachian Regional Port has played a key role in attracting firms to northwest Georgia that choose locations based on logistics infrastructure, and the Gainesville Inland Port will do the same for northeast Georgia.”

The GIP is conducting daily train operations Monday through Friday from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. Once the terminal is fully operational, nearly half of all truck traffic between northeast Georgia and the Port of Savannah will be converted to rail.

“The Gainesville Inland Port demonstrates how rail can be a powerful solution for both economic growth and environmental stewardship,” says Luc. “That’s the power of rail in the right place.”

MY WIFE, MANDY, AND I bought our flower farm, 3 Porch Farm, 16 years ago. It's 8.74 acres just outside of Comer. Our land is a magical little place that backs up to the forest of Watson Mill Bridge State Park. There is pastureland or woods on all sides of us. The topography gently rolls down towards our little cabin, which has seasonal streams in every direction.

Comer has an incredible amount of heart. We've met so many good people on all sides of the fence, and they tend to care for their neighbors in very real ways. The downtown area was sleepy when we arrived, but it is waking up. We've got a great coffee shop that frequently features musicians, plus a thriving farmers market, an amazing baker, super-talented potters, world-class glass blowers, the incredible covered bridge at Watson Mill Bridge State Park, and the best picking you'll ever find over at Neat Pieces Antiques.

To people who tell me they want to start a flower farm, I offer some hard truths: If you aren't absolutely driven to spend your whole life with your back bent and hands in the dirt, you might want to stick to a nice garden. You have to be fanatical to pull off something like this. We are fortunate to support ourselves and our crew entirely through our farm's production. But the hours are endless, the ramp-up phase is a solid decade, and the risks are very high. It's been so much harder,



Steve O'Shea on Flowers, Good Fortune, and Life on the Farm

but also so much more rewarding, than I could have ever imagined.

Last year, we sustainably shipped about 5,000 bundles of flowers (roughly 150,000 stems) and more than 65,000 plants to 47 states. There are lots of poppies in spring and dahlias and mums in the fall, but we also grow and sell hellebores, ranunculus, anemones, and peonies.

On the best days, after the crew leaves, a sense of calm descends on the farm. We can walk the fields and take it all in. We get to appreciate the good fortune we have to be growing these beautiful plants that are so often given as tokens of friendship, love, congratulations, or condolences. We get to help manifest the best of people's intentions into a physical, beautiful thing. It is a life that Mandy and I love.

Georgia on your mind?



FOR 111 YEARS,

the Georgia Chamber of Commerce has served our state's businesses, communities, and citizens through strategic policy advocacy, thought leadership, and future-focused initiatives aimed at keeping Georgia the "Best Place for Business."

Stay Connected with the Georgia Chamber

 **GACHAMBER**

 **GACHAMBER1915**

LEARN MORE AT [GACHAMBER.COM](https://www.gachamber.com)




GEORGIACHAMBER



COMMERCIAL BANKING

Growing your business for tomorrow starts with having confidence in your bank today.

No matter where you want to take your business, with Regions you'll find a bank that understands your vision and is committed to your success. Our local relationship managers work closely with you to develop solutions customized to your needs. From working capital and equipment financing to treasury management and investment services, we help you confidently navigate today's complex financial landscape to position your business for long-term growth.

