The Rural Roadmap Initiative

A Legislative Framework for Strengthening Rural Alabama

To the Members of the Alabama Legislature:

Pursuant to the work of the Rural Roadmap Initiative created by Act 2025-425, we respectfully submit this report outlining key findings, policy recommendations, and proposed timelines to strengthen rural Alabama. This effort reflects extensive input from legislators, local government officials, industry stakeholders, and subject-matter experts from across the state, and is grounded in both data-driven analysis and on-the-ground experience.

The recommendations contained in this report are intended to serve as a practical guide for near-term legislative consideration, as well as a long-term policy framework to support sustained investment in rural communities. Collectively, the findings highlight the need for coordinated state leadership, targeted and flexible resources, and implementation strategies that recognize regional differences while advancing shared statewide goals.

We respectfully submit this report for your review and consideration and appreciate the continued commitment to addressing the challenges and opportunities facing rural Alabama. The Rural Roadmap Initiative stands ready to support further discussion and implementation of these recommendations as the state works to ensure long-term prosperity for its rural communities.

Respectfully submitted,

Sen. Garlan Gudger
President Pro Tempore of the Senate

Rep. Nathaniel Ledbetter
Speaker of the House of Representatives

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Rural Roadmap Initiative is a bipartisan, statewide effort to take a clear-eyed look at the challenges facing rural Alabama and to build a path forward that reflects the day-to-day realities of small communities. Over several months, the Initiative brought together rural leaders, employers, educators, healthcare providers, and community advocates to listen, learn, and identify where policy gaps exist and where state action could make a meaningful difference. One message came through loud and clear: rural decline is not inevitable, but progress requires intentional policy choices, sustained investment, and a coordinated long-term strategy rather than isolated, short-term fixes.

The Initiative's work also made it clear that rural challenges are deeply interconnected. Infrastructure gaps can stall economic development. Workforce shortages strain healthcare systems and local employers. Housing and quality-of-life limitations make it harder to attract and retain talent. And uneven access to capital and technical assistance leaves some communities behind. Because these challenges overlap, the Roadmap focuses on integrated solutions that cut across traditional policy silos and reinforce one another at the local level.

As part of this work, the Initiative identified several first-tier issues that could realistically be addressed over the next few legislative sessions. These include developing a more precise, tiered definition of "rural" that reflects community-level realities rather than county lines alone; creating a centralized grant portal paired with hands-on grant-writing assistance; addressing workforce housing gaps in rural areas; strengthening workforce pipelines through career and technical education and stronger industry partnerships; improving access to basic infrastructure needs such as turn lanes and utility relocation; and expanding access to capital for small, rural-based businesses. These are just some of the priority issues raised by Initiative members, but they represent practical opportunities for early progress.

Ultimately, the future of rural Alabama is inseparable from the future of the state as a whole. Rural communities supply essential workforce talent, agricultural production, natural resources, and cultural heritage that benefit every Alabamian. By continuing this work and acting on the Roadmap's recommendations, the Legislature has a real opportunity to turn shared priorities into lasting progress. The Rural Roadmap Initiative provides the structure, collaboration, and momentum to move beyond conversation and toward durable action – and to ensure rural Alabama has a strong, sustainable future for generations to come.

STRUCTURE

The Initiative operated through focused subgroups:

- Agriculture & Small Business
- Economic Development
- Healthcare
- Infrastructure
- Workforce Development & Training
- Quality of Life & Placemaking

LEGISLATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS

TIER I: IMMEDIATE LEGISLATIVE ACTION

1. ADOPT A TIERED DEFINITION OF "RURAL"

A consistent statutory definition of "rural" is foundational to effective policy design and implementation. Currently, Alabama law relies on at least eight different definitions of "rural," creating confusion and inconsistency across incentives, grants, and eligibility criteria. This fragmentation often results in uneven access to resources and makes it difficult to intentionally direct investments to the communities that need them most.

To address this, a unified, tiered definition of "rural" should be established in statute for prospective use in new state programs, workforce initiatives, healthcare incentives, and infrastructure funding. The definition should be designed to drill down beyond broad, county-level classifications and instead focus on reaching the most rural and underserved communities within counties – recognizing that significant rural need often exists in pockets that are obscured by countywide averages.

Importantly, this new definition would be prospective only and non-retroactive. This would not alter, disrupt, or supersede any programs, incentives, or eligibility standards currently authorized in law. Existing programs would continue to operate under their current statutory definitions unless and until the Legislature explicitly amends. them.

By establishing a single, consistent rural definition for future initiatives, the state can reduce administrative confusion, improve coordination across agencies, and ensure that rural communities are intentionally targeted and afforded the same opportunities for investment and growth as urban areas – without unintended consequences to existing law.

2. CENTRALIZED STATE GRANT PORTAL

Subgroup discussions repeatedly identified the current grant process as a significant barrier for rural Alabama communities. While state and federal grant opportunities exist, rural towns, counties, and communities often lack the time, staffing, and technical expertise required to identify relevant programs, prepare competitive applications, and comply with ongoing reporting and administrative requirements. In many rural jurisdictions, grant responsibilities fall to already overextended clerks, mayors, or volunteer leaders, resulting in missed opportunities or incomplete applications.

The current system is fragmented across multiple state agencies, each with its own application platforms, timelines, eligibility definitions, and compliance standards. This lack of coordination creates confusion, duplication of effort, and inconsistent outcomes – often favoring larger or better-resourced communities with dedicated grant staff. As a result, rural communities are placed at a structural disadvantage, even when need and eligibility exist.

Subgroup recommendations converged on the need for a centralized, statewide grant system to reduce these barriers and improve rural access. Specifically, expanding the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs' (ADECA) existing statewide grant portal to include all state agency grant opportunities would provide a single, trusted entry point for rural applicants. A centralized portal would simplify discovery, standardize basic application elements, and improve transparency around deadlines, eligibility, and required documentation.

In addition, establishing a statewide directory of vetted grant writers would help rural communities connect with qualified professionals, reduce reliance on informal networks, and improve application quality. Coupled with this, offering standardized annual rural grant training and capacity-building tools would equip local leaders with baseline knowledge to pursue grants more effectively and manage awards once received.

Together, these reforms would not create new grant programs, but would modernize and coordinate the existing system – lowering administrative burdens, increasing participation, and ensuring rural communities can compete more equitably for available funding.

3. ADDRESS RURAL WORKFORCE HOUSING GAPS TO SUPPORT ECONOMIC GROWTH

Subgroup meetings consistently identified workforce housing shortages as a critical constraint on rural Alabama's ability to recruit and retain employers, teachers, healthcare providers, and other essential workers. In many communities, available housing is either insufficient, outdated, or in poor condition, leaving new employees with limited options or forcing long commutes that undermine retention. Even when jobs are available, the lack of quality, affordable housing often prevents projects from moving forward.

Employers evaluating rural locations routinely cite housing availability as a deciding factor, particularly for small-to-mid-scale industries and healthcare providers. Without viable housing options, rural communities struggle to attract skilled workers, stabilize their workforce, and support long-term population growth.

To address these challenges, subgroups recommended a targeted set of housing strategies focused on scale, flexibility, and community impact. Small-scale rehabilitation incentives for vacant or underutilized units would quickly expand housing supply by returning existing homes to service. Establishing workforce housing zones aligned with the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) would help direct investment to rural areas while supporting mixed-income developments that reflect local needs. In addition, neighborhood revitalization efforts, including basic infrastructure repairs in existing communities, would improve livability, preserve housing stock, and strengthen surrounding neighborhoods.

These approaches could help rural communities compete for jobs and talent, support essential services, and ensure that housing availability no longer serves as a barrier to economic development and community stability in rural Alabama.

4. STRENGTHEN RURAL WORKFORCE PIPELINES

Subgroups consistently emphasized that rural workforce challenges require locally aligned, practical solutions rather than broad, statewide approaches. Effective workforce development in rural Alabama must focus on building talent pipelines that reflect local industries, labor markets, and community capacity.

Central to this effort are "Grow Your Own" pipelines that prepare students for jobs in their home regions. Expanding high school career technical education (CTE), dual enrollment, and earlier middle school exposure helps students understand local career options and increases participation in high-demand fields.

Instructor shortages remain a critical barrier, particularly in technical and skilled trades. Greater compensation flexibility and stronger industry partnerships would allow experienced workers to teach part-time or serve as adjunct instructors, bringing real-world expertise into classrooms while addressing staffing gaps.

Subgroups also stressed the need for regional alignment. Workforce programs and equipment investments should be coordinated within a practical labor-shed – generally a 50-mile radius – to avoid duplication and ensure training aligns with actual job opportunities.

These strategies are increasingly urgent as the workforce in forestry, logging, manufacturing, and skilled trades continues to age. Addressing regulatory and insurance barriers that limit apprenticeships and early exposure to trades would further strengthen pipelines while maintaining safety and accountability.

These reforms could create a more efficient, locally rooted workforce system that supports rural employers, prepares residents for in-demand jobs, and strengthens long-term economic stability in rural Alabama.

5. INTEGRATED RURAL INDUSTRY INSTRUCTOR EXCHANGE AND EXTERNSHIP INITIATIVE

A strong rural workforce pipeline requires direct, ongoing involvement from industry to ensure education and training programs reflect real-world job demands. This combined initiative strengthens Alabama's rural workforce by tightly connecting employers with classrooms through two complementary tools: the Rural Industry Instructor Externship Program and the Talent Exchange for the Advancement of Careers and Higher Education (TEACH) Credit.

These pathways align classroom instruction with current industry needs by providing paid summer externships placing teachers inside local businesses and incentivizing employers to loan skilled employees to teach in high-demand CTE programs. This will address instructor shortages, brings up-to-date technologies and job-ready skills into the classroom while ensuring students are trained for the careers available in their communities.

By formalizing employer–education partnerships, the initiative strengthens local talent pipelines, improves workforce readiness, and helps rural employers develop the skilled workers they need to grow and remain competitive.

An Industry–Education Externship Program would strengthen Alabama's workforce by directly aligning classroom instruction with the skills, technologies, and processes employers actually use. Through paid summer externships, CTE instructors would spend time embedded in local industries, gaining firsthand experience that can be immediately translated into updated curriculum, lab instruction, and career guidance for students.

For students, the program improves career readiness, increases awareness of local job opportunities, and creates clearer pathways from school to employment. For employers, it strengthens local talent pipelines, reduces recruitment and training costs, and deepens partnerships with education providers. By formalizing collaboration between industry and education, the externship model ensures Alabama's workforce system remains responsive, relevant, and competitive.

6. RECRUIT AND RETAIN RURAL PHYSICIANS THROUGH TARGETED INCENTIVES

Rural communities across Alabama continue to face persistent physician shortages that limit access to primary and specialty care, increase travel times for patients, and place additional strain on already fragile healthcare systems. An aging physician workforce, lower patient volumes, and financial and liability concerns make rural practice less attractive, despite the critical role physicians play in sustaining local hospitals, clinics, and emergency services.

Targeted, practical incentives can help reverse these trends by reducing barriers to rural practice and encouraging experienced physicians to serve where the need is greatest. Expanding Good Samaritan liability protections would allow retired physicians to safely volunteer in rural clinical settings, increasing access to care while protecting providers who offer their services without compensation. Similarly, modifying Continuing Medical Education (CME) requirements for retired physicians who maintain active licenses but only volunteer would remove unnecessary regulatory hurdles while preserving patient safety and professional standards.

To strengthen long-term physician capacity, a state income tax incentive for physicians who relocate and practice full-time in rural areas would improve recruitment and retention by offsetting financial risks associated with rural practice. This incentive would support community stability, bolster rural hospitals and clinics, and help ensure consistent access to care.

These targeted measures would expand the rural physician workforce, stabilize local healthcare delivery, and improve health outcomes – while leveraging existing medical expertise and minimizing new administrative burdens.

7. CREATE A RURAL ACCESS IMPROVEMENT FUND (TURN LANES, UTILITY RELOCATION, SMALL INFRASTRUCTURE)

In rural Alabama, economic development projects often fail not because of large-scale infrastructure deficiencies, but due to small, essential improvements that local governments cannot afford. Turn lanes, drainage corrections, utility relocations, and basic site access upgrades, while relatively modest in cost, can determine whether a project moves forward or stalls entirely. For small communities with limited budgets, these "last-mile" infrastructure needs are frequently insurmountable.

A dedicated Rural Access Improvement Fund, administered by the Alabama Department of Transportation (ALDOT), would address these barriers by supporting targeted, project-specific infrastructure improvements tied to rural retail, service, and small-scale economic development projects. By focusing on practical access needs – including projects on local roads – rather than major highway expansions, the fund would unlock private investment, improve safety, and allow rural communities to compete for projects that are otherwise lost due to minor but unaffordable infrastructure gaps.

8. ENHANCE RURAL QUALITY OF LIFE AND COMMUNITY PROMOTION

Subgroup discussions repeatedly identified quality of life as a primary factor in retaining residents and attracting new families, workers, and visitors to rural Alabama. Yet many rural communities lack the staff, digital media capacity, and basic tourism infrastructure needed to tell their story, promote local assets, and compete for attention.

Targeted, small-scale investments can make a sizeable impact. Modest grants for murals, facade improvements, signage, and community festivals help strengthen local identity, activate downtowns, and create places residents are proud to call home. Complementing these efforts with digital marketing and tourism support allows rural communities to reach broader audiences, highlight unique cultural and outdoor assets, and increase visitor engagement.

Providing technical assistance for branding, video content creation, and integration with tourism apps ensures rural communities can sustain promotion efforts beyond one-time projects. Together, these strategies improve community pride, support local businesses, boost tourism, and enhance overall quality of life, all key ingredients for long-term rural vitality and population retention.

9. RESOLUTION ESTABLISHING A VOLUNTEER FIRE & EMS STUDY COMMISSION

Emergency Medical Services (EMS) agencies across Alabama – both volunteer and career – are facing increasing challenges related to sustainability, workforce recruitment and retention, training pipelines, and reliable funding. These pressures are especially acute in rural and underserved areas, where limited staffing, aging equipment, and inconsistent reimbursement threaten the reliability of emergency response.

To address these challenges in a coordinated manner, a dedicated EMS Study Commission should be established to examine statewide EMS sustainability, workforce development, and funding structures. The commission would review existing statutes, incentives, and regulatory barriers and develop targeted legislative and administrative recommendations to strengthen the EMS system.

Key issues for study include volunteer eligibility for reimbursement upon licensure, expansion of the state income tax incentive to include electronic medical records (EMR) and fire support personnel, and ensuring EMS Explorer and Cadet programs receive appropriate exemptions by recognizing them as educational or apprenticeship pathways.

10. RESOLUTION EXTENDING THE RURAL ROADMAP INITIATIVE

The Rural Roadmap Initiative has provided a structured, collaborative framework for identifying the most pressing challenges facing rural Alabama and developing practical, bipartisan policy solutions to address them. Through its multi-subgroup approach, the initiative has brought together legislators, state agencies, local leaders, and subject-matter experts to examine issues such as infrastructure, healthcare access, workforce development, economic growth, and quality of life in rural communities.

Passing a resolution to extend the Rural Roadmap Initiative for an additional year is necessary to allow this work to continue moving from analysis to implementation. An extension would provide time to refine legislative recommendations, align proposals with budget cycles, evaluate early policy outcomes, and ensure stakeholder input remains central to the process. Continued authorization will help maintain momentum, support coordination across state agencies and the Legislature, and ensure that rural communities remain a sustained policy priority rather than a one-year effort.

TIER 2: MEDIUM-TERM REFORMS

1. CREATE A "SEEDS 2" RURAL SITE & RETAIL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

The original Site Evaluation Economic Development Strategy (SEEDS) program has proven to be a successful and flexible tool for accelerating site readiness, removing blight, and positioning communities for economic growth. By supporting targeted site preparation and redevelopment, SEEDS has helped local governments overcome early-stage barriers that often prevent projects from moving forward. Building on this proven blueprint, a rural-focused "SEEDS 2" program would adapt the model to meet the scale and capacity realities of Alabama's most rural communities.

A "SEEDS 2" Rural Site & Retail Development Program would fund rural-scale site preparation, blight removal, and retail redevelopment in areas where traditional economic development tools are often misaligned with local needs. Unlike existing programs designed for large, industrial sites, this rural-focused model would support small-acreage sites (approximately 5–25 acres), allow for demolition, cleanup, and site preparation for locally significant projects, and adapt local match requirements to better accommodate the smallest and most resource-constrained communities.

By tailoring the successful SEEDS framework to rural contexts, "SEEDS 2" would strengthen the recruitment of small-to-mid-scale employers, support local-growth and service-based industries, and help rural communities create developable sites that attract private investment. Leveraging a proven program structure while right-sizing it for rural Alabama ensures accountability, efficiency, and meaningful economic impact where it is needed most.

2. SUPPORT SMALL RETAIL AS ESSENTIAL RURAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Small retail businesses play an outsized role in rural communities, serving as both economic anchors and quality-of-life drivers. Grocery stores, pharmacies, hardware stores, and locally owned shops provide essential goods and services, support local employment, and help keep dollars circulating within the community. When these businesses are absent or lost, residents must travel farther for basic needs, making it harder to retain families, workers, and employers.

Despite their importance, rural retail projects often struggle to access traditional financing. Smaller deal sizes, thin margins, and perceived risk make banks reluctant to lend, even when community demand is strong. This capital gap frequently prevents otherwise viable retail projects from moving forward.

Authorizing a Revolving Loan Fund for rural retail would address this challenge by providing flexible, patient capital tailored to small rural projects. By supporting essential retail through a revolving loan model, the state can strengthen rural economies, improve access to daily services, and reinforce the long-term viability of rural communities.

3. INTENSIVE SUPPORT FOR THE MOST CHALLENGED RURAL COMMUNITIES/ EDOS

Rural Economic Development Organizations (EDOs) are often the primary drivers of job creation, retail recruitment, and community investment in small towns. However, many rural EDOs are understaffed, underfunded, and stretched thin across multiple roles, limiting their ability to compete with larger communities that have dedicated teams and technical capacity. Without stable operational support, even well-positioned rural communities struggle to pursue opportunities, prepare sites, or respond quickly to prospects.

Targeted state support can help level the playing field. Dedicating a small share of state sales tax revenue directly to local EDOs would provide predictable, ongoing funding to support basic operations, programming, and professional development. Requiring local governments to maintain existing EDO funding ensures state dollars supplement, rather than replace, local investment.

These measures could strengthen local economic development capacity, improve responsiveness, and give the most challenged rural communities the tools they need to attract jobs, retail, and long-term investment.

4. PERMIT IN-KIND CONTRIBUTIONS FOR GRANT MATCHES AND ESTABLISH A STATEWIDE MATCH FUND

Across every Rural Roadmap subgroup, the most consistently identified barrier to rural participation in state and federal grant programs is the inability of small communities to provide required local match dollars. Many rural towns and counties operate with limited general funds, narrow tax bases, and restricted bonding capacity, leaving them effectively locked out of otherwise competitive and well-suited grant opportunities.

Current cash-match requirements often assume a level of fiscal capacity that simply does not exist in small rural jurisdictions. As a result, communities with the greatest infrastructure, workforce, healthcare, housing, tourism, and economic development needs are frequently unable to apply for – or fully leverage – available funding. Even when projects are viable and shovel-ready, the lack of match funding prevents rural communities from drawing down state and federal dollars that would otherwise flow into Alabama.

To reduce these structural barriers, the state should both establish a statewide match fund and explicitly permit the use of in-kind contributions to satisfy grant match requirements where appropriate. A statewide match fund would provide targeted assistance for rural applicants across infrastructure, economic development, workforce, housing, tourism, and healthcare grants, ensuring that local match requirements do not automatically disqualify communities based on size or fiscal capacity.
In addition, allowing in-kind match – such as local labor, equipment use, donated materials, right-of-way contributions, or professional services – would recognize the real investments rural communities already make in their projects. These contributions often represent significant local commitment but are currently undervalued or excluded under rigid cash-match rules.

Implementation of these reforms would not reduce accountability or project quality. Instead, they would unlock access to millions of dollars in existing federal and state funds that rural towns are currently unable to draw down, improve equity across grant programs, and ensure that limited local resources are leveraged rather than penalized. By modernizing match requirements, Alabama can better align its grant system with the realities of rural communities while maximizing return on public investment.

5. STRENGTHEN REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSIONS (RPCS) AND PROMOTE FUNCTIONAL REGIONAL COLLABORATION

Regional Planning Commissions (RPCs) play a critical and often underrecognized role in supporting rural Alabama. In many communities, RPCs are the most consistent source of technical assistance, planning expertise, grant support, and coordination across local governments. Their staff are deeply committed to rural communities and routinely take action where local capacity is limited, often serving as the link between towns, counties, state agencies, and federal programs.

Participants emphasized the need to better support and strengthen RPCs so they can continue and expand this work. Additional state funding is needed to bolster rural-facing RPC staffing, ensuring these commissions have the capacity to meet growing demands and provide timely, high-quality assistance.

Participants also stressed the importance of supporting locally driven, functional regional collaboration. In some cases, economic and workforce realities align more closely across neighboring communities than current RPC boundaries reflect. Allowing and encouraging flexible, functional regional coalitions – working alongside RPCs – would improve coordination and ensure planning efforts reflect how rural regions actually function.

By investing in RPCs and empowering practical regional collaboration, the state can reinforce a trusted rural partner, reduce duplication, and ensure rural communities receive consistent, effective support across programs and priorities.

6. INVEST IN RURAL LEADERSHIP, LOCAL GOVERNANCE TRAINING, AND COMMUNITY CAPACITY

The need for stronger local leadership capacity was raised in every Rural Roadmap subgroup, underscoring its central role in rural success. Subgroup members consistently emphasized that even well-designed programs fail without informed, prepared local leaders to implement them. In many rural communities, newly elected officials assume office with limited access to training, technical support, or institutional continuity.

To address this gap, subgroups recommended a robust, coordinated investment in leadership education and local governance training. This includes targeted instruction in economic development, planning, tourism, and grant management for new local officials. This will ensure they are equipped to navigate increasingly complex funding and regulatory environments. Coordination with existing training programs and leadership initiatives will ensure rural leaders are prepared for the challenges they will face in the years ahead.

In addition, establishing regional leadership academies and continuity tools for newly elected leaders would help preserve institutional knowledge, reduce disruption following elections, and strengthen collaboration across jurisdictions. These investments would build durable local capacity, improve program execution, and ensure rural communities can fully leverage state and federal resources over the long-term.

TIER 3: LONG-TERM STRUCTURAL INVESTMENTS

1. IDENTIFYING HIDDEN GAPS IN RURAL COMMUNITY CAPACITY

Many rural communities face challenges not only because of limited resources, but because they lack the tools to fully identify their own needs and opportunities. Without dedicated staff or technical support, communities often do not know what programs exist, what gaps are holding them back, or which investments would have the greatest impact.

To address this, rural communities need a Rural Capacity Assessment Tool that helps local leaders systematically evaluate infrastructure, housing, workforce, healthcare, and economic development readiness. Such a tool would provide a clear baseline, highlight priority gaps, and guide communities toward appropriate funding, technical assistance, and policy solutions.

In addition, targeted Housing Rehabilitation and Generational Business Incentives are needed to preserve existing assets that communities may overlook. Many rural towns have viable housing stock and long-standing family businesses that could be revitalized with modest support, but they lack awareness of available tools or pathways. Together, these approaches would help rural communities better understand their needs, unlock existing potential, and make more informed, strategic decisions for long-term growth.

2. MODERNIZE RURAL HEALTHCARE CAPACITY, TECHNOLOGY, AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Subgroup discussions consistently emphasized that strengthening rural healthcare requires coordinated investments in services, technology, and frontline support systems. Many rural providers operate with limited resources while serving as essential access points for entire regions, making stability and modernization critical to patient outcomes and community viability.

Key shared recommendations include stabilizing mental health crisis centers and better integrating them with rural hospitals to reduce emergency room strain and improve continuity of care. Participants also stressed the need to support maternal health and strategically restore rural obstetric services where feasible, ensuring families can access care closer to home.

Modernizing healthcare infrastructure is equally important. Funding interoperable electronic medical record (EMR) systems, expanding telehealth connectivity, and addressing cybersecurity vulnerabilities would improve care coordination, expand specialty access, and protect patient data. In addition, enhancing EMS training flexibility and providing greater support for volunteer EMS and fire departments would strengthen emergency response capacity and ensure rural communities remain served during critical situations.

Many of these identified issues will be addressed through the Rural Healthcare Transformation Act.

3. LAND USE, FORESTRY MARKETS, AND EXTERNAL PRESSURES

Subgroup discussions highlighted growing concerns around land preservation as forestry and agricultural lands face increasing pressure from shifting markets and external development forces. Forestry markets in particular are being disrupted by mill closures and an aging logging workforce, reducing landowner options and threatening the long-term viability of working forests that have historically anchored rural economies.

At the same time, rural communities are experiencing heightened tension between preserving farmland and accommodating development pressures. Without intentional policy tools, productive land is at risk of permanent conversion, undermining agricultural continuity, forest management, and rural character.

Participants emphasized the need to explore solutions that sustain forestry markets and protect working lands, including incentives to retain and modernize mills, workforce development strategies for logging and forestry careers, conservation and agricultural easements, and land-use policies that balance property rights with long-term rural stewardship. Addressing these issues through coordinated study and targeted policy action would help preserve rural landscapes while supporting the economic systems that depend on them.

4. ACCESS TO CAPITAL FOR EXISTING SMALL BUSINESSES

Helping rural small businesses thrive requires access to capital that recognizes future opportunity, not just past performance. Subgroup discussions consistently noted that current financing models are heavily backward-looking, relying on historical revenue and collateral thresholds that many rural businesses cannot meet, even when demand and growth potential are strong.

As a result, existing rural employers often struggle to secure financing needed to expand operations, add equipment, or hire additional workers. This challenge is compounded by the fact that most state and local incentives are designed to attract new or relocating businesses, leaving long-standing local employers with few tools to support organic growth.

Participants also highlighted that many banks and credit unions lack the flexibility to structure loans suited to rural growth cycles and smaller deal sizes. Addressing these gaps through more flexible financing tools and incentives for existing businesses would strengthen local economies, support job creation, and help rural entrepreneurs scale businesses that are already rooted in their communities.

Potentially adopting a State New Markets Tax Credit program to leverage the federal New Markets Tax Credit Program created in the Big Beautiful Bill may help address access for small and rural businesses.

5. INFRASTRUCTURE CONSTRAINTS IN RURAL AREAS

Subgroup discussions highlighted that infrastructure limitations continue to constrain rural economic activity, particularly in agriculture and forestry. County roads and bridges often lack the load capacity needed for timber hauling and agricultural transport, increasing costs for producers and limiting access to markets. While these challenges are frequently framed as major infrastructure needs, participants emphasized that the most common barriers are often smaller, targeted improvements – such as turn lanes, access roads, and localized load upgrades – that can determine whether a project or operation remains viable. Often identified as an issue was lack of agricultural infrastructure such as cold storage and processing plants.

Forestry markets face additional strain from mill closures and a lack of viable markets, further reducing options for landowners and increasing reliance on long-distance hauling over already stressed rural road networks. These market disruptions amplify the impact of infrastructure deficiencies and threaten the sustainability of working forests.

Participants also noted that while Alabama's ports have seen significant investment and improvement, agricultural users continue to face structural barriers. Short-term lease arrangements discourage private investment in grain storage and handling infrastructure, and port development has largely prioritized large manufacturing users over agricultural producers. Addressing these issues through targeted infrastructure investments and more balanced port policies would improve market access, support rural producers, and strengthen the broader agricultural and forestry economy.

CONCLUSION

The Rural Roadmap Initiative represents a comprehensive, bipartisan effort to confront the persistent challenges facing rural Alabama while building a practical path forward grounded in local realities. Through months of stakeholder engagement, data analysis, and cross-sector collaboration, the Initiative elevated the voices of rural leaders, employers, educators, healthcare providers, and community advocates. The result is a clear understanding that rural decline is not inevitable, but addressing it requires deliberate policy choices, sustained investment, and a coordinated long-term strategy rather than isolated or short-term solutions.

The Initiative's findings underscore that rural challenges are deeply interconnected. Infrastructure limitations constrain economic development; workforce shortages strain healthcare and industry; housing and quality-of-life gaps impede talent retention; and access to capital and technical assistance remains uneven across communities. As such, the Initiative intentionally advances integrated solutions that cut across traditional policy silos, ensuring that legislative actions reinforce one another and deliver measurable impact at the community level.

Importantly, the Rural Roadmap Initiative is not a one-time report, but a framework for ongoing action. Many recommendations are designed to be phased, piloted, or refined over multiple years, allowing the Legislature to pursue early wins while laying the groundwork for more complex reforms. This approach recognizes fiscal realities while emphasizing accountability, data-driven evaluation, and adaptability as conditions evolve.

Ultimately, the success of Alabama's rural communities is inseparable from the success of the state as a whole. Rural Alabama supplies critical workforce talent, natural resources, agricultural production, and cultural heritage that underpin statewide prosperity. By advancing the recommendations outlined in this report, the Legislature has an opportunity to strengthen these communities, expand opportunity, and ensure that economic growth and quality of life are not limited by geography. The Rural Roadmap Initiative provides the structure, consensus, and momentum necessary to move from discussion to durable action – and to position rural Alabama for long-term resilience and growth.

SUMMARY OF SUBGROUPS

Agriculture and Small Business Subgroup

The Agriculture and Small Business Subgroup addressed the unique challenges facing rural entrepreneurs, farmers, and small businesses. The group examined barriers related to startup and expansion capital, regulatory compliance, workforce availability, and market access. Particular attention was given to strengthening local food systems, supporting generational businesses, and ensuring that state programs are appropriately scaled to meet the needs of small operators who are critical to rural economic stability and community identity.

Subgroup Members: Sen. Josh Carnley, Rep. AJ McCampbell, Lee Haynes, Marquis Forge, Steve Lake, Joe Lambrecht, Dean Mitchell, and Joey King

Economic Development Subgroup

The Economic Development Subgroup focused on the structural barriers preventing rural communities from participating fully in state economic development programs. Its work centered on redefining "rural" for program eligibility, addressing scale mismatches in existing incentives, and improving access to capital for small-scale site and retail development. The subgroup also highlighted the need for rural-focused grant programs, revolving loan tools, and a centralized grant portal to reduce administrative burdens on small communities.

Subgroup Members: Sen. Lance Bell, Rep. David Standridge, Secretary Ellen McNair, Darryl Colburn, Chris Busby, Jamie Troutman, Phillis Belcher, Greg Barker

Healthcare Subgroup

The Healthcare Subgroup focused on strengthening access to healthcare services in rural communities, with particular attention to workforce recruitment and retention, hospital sustainability, and emergency response systems. The group examined challenges facing rural hospitals, clinics, EMS providers, and volunteer fire departments, recognizing their critical role in both public health and economic viability. Recommendations centered on workforce incentives, liability protections, infrastructure support, and the long-term sustainability of emergency and healthcare services.

Subgroup Members: Sen. April Weaver, Rep. Phillip Rigsby, Allison Ross, Danne Howard, Dr. Joseph Marchant, Dr. Marnix Heersink, James Clements, Dr. Jeff Price, Lance Byrd, Kenneth Kirkland, Brandon Farmer, Ted Hosp

Infrastructure Subgroup

The Infrastructure Subgroup examined the foundational systems required for rural communities to function, grow, and attract investment. Its work focused on identifying gaps in transportation access, broadband availability, and utility capacity – particularly water and sewer infrastructure – that limit economic development and quality of life in rural Alabama. The subgroup emphasized the importance of aligning infrastructure investments with realistic rural scale, improving coordination across state agencies, and prioritizing projects that unlock economic opportunity, public safety, and long-term sustainability.

Subgroup Members Sen. Clyde Chambliss, Sen. Bobby Singleton, Rep. Chris Pringle, Ed Austin, Tim Culpepper, Kenneth Boswell, Paul Housel, Greg Henderson, Chad Scroggins, Jane Covington, Elizabeth Lawler

Quality of Life and Placemaking Subgroup

The Quality of Life and Placemaking Subgroup addressed the factors that influence whether people choose to live, work, and invest in rural communities. Its work focused on housing revitalization, downtown development, beautification, tourism promotion, and removal of blighted properties. The subgroup also emphasized improving local capacity through better access to grants, simplified matching requirements, and tools to help communities identify assets and opportunities, recognizing that quality of life is a key driver of workforce retention and economic growth.

Subgroup Members: Sen. Wes Kitchens, Sen. Bobby Singleton, Rep. Jennifer Fidler, Anne Marie Bryan, Chad Watkins, Dean Mitchell, Nathan Anderson, Peggy Smith, Connie Baggett, Melinda Murphy, and Tami Reist

Workforce Training Subgroup

The Workforce Training Subgroup examined how education and training systems can better prepare rural residents for local employment opportunities. Key areas of focus included early career exploration, access to career and technical education, alignment of training programs with local industry needs, and improved data tracking of education-to-workforce outcomes. The subgroup emphasized starting career awareness earlier in the education pipeline and addressing inequities in access to workforce credentials across rural counties.

Subgroup Members: Sen. Donnie Chesteen, Rep. Kelvin Lawrence, Billy Troutman, Keith Phillips, Secretary Greg Reed, and Ed Castille