Aiken Alignment Report

AI REPORT FINDINGS

From Assets to Outcomes



PREPARED BY:

aiken CORPORATION
portners in prosperity

USC Aiken AI Regional and Economic Workforce Development Council

A Letter to Aiken

Aiken has much to celebrate. Our region benefits from nationally significant institutions, respected employers, a strong and diverse educational system encompassing public and private K-12 schools, technical education, a four-year higher education institution, and a distinctive quality of place. These **assets provide a foundation** many communities would welcome. They also create a responsibility to determine whether Aiken's strengths are producing broad and lasting opportunities for our people and businesses.

The Aiken Alignment initiative grew out of Chancellor Dan Heimmermann's **USC Aiken AI Regional and Economic Workforce Development Council,** beginning with an idea proposed by Major General Les Eisner (USA, Retired): to examine the region's strengths, challenges, and opportunities through a shared body of evidence. Together, Les Eisner, Thomas Scott, Dr. Carl Henson, and Megan Pruitt have served as the task force members actively shaping this initiative and developing the report. We were also assisted early in the project by Dr. Eslam Hasan, Dr. Joe Iglesias, and Dr. David Buckman from USC Aiken.

The resulting Aiken Alignment Report provides the evidence base for Aiken Corporation's broader Aiken Alignment Ecosystem. Developed through the review of **more than 50** plans, studies, datasets, presentations, and public sources, it examines how effectively Aiken's assets are being converted into stronger businesses, quality jobs, innovation, household stability, and greater access to opportunity. It offers an honest assessment of what Aiken has built, what the evidence reveals, and where stronger connections are needed.



"The findings should inspire both confidence and candor."

The findings should inspire both confidence and candor. Aiken has an unusually strong foundation of institutions, expertise, and investment. However, possessing valuable assets does not guarantee that the benefits will reach the broader community. We must become more intentional about turning our strengths into visible and measurable outcomes. Recognizing that opportunity is how a successful region prepares for **what comes next.**



We would like to thank Chancellor Dan Heimmermann for his leadership and support of this important project. We hope this report gives the community a clearer picture of the regional economy, provides decision-makers with a common evidence base, and helps institutions align around shared results. Most importantly, it should help Aiken move from **possessing exceptional assets to consistently producing exceptional outcomes.**

Our shared vision extends beyond a document published at a single point in time. Through the Aiken Alignment Report, this work will transition to the ownership of Aiken Corporation and can become an **ongoing economic intelligence platform:** a trusted and searchable home for the region's evidence, organizations, projects, findings, and measures of progress.

At the center of that platform will be **Ask Aiken Alignment,** a tool designed to help leaders explore approved regional evidence, identify connections, and ask better questions while keeping sources, human judgment, and accountability visible. Over time, the platform can preserve Aiken's institutional knowledge, keep the assessment current, connect findings to responsible action, and help the community understand what is changing and whether conditions are improving.

This effort depends on the **knowledge, participation, and commitment** of people across our community. Our purpose is to help connect people, institutions, and investment so promising ideas become meaningful results. We invite you to read this report with **pride** in what Aiken has achieved, honesty about what the evidence reveals, and a shared commitment to the opportunities ahead.

As task force members, we will continue helping shape this work and strengthen its evidence base. **Aiken Corporation will serve as an active steward,** supporting leadership alignment, a companion action agenda, and transparent measures of progress through the Aiken Alignment initiative.

Sincerely,



MAJOR GENERAL LES EISNER
(USA, Retired)
USC Aiken AI Regional & Economic Workforce Development Council



THOMAS SCOTT
Lead of Cyber Workforce Development for USC Aiken



MEGAN PRUITT
Executive Director, Aiken Corporation
USC Aiken AI Regional & Economic Workforce Development Council



DR. CARL HENSON
Founder & CEO, MarZeka Consulting

Remarkable Strengths Greater Possibilities

If you are lucky enough to live in Aiken, you understand what makes it such a remarkable place.



Its rich history, **distinctive character,** and strong sense of community exist alongside nationally significant institutions and new opportunities for growth.

As Aiken enters its next chapter, the challenge is to build on these strengths while **preserving** the qualities that make this region our home.

The Aiken Alignment Report brings together

MORE THAN

50

regional plans, studies, datasets, presentations, organizational reports, and public sources

to create a **shared picture** of Aiken's economy and the systems that influence opportunity.

A FOUNDATION OF ECONOMIC STRENGTH

$7.65B
Aiken County
Real GDP- 2024

67,565
Aiken County Employment
Fourth Quarter 2025

13,510
March 2025
SRS Workforce

Significant public and private investment continues across the region.

The next question is how effectively those strengths **translate into opportunity**.

From Assets to Outcomes

> “Aiken is **asset rich, economically substantial, and still conversion constrained.**”

TURNING STRENGTH INTO OPPORTUNITY

The evidence led the Aiken Alignment Task Force to this central conclusion. The opportunity lies in how effectively Aiken's strengths become stronger businesses, quality jobs, innovation, household stability, and greater access to opportunity.

THE QUESTION AT THE HEART OF THE REPORT

Are Aiken’s existing strengths producing **the outcomes** our community expects?



HOW THE REPORT WAS BUILT

50+

SOURCES WITH LOCAL JUDGMENT

After testing multiple artificial intelligence platforms, the task force used **OpenAI's ChatGPT, primarily powered by GPT-5.6 Sol,** to assist with organizing, synthesizing, comparing, and interrogating the evidence.

AI was used as a research and analytical tool, not as an independent source or decision-maker. Task force members provided local context, reviewed findings, challenged conclusions, and retained responsibility for the **report's interpretation.**

THE ASSETS-TO-OUTCOMES FRAMEWORK

An Established Foundation An Aiken-Specific Test

The Aiken Assets-to-Outcomes Framework is informed by **cluster-based economic development theory**, most closely associated with Harvard economist **Michael Porter**. Cluster theory recognizes that regional competitiveness depends not simply on individual employers or institutions, but on the **relationships** among firms, suppliers, talent, research, education, infrastructure, capital, and supporting organizations. [4]

Aiken Alignment builds on that established foundation by adding an outcomes test:



ASSET	What strengths do we have?
CONNECTION	How are those strengths connected?
CONVERSION	How do connections become results?
OUTCOME	What regional value is produced?
MEASURE	How do we know it is working?

Cluster theory helps explain why interconnected economic systems matter.
Aiken Assets-to-Outcomes asks whether those connections are actually producing measurable regional value.

SCOPE OF THE AIKEN ALIGNMENT REPORT

Where We Focus
How We Define Success

AIKEN COUNTY, SOUTH CAROLINA

Aiken County is the report's primary geography for measuring the economy and household conditions. It includes the City of Aiken and communities across the county.

CITY OF AIKEN

City-level evidence describes downtown conditions, municipal services, and decisions within the city's authority.

REGIONAL CONNECTIONS

The Augusta–Aiken economy, Savannah River Site, and Lower Savannah workforce region show how jobs and markets extend beyond the county. Regional figures retain their own boundaries. [6]

WHAT THE REPORT EXAMINES

The report examines Aiken's economic engines, what helps residents and businesses participate, and how decisions about growth affect affordability, infrastructure, public costs, and quality of place. [7]

WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

Success means Aiken's strengths lead to lasting, measurable improvements for residents and businesses. We look at who benefits, where, and at what cost.

RESIDENTS	More residents secure and keep quality jobs, can afford housing, and can reach work and essential services.
LOCAL BUSINESSES	More firms complete contracts, gain repeat customers, and turn research or new technology into products and sales.
COMMUNITIES	Infrastructure and services keep pace with growth, valued places are protected, and public commitments are delivered.

Track results against a baseline, with the geography, time period, population measured, and organization responsible for tracking clearly identified. [5–7, 39–40]

ECONOMIC ENGINES & DISTINCTIVE ASSETS

Federal Missions, Nuclear & Energy



13,510

SRS personnel reported, March 2025 [3]

GET TO KNOW AIKEN

Savannah River Site is a **defining force** in Aiken's economy, supporting a concentration of scientific expertise, engineering talent, skilled trades, and specialized businesses that few communities of its size can claim. With 13,510 personnel reported in March 2025, SRS and its network of institutions and contractors provide a **substantial foundation for the region.** [3] That strength also brings exposure to federal priorities, funding, and contract decisions made outside the community.

Businesses have opportunities to compete for significant procurement work, but **participation requires technical readiness,** quality standards, and resources that can be difficult for smaller firms to sustain.

Emerging research and energy initiatives may build on the region's expertise, though they remain at different stages of development. Aiken's opportunity is to **strengthen its existing foundation** while helping more businesses compete, developing transferable skills, and expanding economic activity beyond any single institution or contract.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR AIKEN

Aiken's federal economy is a major strength, but its dependence on decisions and project schedules **outside local control** makes it essential to prepare for growth with flexible plans, staged investments, and businesses and skills that can serve multiple markets.

LOOKING OUTWARD: OAK RIDGE, TENNESSEE

$497.5M

ORNL small-business spending FY2025

Oak Ridge demonstrates how a national laboratory community can connect federal research to **commercialization and supplier development.**

Oak Ridge National Laboratory reported $497.5 million in small-business spending in FY2025, providing a useful example of measuring **economic activity beyond** the laboratory itself. [6]

ECONOMIC ENGINES & DISTINCTIVE ASSETS

Advanced Manufacturing & Commercial Innovation

17.1%

Manufacturing employment growth · 2017–2022 [35–37]

63,000 SQ. FT. | Advanced Manufacturing Collaborative [7]

GET TO KNOW AIKEN

Aiken has a growing manufacturing economy and substantial innovation capacity through established employers, research, automation, additive manufacturing, artificial intelligence, entrepreneurship infrastructure, and the 63,000- square-foot Advanced Manufacturing Collaborative. [7] **Manufacturing employment increased 17.1 percent from 2017 to 2022**, and recent expansion announcements by Rolls- Royce and AGY signal continued investment, though announced commitments do not by themselves confirm completed projects or filled jobs. [35–37]

The larger question is how consistently Aiken can **turn its capabilities into commercial results**—helping existing manufacturers remain competitive while moving research and new ideas into adoption, customers, contracts, productivity, revenue, and growing firms.



WHAT THIS MEANS FOR AIKEN

The test is not simply whether innovation infrastructure exists, but whether **capability repeatedly becomes economic activity**.

LOOKING OUTWARD

GEORGIA MANUFACTURING EXTENSION PARTNERSHIP

Georgia's Manufacturing Extension Partnership works directly with small and midsized manufacturers to move technologies and operating practices into practical business adoption. Aiken can study how technical capability is translated into measurable productivity, workforce, and firm-level outcomes. [8]

ECONOMIC ENGINES & DISTINCTIVE ASSETS

Small Business & Local Enterprise



Beyond startup assistance.

Toward stable revenue, sustainable operations, and long-term growth.

GET TO KNOW AIKEN

Aiken's small businesses are supported by a growing network of training, mentoring, and financing resources, including the Aiken Business Coalition's entrepreneurship program, Greater Aiken SCORE, and the Aiken Venture Lab. [38-40] These efforts have connected entrepreneurs with coaching and capital, but lasting success also depends on **finding customers, covering operating costs, securing suitable space, and managing financial risk.**

Aiken's opportunity is to build on its existing support network by helping businesses move beyond startup assistance toward stable revenue, sustainable operations, and long-term growth.

DOWNTOWN AIKEN RENTAL COSTS

$15 per sq. ft. annually

Average rental rates can make it harder for small businesses to succeed.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR AIKEN

Help growth-oriented local firms **connect to customers, contracts, capital, employees, and larger regional opportunities.**

LOOKING OUTWARD: ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO

Albuquerque's City Alive initiative treats entrepreneurship as a connected ecosystem, aligning business, government, education, nonprofits, finance, and community partners around locally grown enterprise. Its approach offers lessons in ecosystem mapping, capital access, technical support, and local procurement. [10]

Equestrian Economy & Quality of Place



40+

Regulation-size polo fields. [35, 41]

GET TO KNOW AIKEN

Aiken's equestrian economy is both a **defining part of the community's identity and a working industry** that supports farms, competitions, and a network of veterinarians, farriers, trainers, suppliers, and other businesses. [11] With more than 40 regulation-size polo fields and major events such as the Aiken Steeplechase, the sector reflects years of investment and stewardship by private owners, organizations, and conservation partners. [35, 41]

Sustaining that foundation requires attention to more than its traditions: equestrian businesses need skilled workers, viable operating costs, suitable land, and safe access.

Aiken's opportunity is to treat the equestrian economy as a **deliberate economic development priority**, connecting land-use decisions and industry support to the conditions needed for it to operate and endure.

TREAT THE EQUESTRIAN ECONOMY AS A deliberate economic development priority

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR AIKEN

Sustaining and expanding Aiken's equestrian economy requires deliberate decisions about land, access, and investment that balance competing community needs while supporting viable businesses, year-round activity, and local spending.

LOOKING OUTWARD: OCALA/MARION COUNTY, FLORIDA

Ocala/Marion County regularly measures equestrian activity as an economic cluster, including horses, employment, supporting industries, visitors, and broader economic effects. Aiken can study how another nationally recognized equestrian community connects economic measurement with tourism, land, and preservation. [12]

Aviation & Business Access



28,300

Approximate takeoffs and landings 2023 [13, 14, 42]

"Building on the region's growing expertise in drone applications."

Potential connections to Aiken's hospitality, equestrian, industrial, and scientific communities.

GET TO KNOW AIKEN

Aiken Regional Airport is an active general and business aviation gateway, with approximately 28,300 takeoffs and landings recorded in 2023 and a visible role serving visitors during Masters week. [13, 14, 42] City ownership, an established aviation operator, and investment in runway infrastructure provide a foundation for its continued use. [43, 44]

The airport also has potential connections to Aiken's hospitality, equestrian, industrial, and scientific communities, including the region's growing expertise in drone applications. [45]

Aiken's opportunity is to build on these strengths with a year-round economic development strategy grounded in customer demand, realistic costs, and benefits that extend beyond the runway. [45]

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR AIKEN

Aiken Regional is already a business-aviation asset; the opportunity is to **connect it more deliberately to recruitment, major institutions, visitor activity, and emerging industries.**

LOOKING OUTWARD: GREENVILLE DOWNTOWN AIRPORT, SC

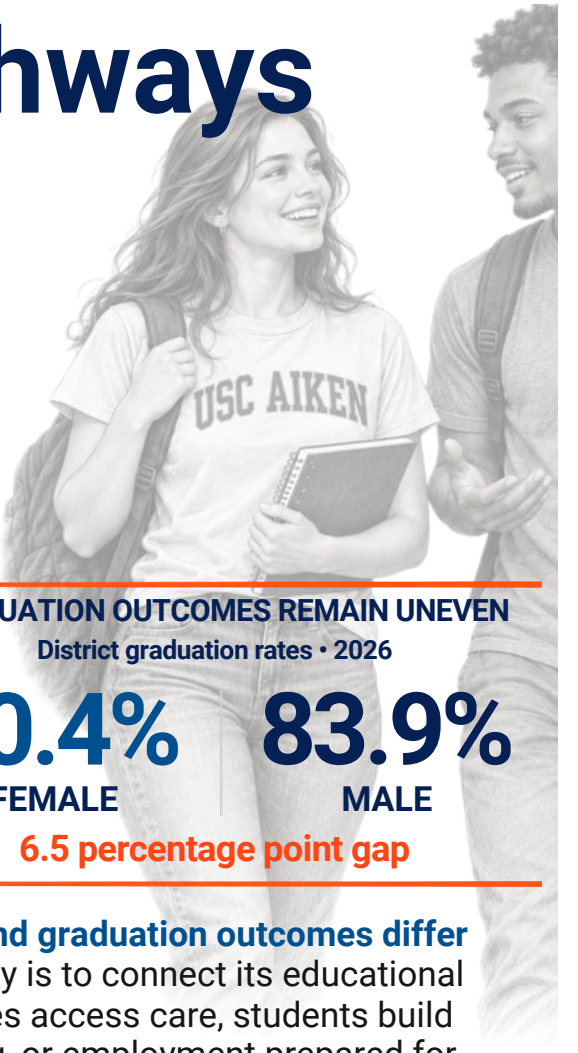
Greenville Downtown Airport demonstrates how general aviation can function as a corporate gateway and economic-development platform through aviation businesses, executive access, services, developable property, and connections to regional industry. [15]

PEOPLE AND EVERYDAY OPPORTUNITY

Education & Pathways Into Careers

87.2%

District graduation rate • 2026 [46-48]



GET TO KNOW AIKEN

Aiken's education and workforce pipeline spans childcare, public schools, career and technical education, Aiken Technical College, USC Aiken, and employer partnerships. The community has much to celebrate: Aiken Scholars Academy earned national recognition, school ratings improved, and **the district's graduation rate rose to 87.2 percent in 2026.** [46-48]

GRADUATION OUTCOMES REMAIN UNEVEN

District graduation rates • 2026

FEMALE	MALE
90.4%	83.9%

6.5 percentage point gap

Yet, **mathematics proficiency trails the state average, and graduation outcomes differ** for male and female students. [49-51] Aiken's opportunity is to connect its educational strengths across every stage of learning—helping families access care, students build strong foundations, and graduates enter college, training, or employment prepared for success.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR AIKEN

Aiken's educational capacity is an asset, but its value depends on whether students leave with a **clear path to a career**. The graduation gap raises a critical question: **Who is falling out of that pathway before reaching opportunity?** Aiken needs to identify where students lose momentum, connect support across institutions, and **measure success beyond graduation**—in credentials earned, meaningful employment, wage growth, and the ability to build a future here.

LOOKING OUTWARD: COLUMBUS, INDIANA

Columbus connects K-12 STEM and project-based learning to technical pathways and a manufacturing- and engineering- intensive economy. Aiken can study how career awareness, technical education, work-based experience, postsecondary transition, and employers operate as one talent-development pathway. [20]

PEOPLE AND EVERYDAY OPPORTUNITY

Workforce & Pathways Into Careers

800+
SRS Apprenticeship School graduates [52]

90%
Joined the workforce supporting site missions [52]

12,641
Projected annual openings- Lower Savannah region 2020-2030 [21]

GET TO KNOW AIKEN

Aiken has functioning pathways into skilled work through apprenticeships, scholarships, educational institutions, and employer partnerships. The **SRS Apprenticeship School,** for example, reported more than 800 graduates, with 90 percent joining the workforce supporting site missions. [52] Across the Lower Savannah region, projections anticipated approximately 12,641 openings annually from 2020 to 2030, largely as workers change occupations or leave the labor force, despite modest net employment growth. [21]

Yet **proximity to employers does not guarantee that local residents can access those opportunities:** qualifications, transportation, childcare, housing costs, and household responsibilities can affect participation. [51, 53] Aiken also **lacks a connected picture** of how local graduates, commuters, and workers recruited from elsewhere fill regional jobs. Its opportunity is to build on proven pathways across multiple industries and measure whether residents can move from career awareness to preparation, employment, and a stable life in the community.



Practical supports: transportation, childcare, housing, and household needs.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR AIKEN

Aiken's workforce strategy should **introduce young people to career opportunities early** and pair training with practical support and employer practices that help residents obtain and sustain jobs, measuring success through **earnings, retention, and advancement.**

LOOKING OUTWARD: CHATTANOOGA, TENNESSEE

Chattanooga connects employers, training providers, job seekers, and support organizations around in-demand occupations while also recognizing the need to attract specialized talent. Aiken can study how local-talent development, outside recruitment, placement, and retention are measured together. [22]

PEOPLE AND EVERYDAY OPPORTUNITY

Mobility & Access to Opportunity



76.1%

Workers who drove alone
2024 commuting baseline [25]

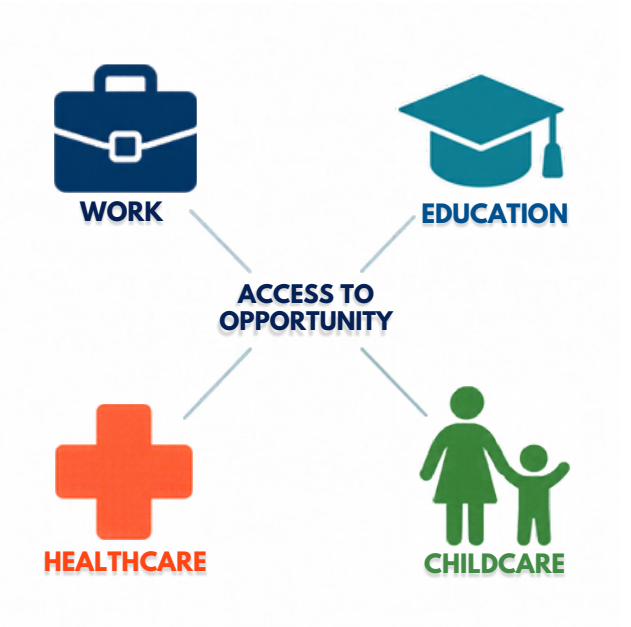
0.4%

Workers who use public transportation
2024 commuting baseline [25]

GET TO KNOW AIKEN

Access to opportunity in Aiken often depends on access to a car: in the report's 2024 commuting baseline, 76.1 percent of workers drove alone and 0.4 percent used public transportation. [25] Best Friend Express and Dial-a-Ride provide an existing transit foundation, but published schedules, route cycles, service areas, and eligibility requirements **do not accommodate every essential trip.** [58, 59] These limitations can make it harder for residents to sustain employment, attend classes, obtain medical care, or manage childcare.

Aiken's opportunity is to improve reliable access to daily destinations through transportation options designed around residents' needs and supported by realistic operating capacity and funding.



WHAT THIS MEANS FOR AIKEN

Aiken's transportation strategy should **focus on the essential trips residents cannot reliably make**, designing and funding services around their schedules and needs while measuring completed trips, reliability, and cost.

LOOKING OUTWARD: WILSON, NORTH CAROLINA

Wilson replaced its traditional fixed-route transit system with on-demand microtransit designed around actual trip demand. Employment represents a significant share of trips, providing a useful model as Aiken evaluates whether more flexible service could improve access to work, healthcare, and other destinations. [26]

PEOPLE AND EVERYDAY OPPORTUNITY

Healthcare & the Aging Economy



7,128

Covered jobs in healthcare and social assistance [16]

22.8%

Residents age 65 or older [16]

GET TO KNOW AIKEN

Healthcare and social assistance account for 7,128 covered jobs in Aiken County, while 22.8% of residents are age 65 or older. [16] Healthcare occupations are also among the fastest-growing in the Lower Savannah region, raising an important question: **Will Aiken have enough healthcare workers and services to meet residents' needs as demand grows?** [17]

Shortage-area designations and reported difficulties obtaining appointments, paying for care, and arranging transportation point to existing access pressures, although the available evidence does not establish the precise size of the service gap. [60] Aiken's **opportunity is to strengthen** its healthcare workforce and connect medical care with practical support so residents can obtain timely, affordable care and remain independent.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR AIKEN

Anticipate **demographic change** by connecting healthcare workforce pipelines, housing, mobility, aging-in place services, and technology before increased demand becomes a capacity constraint.

LOOKING OUTWARD: SARASOTA COUNTY, FLORIDA

Sarasota treats aging as across-sector planning issue involving healthcare, housing, transportation, technology, accessibility, and aging in place. Aiken can study how demographic change is incorporated into broader economic and community planning. [18]

PEOPLE AND EVERYDAY OPPORTUNITY

Nonprofit & Community Support System

An essential part of Aiken's economic infrastructure.

30
United Way partner agencies [27]

45+
Critical-need programs [27]

GET TO KNOW AIKEN

Aiken's nonprofit organizations are an **essential part** of the community's support system, helping residents access food, housing assistance, disability services, and care for older adults. United Way of Aiken County identifies 30 partner agencies and more than 45 critical-need programs within a broader network of community organizations. [27]

Their work also **helps reveal where needs in housing, transportation, healthcare, childcare, and other areas remain unmet**. Family Promise, for example, reported more than 640 applications for family housing assistance by September 2026—a measure of demand for its services that points to broader housing pressures. [61]

640+
Applications for family housing assistance reported by Family Promise by September 2026 [61]



WHAT THIS MEANS FOR AIKEN

Nonprofits are part of Aiken's economic infrastructure and should be connected to regional planningandoutcome measurement.



LOOKING OUTWARD: ALBUQUERQUE'S COLLECTIVE-IMPACT MODEL

City Alive brought independent organizations together around shared outcomes, common measures, coordinated activities, and a backbone organization while allowing each to retain its individual mission. The model offers lessons for connecting Aiken's extensive community-support network. [10]

GROWTH AND PUBLIC VALUE

Infrastructure, Environment & Capacity to Grow

20 million gallons per day

Horse Creek treatment capacity allocated to existing or planned users [62, 63]

Proposed expansion capacity is not yet available.

GET TO KNOW AIKEN

Aiken's infrastructure shapes where the community can grow and how reliably residents and businesses receive essential services. Investments in water systems, sewer treatment, and roads show progress, but aging infrastructure, capacity constraints, and the cost of serving new development remain significant concerns. [62–64] The county's 2025 facilities review reported that **all 20 million gallons per day of Horse Creek treatment capacity had been allocated to existing or planned users;** a proposed expansion would add capacity, **but that capacity is not yet available.** [62, 63] The opening of the first phase of Tribute Parkway also provides a new connection from Whiskey Road, though its effects on traffic and safety should be assessed over time. [65] Aiken's opportunity is to coordinate growth with infrastructure investment, balancing dependable service, development costs, and long-term affordability for the community.



WHAT THIS MEANS FOR AIKEN

Aiken's infrastructure strategy should **align development with available capacity, environmental conditions, and credible demand,** while ensuring essential services are reliable and their long-term costs are fairly understood.

LOOKING OUTWARD — HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA

Huntsville connects employment and population growth to long-range land use, transportation, infrastructure, housing, and capital planning. Aiken can study how a rapidly growing technology and defense community plans infrastructure alongside growth rather than responding only after development occurs. [28]

GROWTH AND PUBLIC VALUE

Policy, Incentives & Major Investment

From selection to operation



GET TO KNOW AIKEN

Aiken competes for investment across the CSRA, where businesses weigh available sites, utility capacity, workforce, transportation, permitting, and project timelines alongside financial incentives. The Western SC Economic Development Partnership provides an established foundation for business recruitment, expansion, and retention, while South Carolina offers tools to support eligible projects. [66, 67]

To remain competitive, Aiken must also ensure that **sites are ready for development and that businesses have a clear path from selection to operation**. Major announcements should be evaluated by their actual stage and commitments, including permanent jobs, public revenue, infrastructure costs, and the community's obligations—not simply by the size of the proposed investment.

EVALUATE THE COMMITMENT

Permanent jobs
Public revenue
Infrastructure costs
Community obligations

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR AIKEN

Measure incentive competitiveness by accessibility and outcomes, not simply by what is available or awarded.

LOOKING OUTWARD — AUGUSTA, GEORGIA

Augusta is particularly relevant because businesses considering the greater Augusta-Aiken market can choose between two states. Augusta actively packages tax incentives, infrastructure and permitting assistance, and concierge-style support for prospective businesses. Aiken can study how clearly incentives are communicated, who can qualify, and how easily businesses can navigate the process. [29]

Resident Sentiment & Public Confidence

Opportunity- Character- Trust

GET TO KNOW AIKEN

Economic progress must be understood through both measurable outcomes and **residents' experience**. Public feedback reveals a strong desire to protect the qualities that make Aiken distinctive: its historic charm, small-town atmosphere, equestrian heritage, rural landscapes, and natural resources. Historic preservation and community character are part of how participants define quality of life and judge proposed change. [32, 33]

Participants expressed **differing views about growth**. Some welcomed the potential for jobs, businesses, housing, and amenities; others emphasized the risk that development could erode the character they value. Recurring concerns involved traffic, infrastructure capacity, housing costs, development patterns, and the loss of farmland, trees, and green space. **The central tension is how to create opportunity while protecting the places and qualities that make people choose Aiken as their home**. [32, 33]

Create opportunity. Protect what makes Aiken home.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR AIKEN

Regional progress should **strengthen opportunity while protecting Aiken's historic charm and distinctive sense of place**. Leaders should show how investment improves residents' lives, respects community character, and responds to public input.

LOOKING OUTWARD —FORT COLLINS, COLORADO

Fort Collins conducts an annual Community Survey using random house hold invitations, demographic weighting, and recurring questions to measure residents' experiences of quality of life, services, affordability, and local government. Published results show trends over time and differences among population groups, while findings inform the city's strategic plan and budget. Aiken can study how recurring resident feedback becomes a measurable part of regional performance—connecting public confidence and lived experience to decisions, investments, and accountability. [34]

Remarkable Assets. Greater Alignment.

Across every sector examined, **Aiken's strengths are clear**. We have nationally significant institutions, talented people, respected employers, educational capacity, community organizations, investment, and a quality of place worth protecting.

The opportunity is not simply to build more.

It is to better connect what we already have.

The evidence repeatedly points to the spaces between our assets—between education and employment, research and commercialization, institutional spending and local businesses, jobs and talent, growth and infrastructure, and opportunity and access.

Aiken often measures assets and activity more consistently than it measures outcomes.

The next step is to connect those assets **more intentionally**—and measure what becomes possible when we do.

ASSET → CONNECTION → CONVERSION → OUTCOME → MEASURE

No single organization can create those outcomes alone. The opportunity belongs to all of us—to recognize where our work intersects, strengthen the connections between our systems, and build from a shared understanding of where Aiken is today and where greater alignment can take us.

Aiken already has many of the assets needed for its next chapter.

The opportunity now is to align them.

Scan for text only document/ sources & references

THE COMMON THREAD

The spaces between our assets.

Greater alignment begins with the connections.

01 **Education**
Employment

02 **Research**
Commercialization

03 **Institutional spending**
Local businesses

04 **Jobs**
Talent

05 **Growth**
Infrastructure

06 **Opportunity**
Access

From connection to measurable value.

ASSET

What strengths do we have?

CONNECTION

How are those strengths connected?

CONVERSION

How do connections become results?

OUTCOME

What regional value is produced?

MEASURE

How do we know it is working?

The opportunity now is to align them.

AIKEN ALIGNMENT REPORT

Remarkable Assets. Greater Alignment.



From Assets to Outcomes

EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW