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Fulfilling the UN Sustainable Development Goals in Georgetown, South Carolina: Economic
Recovery in a Post-COVID World

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Introduction

Georgetown County has a rich economic history of manufacturing and agricultural industry, but these have sometimes been at the expense of the environment via deforestation and air pollution, or marginalized communities via slavery, segregation, and the lasting implications of them. Using the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth as a focal point, I want to be able to provide suggestions to the county on how to find new, sustainable pathways to economic growth and a healthy job market while coming out of a COVID-fueled recession.

The Georgetown County Office of Economic Development is working most significantly towards United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 8, which is to promote sustained, and inclusive economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all. As the entire world is in a state of economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, Georgetown County's economic recovery has been two-fold, first due to pandemic employment loss, and secondly due to the reduced operation of Georgetown's Liberty Steel mill in recent years. In this report, I will be using Georgetown County's Economic Development data to analyze the effect COVID-19 had on rural southern economies and their ability to achieve UN SDG Goal 8, Decent Work and Economic Growth.

In my search for solutions, I am using data gathered from Georgetown County's Office of Economic Development, the Northeastern Strategic Alliance (NESA), and the South Carolina Department of Labor to see economic growth trends among various industries and employment records before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. I will also be using interviews I conducted with Airport Manager Jim Taylor and County Administrator Angela Christian on their

first-hand accounts of Georgetown's economic development and recovery from COVID-19.

Next, I will be using a case study from a rural town in Jamaica to show how community-based efforts towards the fulfillment of the UN SDGs is possible in a rural economy. Finally, I will be using several UN reports on Global Socio-Economic Impacts of COVID-19 to compare to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 on Georgetown County.

History of Georgetown County

Founded in 1729, the City of Georgetown is the third oldest city in South Carolina, following Charleston and Beaufort. Georgetown is located centrally between Myrtle Beach to the north and Charleston to the south. In the early years of the county, Georgetown grew into a plantation economy with an enslaved population that outnumbered whites nearly 8:1 by 1860 (Census Bureau). Before the Civil War, Georgetown County produced nearly a third of the United States' rice and the Port of Georgetown was the busiest rice port in the world (Ford and Stone, 2007)

After the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, Georgetown transitioned from a slave-based economy to one based on its lumber, hunting, fishing, and natural resources. The abundance of the lumber industry resulted in the establishment of International Paper's Georgetown Mill in 1936, and lumber had replaced rice as Georgetown County's biggest asset. Later, in 1969, the Georgetown Steel Mill was built and by 1985, the mills employed a combined 77% of the city's workforce (Urban Land Institute, 2016).

The rise of these industrial plants in the 1900s in Georgetown County brought economic stability and high employment rates to the people of Georgetown, but it wasn't until the 1980s that residents noticed the environmental impacts these plants might have, especially since the

county is rich in natural beauty such as marshes, rivers, and beaches, and forests. In the late 1980s, the EPA found that the Georgetown paper mill had the highest levels of chemical discharge among all International Paper facilities. Bleach and a by-product of bleach called dioxin had contaminated the rivers and swamps around Georgetown, killing and mutating fish and causing miscarriages in women in the area (Howard 2018) The Georgetown County League of Women Voters filed an appeal to the EPA and the paper mill was shut down for a short time in the 1990s.

While the issue of chemical dumping has been resolved, the Georgetown paper mill is still responsible for significant emissions that not only pollute the air, but also produce an unpleasant odor that Georgetown is unfortunately infamous for. In 2009, many citizens of Georgetown filed a class action lawsuit against International Paper for their responsibility in the poor air quality that was getting into Georgetown's schools and causing health problems for many elderly residents of the West End section of the city of Georgetown (Slade 2007).

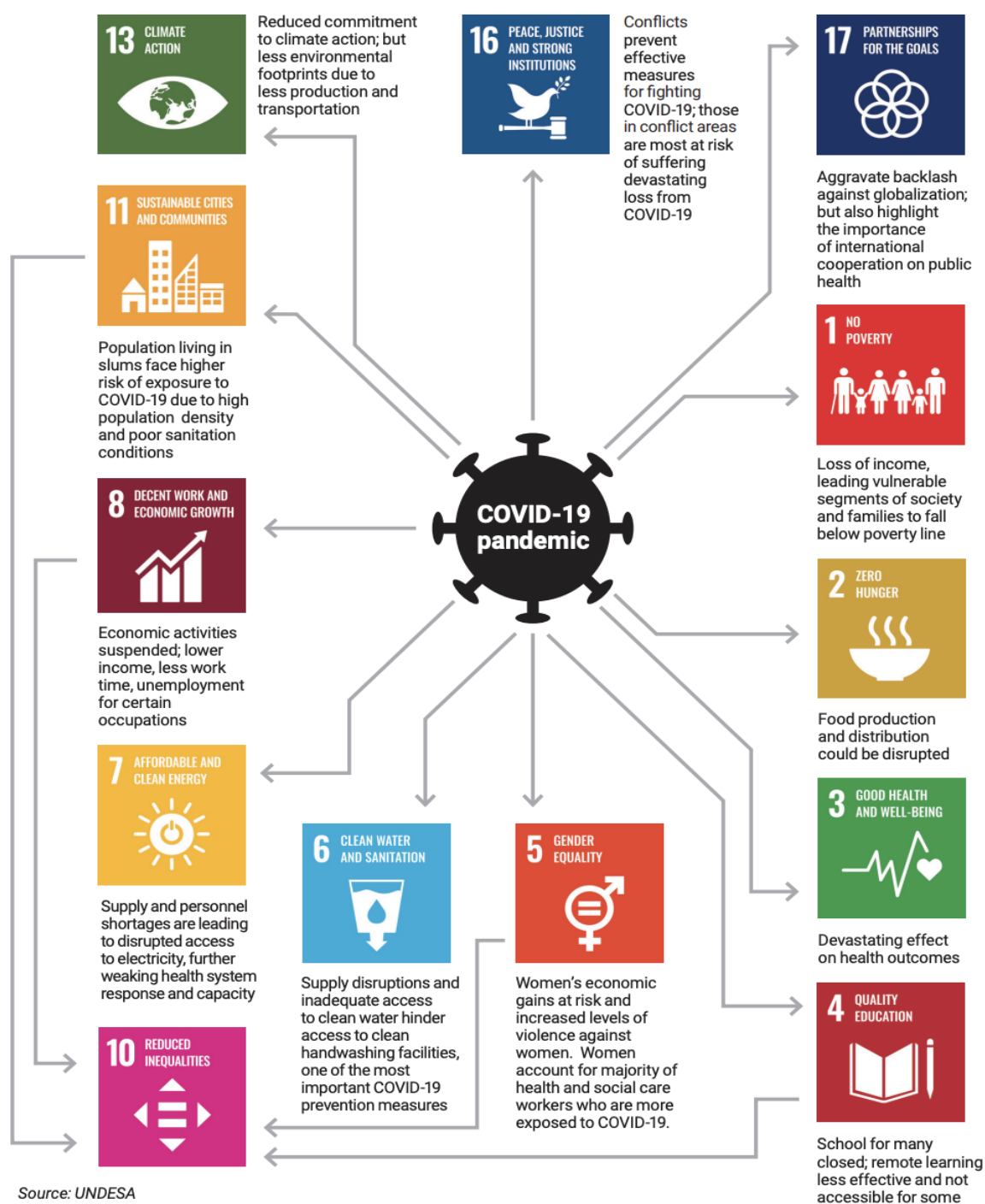
Overview of the Planet

The United Nation's suggestions for socio-economic recovery from the initial COVID-19 surge can provide solutions, especially since many of the UN economic reports speak to rural parts of the world just as much as urban parts. The UN Secretary General's March 2020 report "SHARED RESPONSIBILITY, GLOBAL SOLIDARITY: Responding to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19" describes the global scale of the outbreak, and the societal and economic disruption of COVID-19.

The figure below shows how COVID-19 has affected every SDG, and while this specific report assesses the damage COVID-19 has done to the global economy, the impacts COVID has

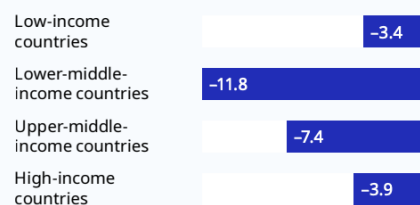
had on SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth can be seen at the local level as well, especially regarding unemployment and wage changes.

FIGURE 5: COVID-19 AFFECTING ALL SDGS



In early 2022, The International Labor Organization (ILO) published their “World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2022” report that contains projections regarding employment for the coming year, both in the global economy and in each continent. The ILO projects that the global labor market will remain weak and in a state of recovery until 2023. This report also discusses at length the disparities between developed and developing regions in terms of their path to economic recovery. Low- and medium-income nations have been hit the hardest and thus are experiencing the slowest recovery. Lower middle-income countries saw the largest decline, 11.8%, in manufacturing employment, compared with 7.4% in upper-middle-income, 3.4% in low-income and 3.9% in high-income countries. This can be compared to Georgetown County’s economic recovery in terms of employment and wage rates. The North American economy recovered relatively quickly compared to the rest of the globe thanks to vaccine campaigns. The US saw a 5.9% increase in GDP through 2021.

► **Figure 1.1 Growth in manufacturing employment, 2019–20, by country income group (percentages)**



Source: ILOSTAT, ILO modelled estimates, November 2020.

Case Study: Jeffery Town, Jamaica

A case study was conducted by Risa Khan, Nicole Thwaite, et. al. in an attempt to assess community-based approaches to sustainability in a generally low-income, rural community. The community that is researched in this study is Jeffrey Town in St. Mary’s, Jamaica. To do this,

they looked at the community's awareness of the SDGs, their perceptions of the SDGs, and Jeffrey Town's own sustainability progress. The study seeks to share insights which may be useful for communities (especially rural, agriculture-dependent communities) assessing the SDGs, which is why I am using it in my study of Georgetown County.

They found that the eldest members of that community were more likely to prioritize needs-related SDGs, such as no poverty, zero hunger, decent work and economic growth, sustainable cities and communities, and responsible consumption, while younger community members were more likely to prioritize technological-development – SDGs such as innovation and infrastructure, clean water and sanitation, good health and well-being.

Later in this study, the community members were asked about Jeffrey Town's efforts toward each individual SDG. For the purposes of my research, I will be citing their remarks on SDG Goal 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth, and SDG Goal 9 – Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure. For goal 8, the community expressed their desire for more agricultural employment opportunities, which were made possible in Jeffrey Town through the development of greenhouses for farming. These greenhouses offer sustainable agriculture for health and wellness, but also contribute to a healthy job market and employment rates (Khan et al. 2018)

For goal 9, the community expressed their desire to be technologically developed, and that their greenhouse “agro-processing facilities” were a manifestation of that. These facilities are so important to the community because they have the potential to “significantly increase employment opportunities and community income in both the medium and long term” (Khan et al, 86). Opportunities like this are vital to rural communities, and Georgetown county's rural communities can connect with this case study because community members have expressed a desire for more agricultural and industrial land (Land Use Survey). Discussing community-based

approaches of measuring SDGs in Jeffrey Town, Jamaica is vital to understanding the implementation of sustainable practices in Georgetown, since both rural communities face the same struggles of development and land optimization.

In a research report by the Institute of Strategic and International Studies, Alizan Mahadi and Nazran Zhafri examine SDG implementation and suggest methods for local entities to successfully meet SDG goal targets. They find that underserved communities, such as urban slums and rural areas, often fall through the cracks of local sustainable development, but SDGs are important for agenda setting and policy formulation at the local level (Mahadi and Zhafri 2021). The SDGs offer a broader view of development issues on hand, and local governments can use the SDGs to create sustainability that works for their community.

Georgetown County Airport

Through my internship I had the opportunity to interview the Georgetown County Airport Manager Jim Taylor to discuss the airport's economic development efforts. The airport, under the direction of County Administrator Angela Christian, was moved from the authority of County Public Works to directly under the Office of Administration, because one of Mrs. Christian's primary goals is to develop the airport. One of the long-term goals of Airport Manager Jim Taylor is for Georgetown County Airport to be financially self-sufficient, lessening the burden of money needed from the county and resident taxpayers. To help achieve this, the Office of Economic Development created several mixed-use commercial economic development zones for aviation-related businesses to purchase and occupy land at the airport.

Last summer the Georgetown County Airport announced that Sherpa Air, a charter aviation contracting company, would be opening business at the Georgetown Airport. Sherpa

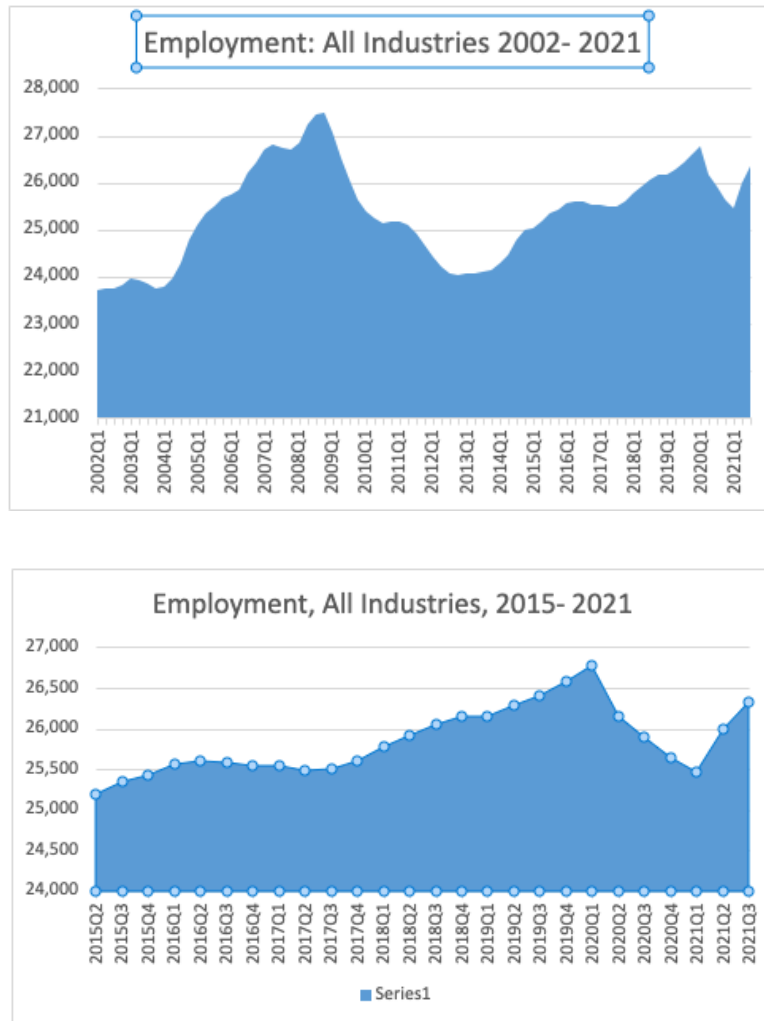
plans to invest nearly \$19 million into the county and build two large aircraft hangars along the decommissioned runway. Sherpa has set up temporary operations at the airport and are planning to build two 30,000 square foot aircraft hangar facilities later this year, which will be the largest hangars at the Georgetown airport. Taylor says that he is communicating with other companies to come to Georgetown as well. In the long term, the goal of Georgetown County Airport is to develop along the unused runway so that the airport can become a business park for aviation-related businesses, bringing jobs and revenue to the county while simultaneously putting Georgetown County on the map in the aviation industry.

Furthermore, the Georgetown Airport is located directly next to the Georgetown campus of Horry Georgetown Technical College (HGTC). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the airport was in communication with HGTC about creating an access gate between the facilities in order to give mechanics students the opportunity to take aviation mechanics classes, offer student internships in aviation mechanics, and even expand their flight school to be offered to HGTC students. Those conversations were put on hold when COVID hit, but Taylor said he thinks it would still be a great way to get the community engaged in airport operations, especially since the labor shortage has hit the aviation mechanical industry hard.

Data

In an effort to provide recommendations to Georgetown County on economic recovery, we must first understand the economic climate of the county pre-pandemic. One way to do this is to look at employment trends. At my internship office I worked with NESARA, the regional economic development alliance Georgetown County belongs to, to render data on employment in the county, and the data shows that employment was on a steady increase from 2015-2019 before taking a dip in 2020. The data also shows that since Q1 of 2020, the employment rate in

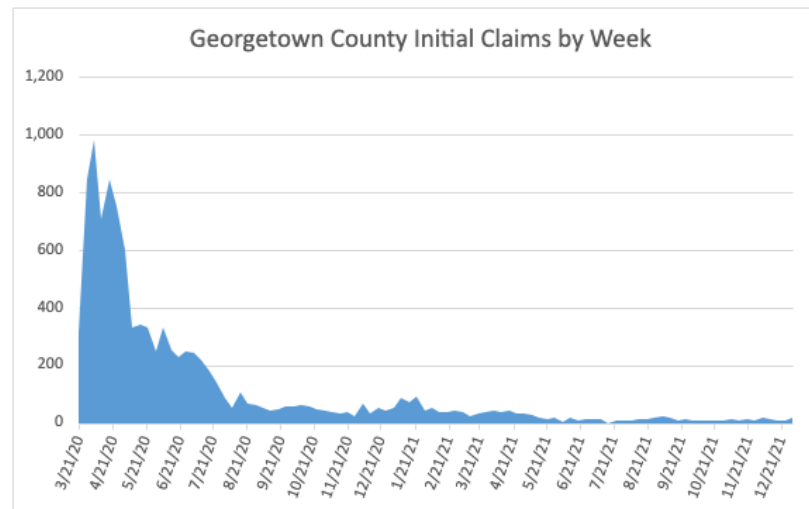
Georgetown has increased over the course of 2020 and 2021 but has still not yet reached pre-pandemic levels.



(Source: NESa 2022)

The data in the presented graphs are a particularly good indication of recovery for Georgetown County’s workforce also worked with NESa to obtain unemployment insurance claim data throughout the initial outbreak of COVID-19, which shows that unemployment insurance claims skyrocketed in Georgetown County starting in March of 2020, but quickly tapered off through the summer of 2020. This is a good sign for Georgetown County – it

demonstrates how quickly Georgetownians were able to get back to work after the initial shutdown.



Source: NESa 2022

Analysis

The employment (and unemployment) data that I have collected from Georgetown County show that the county took a big hit from the initial COVID-19 outbreak through 2020, especially since pre-pandemic employment rates were at a decade high in 2019. But data from 2021 indicate that Georgetown County is recovering from this economic setback, and the growth of Georgetown's industries have made way to economic growth and workforce recovery.

One consequence of the pandemic highlighted by the UN Secretary General's report on the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 is the possibility of lowered wages as a result of economic strife endured by businesses. This could be a concern to the residents of Georgetown County, as many residents work in industries that require in-person work. However, NESa's graph on annual wage rates for Georgetown County shows that the wage rate was not impacted by the pandemic, and that wages have been on a steady increase in the county in the past two

decades. Average annual wages per worker increased 6.2% in the region over the preceding four quarters. (NESA). This steady increase in wages over the last 20 years contributes to Georgetown's implementation of SGD Goal 8, specifically target 8.5, which strives for fair and equal pay (UNDESA).

One of the fastest growing industries in the county is tourism. However, much of this growth has been solely on the Waccamaw Neck, excluding the City of Georgetown, the Town of Andrews, and the rural areas that make up the rest of the county. Another way Georgetown can grow their tourism industry is by implementing the Urban Land Institute Advisory Panel Report on the rezoning and renovation of Georgetown's steel mill and waterfront area. The transition of this area from heavy industrial to mixed commercial will enhance the attractiveness of downtown Georgetown, bringing tourists from the Waccamaw Neck inland (ULI). This will contribute to Georgetown's fulfillment of UN SDG 8 through target 8.9, which is the development of sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products (United Nations, 2015).

This push for the rezoning of the Georgetown Mill and surrounding area has been met with opposition by the employees of Liberty Steel, the current operator of the mill site. At its peak in the mid-1970s, Georgetown Steel employed more than 1,500 people, but after multiple shutdowns and changes of ownership, the mill now owned by Liberty Steel only employs about 65 people, and only about 10% of the original plant is operational. Still, the employees of Liberty Steel, with the help of the steelworker's union, remain vigilant in their opposition to the rezoning of the land.

SGD Goal 8 targets 8.1 and 8.2 both stress the importance of sustainable GDP growth for countries, but this can also be applied to the local level for successful SDG implementation. The

indicators of these goals are the annual growth rate of the real GDP per capita and per employed person (United Nations, 2015). In 2020, nominal GDP in Georgetown County, South Carolina contracted 0.4%. This follows a growth of 6.9% in 2019. As of 2020, total GDP in Georgetown County, South Carolina was \$2,600,635,000 (NESA, 2020). This indicates that Georgetown County's GDP was on a steady incline before the pandemic, but that COVID-19 disrupted economic activity significantly in the county. While there is no GDP data for fiscal year 2021 yet, Georgetown County's employment data from 2021 indicate that this disruption was short-lived as the employment rate has recovered significantly since the summer of 2020.

This data can also be viewed in the context of the International Labor Organization's 2020 Trends projection report, which predicted that employment rates and economic activity levels will still be in a state of recovery through 2022. The ILO's projections contradict Georgetown County's employment data which shows a significant amount of economic recovery, especially in employment.

Recommendations:

My first major recommendation to the county, in relation to my work at the Administration Office, is to both physically open the fence between the Georgetown County Airport and the Georgetown HGTC campus, and to adopt an aviation mechanics program for HGTC students to take classes, work internships, and otherwise coordinate with the airport to offer aviation-related programming. This will help alleviate the labor shortage plaguing the aviation mechanics industry as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The airport and the technical college had previously talked about this collaboration, but these conversations were put on hold as a result of COVID-19 in spring of 2020.

My second recommendation is on par with the Urban Land Institute's 2016 report regarding the rezoning and renovation of the Georgetown Steel Mill and Port of Georgetown site. The rezoning of this land from industrial to mixed-use commercial will allow businesses to develop on the west end of Front Street and the lengthening of the walkable waterfront. This will lend itself to higher rates of tourism in downtown Georgetown, fulfilling target 8.9, which reads "By 2030, devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products" (United Nations, 2015).

Conclusions

After extensive research on Georgetown County's history, economy, and UN Sustainable Development Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth, it is clear that Georgetown is in desperate need of economic revitalization. This revitalization is what the people of Georgetown County deserve, and I believe that if Georgetown invests in sustainable natural resource extraction, manufacturing, and agriculture, the tourism industry, and career-ready education, they will see remarkable return on their investment. This includes efforts like the rezoning and renovation of the Georgetown Steel mill and Port of Georgetown area, the expansion of Georgetown County Airport, and the airport's collaboration with Georgetown's HGTC campus.

These efforts would help bring more money into the county, helping to alleviate labor shortages which would in turn put more money into the hands of Georgetown locals. Economic opportunity is something that Georgetown County lacks, on account of many of its residents, but I believe what I have presented shows that Georgetownians are committed to the betterment of their community, and with the help of grants from the state, USDA, private investments, and nonprofit organizations like the Bunnelle Foundation, Georgetown can come out of the COVID-19 fueled recession stronger and ready to build a society for the future.

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