



HIGHLANDS COUNTY BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS STRATEGIC PLAN

AUGUST 2025
VISIONFIRST ADVISORS



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ABOUT VISIONFIRST ADVISORS

VisionFirst Advisors is a team of professionals with deep experience in developing community, regional and state strategies. For more than 10 years, VisionFirst Advisors has provided community engagement, strategic marketing and communications, research and benchmarking—offering a comprehensive approach to help communities strengthen their competitive position. With a proven track record leading economic and community development initiatives at the state and local levels and working with hundreds of counties across the country, VisionFirst delivers insights and solutions that move communities forward.

Learn more at <https://www.visionfirstadvisors.com/>.

Introduction »

Florida's rural communities have long been overlooked, often receiving less attention and funding than the rapidly growing city-states of Orlando, Tampa, Jacksonville and Miami. Yet rural Florida is distinct, not a mirror of the Midwest heartland, but a landscape of beaches, lakes and natural ecosystems that have attracted generations seeking a quieter, more connected way of life. These communities may not define the national heartland, but they are undeniably the heartland of Florida, forming the backbone of the state's \$10 billion agricultural economy.

After years of being overlooked, rural Florida is finally gaining long-overdue attention. During the last legislative session, the Florida Legislature signaled a shift in priorities with the introduction of the Rural Renaissance bill. Although the bill did not advance, it marked a renewed commitment to rural communities. Now is the time for the county to leverage this momentum to secure meaningful investment and deeper engagement from the state.

However, success is not one-size-fits-all. What works for Walton County in rural northwest Florida, with its white sandy beaches and tourism-driven economy, may not work for Highlands County. Still, there is a shared foundation for success—strong neighborhoods, high-performing schools, diverse job opportunities and a vibrant social sector. These elements support long-term growth and enhance quality of life.

To remain resilient and responsive in a changing world, Highlands County must leverage state funding and local revenue to invest in its amenities, meet evolving community needs and foster collaborative partnerships. Fortunately, the county is home to passionate leaders, dedicated staff, engaged partners and residents who deeply care about their community. While government is a key driver of progress, it cannot do it alone. Lasting impact will depend on strong partnerships with state agencies, nonprofit organizations, the faith-based community and other stakeholders.

To guide this journey, VisionFirst has developed four strategic pillars—high-level goals rooted in the county's mission, values and essential services. These pillars reflect extensive research, best practices, stakeholder input and a deep understanding of the community's priorities.

The goals and their supporting strategies and tactics are meant to guide daily decisions and shape policy. At the core of implementation is a shared commitment to delivering transparent, customer-focused services for residents, businesses and visitors alike. Implementing the plan's tactics today, Highlands County can build upon its agricultural heritage to build the vibrant and welcoming community of tomorrow.

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Project Approach »

VisionFirst’s approach incorporated a collection of local and regional data, a review of existing documentation and stakeholder feedback to offer recommendations to strategically align the county’s departments and activities. While each phase was unique, together the results provide the foundation for the recommendations.

01

Analyzed economic data and benchmarked Highlands County against the 45-minute drive time, surrounding 8-county region, the state and the nation.

02

Engaged leaders and staff, county and municipal officials as well as stakeholders about the county’s economic development priorities, values, strengths and challenges.

03

Assessed and evaluated organizational programs, practices and demographic data to identify opportunities to increase success.

04

Synthesized key findings, themes along with best practices to develop the recommendations that meet economic development objectives.

05

Developed tactics and metrics for implementation. The recommendations align resources to serve residents while increasing economic development competitiveness.



First Impressions | What We Heard & Saw »

Developing an effective strategy necessitates a clear understanding of the county's departments and services from an outsider's perspective. The following information presents VisionFirst's initial impressions of the county, existing programs, initiatives, the activities carried out and the level of stakeholder support.



ELEVATE INTERGOVERNMENTAL COORDINATION	OPTIMIZE REVENUE STREAMS & CUSTOMER SERVICE	DESIRE FOR SMART GROWTH
<p>With new leadership at the county and municipal levels, there is an opportunity to strengthen coordination and communication while advancing resident priorities. Community leaders must align a shared brand, goals and vision to drive progress. In addition, a coordinated approach will better position the county to secure state funding for infrastructure improvements and long-term economic growth.</p>	<p>Highlands County's affordability makes it a desirable Central Florida location, but without optimizing revenue streams like impact fees, it lacks key amenities to attract young professionals. Additionally, inconsistent service and customer experience create frustration for residents. Regardless of impact fee decisions, the county must strengthen revenue streams, improve customer service and invest in projects that enhance its quality of place for residents, visitors and businesses.</p>	<p>Agriculture has long been a cornerstone of the county's economy, but the decline of citrus production raises questions about the future of large land parcels. At the same time, there is a growing demand for development, particularly to expand housing and retail corridors. To balance the county's agricultural heritage with the need for smart growth, clear and consistent land-use planning guidelines must be established to achieve long-term community goals.</p>

Discovery + Engagement »

In Your Words » After an initial review of the county's data, VisionFirst interviewed a host of stakeholders including existing business executives, education administrators, non-profit directors and resource partners, as well as local elected officials, staff and municipal leaders. In addition, a resident survey was deployed that garnered 230 responses.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

In assessing the economic development needs and desires of Highlands County leaders and residents, VisionFirst Advisors, along with staff, outlined an engagement plan that included in-person stakeholder interviews, conversations with county and municipal leaders, staff and an online resident survey. The goal of the engagement was to gather candid observations, feedback and ideas from the community to help prioritize and direct focus.

Regardless of the medium, stakeholder engagement was meant to seek answers to questions such as:








- What do you value about Highlands County?
- What are the community's values?
- What are your thoughts on ways you see the community growing? How has it grown over the last five years?
- What stands out as Highlands County's most significant achievement(s) in recent years?
- What do you see as Highlands County's greatest economic strengths and competitive advantages?
- Are there specific industries, businesses or assets we should prioritize for growth and investment?
- What factors do you believe make Highlands County an attractive place to live, work and do business?

Engagement with a diverse set of stakeholders develops a broad sense of plan ownership and collaboration and creates advocates and partners in implementing the strategies.

RESIDENT SURVEY

In addition to staff and stakeholder interviews, an online survey was conducted to expand outreach and gain deeper insights into the community's perspectives. The 14-question survey explored the county's strengths and challenges – including economic development efforts, emphasizing the importance of resident input in shaping the strategic plan. Over the course of three weeks, the survey garnered 230 responses. While this sample size may not be statistically representative, it offers valuable insights that complement other feedback sources, enriching the understanding of community needs and priorities.

Below is a snapshot of survey participants.

	230	Total Respondents
	80%	Own their Own Home
	41.3%	Lived in Highlands County for more than 25 Years – but 22% have lived there for 1 to 5 years
	55-64	Primary Age Category
	28%	Percent of respondents who have a bachelor's degree
	73%	Are Employed
	QUALITY OF PLACE	Was the top issue throughout the survey

Overall Survey Themes

Future Vision for Highlands County

- Many residents hope for economic growth, including increased job opportunities and higher wages.
- There is widespread support for attracting a diverse mix of businesses beyond just retail and tourism.
- Expanding entertainment and recreational options for families and young people is frequently suggested.
- Infrastructure modernization is seen as vital, with improvements needed in road maintenance, public transit and community spaces.

Infrastructure Concerns

- There is a strong call for the development of public transportation options to better serve the community.
- Concerns about the reliability and affordability of utilities and the availability of strong internet access.

Economic Growth Needs

- Residents support efforts to bring in higher-paying industries to diversify the local economy.
- Expanding resources and support for small local businesses is seen as a critical factor for economic success.
- Revitalizing downtown areas to make them more appealing for residents and visitors is a popular idea.
- Improving job training and educational opportunities is viewed as a key step toward workforce development.

Challenges In Employment & Economy

- Residents feel that local wages are too low to match the cost of living in the area.
- Some believe that job opportunities are limited or not diverse enough to support the needs of the community.
- Starting and sustaining small businesses in the county is seen as difficult due to regulatory challenges.
- There are calls for stronger collaboration between local businesses and government to foster economic growth.

Public Services & Amenities

- There is a strong demand for better healthcare, including improved medical facilities and more specialists.
- Residents express a need for higher-quality education and training programs for students and job seekers.

County Services Specific Survey Responses

The resident survey was designed to gather insights into both the county's strategic plan and the economic development strategic plan. Below are key highlights and data points from the survey questions focused on overall community conditions.

What issues matter most to you and your family in Highlands County?					
Answer Choices	Not Important	Not too Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Weighted Average
Keeping the community safe	0.43%	1.30%	13.04%	85.22%	3.83
Good schools for children (Pre-K through 12th grade)	2.61%	1.74%	20.00%	75.65%	3.69
Protecting nature and the environment	0.87%	5.22%	25.22%	68.70%	3.62
Creating more jobs	1.30%	3.91%	32.17%	62.61%	3.56
Growing and improving the community	3.04%	5.22%	30.00%	61.74%	3.5
Better roads, sidewalks, and bike lanes	1.30%	8.26%	33.04%	57.39%	3.47
Affordable places to live	3.04%	9.57%	24.35%	63.04%	3.47
Retail and cultural activities (like shopping, parks, museums, and events)	1.74%	12.61%	29.13%	56.52%	3.4

Please rate Highlands County's performance in the following categories.						
	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent	No Opinion	Weighted Average
Responsible use of taxpayer dollars	14.78%	32.61%	34.78%	7.39%	10.43%	2.66
Delivering high-quality essential services	13.91%	33.91%	38.26%	8.70%	5.22%	2.57
Transparency & accessibility	17.83%	33.48%	33.04%	6.09%	9.57%	2.56
Keeping residents informed and engaged	16.52%	32.17%	35.65%	10.87%	4.78%	2.55
Listening and responding to citizens	20.43%	34.35%	33.04%	3.48%	8.70%	2.46

Please rate the quality of county services.						
	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent	No Opinion	Weighted Average
Library services	2.17%	10.43%	38.70%	30.43%	18.26%	3.52
Fire rescue	1.74%	11.30%	45.22%	30.00%	11.74%	3.39
Emergency management Services	2.17%	15.22%	46.09%	23.04%	13.48%	3.3
Veteran services	12.61%	20.43%	25.22%	9.13%	32.61%	3.29
Animal control services	7.39%	18.70%	41.74%	10.43%	21.74%	3.2
Permitting, building & code enforcement services	13.91%	30.43%	28.26%	4.78%	22.61%	2.92
County parks, trails & community centers	15.22%	25.22%	45.22%	6.52%	7.83%	2.67
Local economic development	19.13%	29.13%	31.74%	5.22%	14.78%	2.67
Building and maintaining roads	10.43%	29.57%	47.39%	9.13%	3.48%	2.66
Sidewalks and bike lanes	21.30%	36.96%	32.61%	3.04%	6.09%	2.36

When it comes to the availability and quality of infrastructure, business and community services, how do you rate the following?

	Serious Problems Exist	Slight Improvements Necessary	Meets Our Needs	No Opinion	Weighted Average
Law enforcement and fire department	12.17%	34.35%	46.96%	6.52%	2.37
Utilities	16.96%	43.04%	36.52%	3.48%	2.2
Park, recreation and trail offerings	18.26%	45.65%	32.17%	3.91%	2.14
Overall community appearance	16.52%	50.87%	29.57%	3.04%	2.13
County/city road and streets	20.43%	49.13%	28.26%	2.17%	2.08
Post-secondary, tech school opportunities/choices	21.74%	37.39%	27.39%	13.48%	2.07
Arts/cultural programs/facilities	25.22%	35.22%	25.65%	13.91%	2.01
Community centers and public spaces	34.78%	36.52%	21.74%	6.96%	1.86
K-12 school opportunities/choices	31.30%	31.74%	20.00%	16.96%	1.86
Healthcare services	39.57%	30.00%	24.35%	6.09%	1.84
Retail, entertainment, nightlife, and dining	43.48%	36.52%	16.09%	3.91%	1.71
Overall condition/availability of housing stock	38.26%	38.70%	12.61%	10.43%	1.71
Public transit system	70.43%	12.61%	2.61%	14.35%	1.21

Where would you like to see Highlands County in five years? (Select top three)

Higher incomes for people	56.09%
Better schools and training programs (Pre-K to community/technical colleges)	56.09%
Lively downtowns and neighborhoods that attract young professionals and families	53.91%
More people working (lowering unemployment)	43.91%
An expanded mix of different types of businesses	42.61%
Additional support for new businesses and entrepreneurs	18.70%
Other (please specify)	18.70%
More people moving to the county (growing the population)	6.96%
No changes, the community is fine as it is	3.04%

What should Highlands County focus on to grow and improve the economy? (Select up to five strategies.)

Make the county a better place to live with more activities and recreation	66.96%
Bring in new industries and higher-paying jobs	58.70%
Work to improve schools	50.00%
Offer more housing options for people at different income levels	45.65%
Attract and keep young professionals and families	44.78%
Support and expand local businesses	35.22%
Create a clear plan for growth in the region	33.91%
Make it easier for new businesses to start and grow	26.09%
Revitalize downtown areas	25.65%
Help workers improve their job skills	19.57%
Encourage local governments to work together better	16.52%
Other (please specify)	11.30%

What do you see as Highlands County's greatest strengths and biggest weaknesses?

	Weakness	Not a Strength	Strength	Substantial Strength	No Opinion	Weighted Average
Available sites/buildings for new industry or expansions	5.65%	20.00%	35.65%	13.91%	24.78%	2.77
Crime and personal safety	13.91%	24.35%	44.78%	9.57%	7.39%	2.54
Tax environment	10.87%	18.70%	33.48%	7.83%	29.13%	2.54
Affordability	10.87%	33.48%	42.17%	9.57%	3.91%	2.52
Opportunities for higher education including technical training	17.83%	23.91%	35.65%	10.00%	12.61%	2.43
Ease of doing business/regulatory environment	7.39%	27.39%	26.96%	3.91%	34.35%	2.42
Connectivity – location, traffic and roadways	24.78%	24.78%	36.52%	9.13%	4.78%	2.32
Organized business leadership	11.30%	22.61%	23.48%	2.17%	40.43%	2.28
Support for existing industry growth and expansion	17.39%	26.96%	23.04%	4.35%	28.26%	2.2
Workforce costs	11.30%	33.91%	16.09%	2.17%	36.52%	2.14
Start-up business support	12.61%	29.13%	16.96%	0.87%	40.43%	2.1
Quality of life amenities	23.48%	39.57%	26.09%	3.04%	7.83%	2.09
Access and affordability of high-speed internet for home and business	26.52%	33.48%	26.96%	3.48%	9.57%	2.08
Education (public and private)	27.83%	29.57%	24.35%	5.22%	13.04%	2.08
Technical support of entrepreneurs and small business	15.65%	30.87%	12.61%	1.74%	39.13%	2.01
Workforce skills and availability	19.57%	45.65%	18.70%	0.43%	15.65%	2
Housing options (rental and home ownership)	32.17%	36.52%	19.57%	2.61%	9.13%	1.92
A shared vision of where the county is going	31.30%	32.17%	13.04%	1.74%	21.74%	1.81

Director Feedback | 3 Year Priorities

Another engagement component was connecting with staff to understand their vision for the future. VisionFirst sent a list of questions to directors, asking for input on priorities for the next three years and the county's greatest strengths. Their feedback was critical in aligning goals and tactics with both staff capacity and strategic direction. **Below is summary of their feedback.**

Infrastructure & Funding

- Upgrades to infrastructure and identifying alternate funding sources.
- Implementing funding mechanisms for capital improvements.
- Accepting projected growth and development.
- Identifying current fiscal capabilities and potential challenges.
- Determining alternative funding models and sources to support quality of service.

Quality of Life & Community Services

- Improving quality of life for residents (housing, healthcare, transportation).
- Addressing homelessness and mental health needs.

Economic Development & Vision

- Encouraging growth of existing businesses and industry.
- Attaining a long-term vision and strategic plan for the county.
- Determining a quality service delivery model.

Collaboration & Unity

- Promoting unity across communities and clarifying county versus city initiatives.
- Emphasizing collaboration rather than competition.

Employee Development & Training

- Recruitment and retention of engaged personnel.
- Creating a dedicated training division for leadership and technology training.
- Ensuring each division has a budget for training.
- Training in HR (onboarding, compliance, public records, payroll, benefits, retirement, report training, HR hot topics, new IRS laws).
- Training in budget division (leadership development, FGFOA updates, conferences, webinars).
- Training in procurement division (NIGP programs and certifications, in-house training for competitive bidding, state contracts, vendor selection, end-of-year processing).

County's Greatest Strengths

Adaptability & Community

- Employees' adaptability in solving issues with limited resources.
- Strong sense of community and support.
- Doing more with less, despite limited resources.

Natural Resources & Infrastructure

- The county's natural resources, including the ridge, lakes and diverse ecosystem.
- Superb transportation system and county-owned asphalt plant.

Dedicated Teams & Communication

- Dedicated administrator, director, economic development and tourist development teams.
- Enhanced communication efforts from administration.

Key Assets & Organizations

- Sebring Airport and CRA's role in local development.
- Non-profit organizations provide direct services.

Stakeholder Themes

VisionFirst identified the strongest themes, insights and supporting details to use in the analysis and ideation of goals and tactics. Key findings from the interviews, surveys and staff feedback are presented in aggregate below and have been grouped by the main themes that resulted from the conversations. **The comments listed are a sample of the feedback from stakeholders and do not reflect VisionFirst's opinion.**

Governance

- There is a need for more customer-focused staff when communicating about projects, permits and processes.
- Some stakeholders feel county leadership lacks vision to guide future growth.
- Need for better alignment between county and municipalities (Sebring, Avon Park, Lake Placid) to advance economic development goals.
- There is a desire for joint city-county meetings and strategic planning to unify economic development efforts.

Infrastructure & Growth Management

- Concerns that zoning policies limit development flexibility, particularly for agricultural land transitioning to new uses.
- Many stakeholders advocate for reinstating impact fees to fund infrastructure.
- Infrastructure challenges, along major corridors (Highway 27/70), limit development.
- Desire for staff to explore grants, sales tax allocations and municipal service benefit units (MSBUs) to support infrastructure projects.

Quality of Place Amenities

- Residents would like the development of more non-sports tourism and recreation opportunities including trails, lakes and parks.
- Housing shortage across income levels, particularly for middle management and entry-level workers.
- There is a growing demand for skilled nursing facilities and assisted living to support the aging population.
- Opportunity to enhance and redouble tourism efforts to include a focus on recreational amenities and eco-tourism.

Perception vs. Reality

- With growth in the surrounding counties to the north, there is a need to tell the Highlands County story and demonstrate the community's vision.
- Schools are perceived as underperforming and while there are areas for improvement, there are programs and achievements that should be touted.
- The Hometown Takeover show offers the opportunity to showcase the county's forward direction to potential residents, businesses and visitors.

Data + Benchmarking »

VisionFirst Advisors conducted a detailed data analysis of Highlands County, a 45-minute drive time and the surrounding region using a variety of perspectives. The data offers a baseline of information to educate, inform and better position the community.





THE LABORSHED IS HOME TO **MORE THAN 1.5M RESIDENTS** 

THE LABORSHED HAS **219.4 PEOPLE PER SQUARE MILE**

REFLECTING A RURAL SETTING FOR POTENTIAL EMPLOYEES
HIGHLANDS (105.7) | FLORIDA (421.4PPSM) | USA (94.8 PPSM)



2.6% POPULATION GROWTH RATE WITHIN THE LABORSHED

COMPARED TO STATE & NATIONAL AVERAGE • FL (1.5%) / USA (0.6%)
HIGHLANDS COUNTY (09%)

A LOWER COST OF LIVING IN THE REGION

90.6 HIGHLANDS | 94.1 LABORSHED | 103 FLORIDA



LABOR FORCE SIZE
 (ROUNDED)

38,000
 HIGHLANDS

105,000
 45-MIN. DRIVE

690,000
 LABORSHED

LABORSHED TALENT PIPELINE

7,500
 POST-SECONDARY AWARDS ANNUALLY
 (2022-2023)

87.3%
 H.S. GRAD OR HIGHER

33.2%
 ASSOC. DEGREE OR HIGHER



JOBSEQ DATA AS OF 2024Q2

ECONOMIC OVERVIEW

Collecting and analyzing data regarding the county's operations and economy are foundational elements for understanding the county's current position and informing future actions. To identify the best and most achievable strategies for Highlands County, VisionFirst conducted high-level research comparing the county to three peer counties—Charlotte, Pasco and Clay—selected in conjunction with county staff. In addition, from an economic development standpoint, data was compiled from a 45-minute drive time as well as a regional perspective. The combination of these data sets provides a more holistic view of the county's performance as well as the perception of the location when only utilizing online data. In total, the analysis includes nearly 40 different metrics, covering population trends, employment sectors, income levels, county budget data and other government-related indicators.

The figures on the following pages provide a snapshot of key indicators that reflect the overall vitality of a county and its residents. VisionFirst compiled this information using trusted state and national data sources to ensure accuracy and relevance. These metrics are used to provide insight into the community's current landscape and to serve as a benchmark for measuring the success of strategies and activities undertaken through the strategic plan.

What the Data Says ||

Gathering data is only the beginning; to drive meaningful progress, it is essential to look beyond the numbers. By analyzing key trends and benchmarks, county leaders can determine where to focus their time and resources where they will have the greatest impact.

Demographics & Labor Force

- Population: 107,614 (2024 estimate); slow growth rate of 0.9% annually.
- Aging Population: Median age is 54.1, significantly higher than Florida (42.4).
- Labor Force Participation: Low at 42.9% (state average is 59.2%).
- Prime Working Age Participation: Moderate at 76.4% but still slightly below state and national levels.
- Unemployment Rate: 4.9%, above state (3.5%) and national averages (4.2%).
- High School Diploma or Higher: 84.3% (below state/national averages).
- Associate Degree or Higher: Only 28.5%, compared to 45.0% nationally.

Understanding the Why »

- Age data is typically utilized to understand social and economic attributes to plan and examine many public programs and policies, especially regarding health and safety for those under 18 and over 65.
- Highlands County has seen marginal growth since 2011, representing the need to identify community and economic development opportunities, infrastructure improvements and policies to foster a pro-business environment to attract and retain talent in the community.
- Slow growth suggests limited in-migration and challenges in attracting new residents.

- Lower labor force participation indicates a smaller portion of the population is working or actively seeking work, which can hinder new business investment.
- Though relatively strong, prime age labor force participation still trails the state and national rates, suggesting room to better engage the core workforce.
- An unemployment rate higher than both state and national averages signs potential barriers to employment or a mismatch in job availability and skills.
- Below-average educational attainment may limit residents' access to skilled jobs and economic advancement.
- The proportion of individuals holding an associate degree or higher is notably below the national average, pointing to a need for more post-secondary education and training opportunities to build a competitive workforce.

Economic & Social Conditions

- Annual Average Wage: \$46,365, far below Florida (\$66,049) and the U.S. (\$72,405).
- Poverty Rate: High at 15.6%.
- Cost of Living Index: Low (90.6), indicating affordability but also limited wage-driven growth.
- Median Home Value: \$155,900, well below Florida median (\$292,200).
- Single-Family Permits (2022): Highlands issued just 641 permits, signaling limited residential development, especially compared to Charlotte: 4,637 and Pasco: 7,400
- Multi-Family Permits: Very low at 22, again much lower than peers (Charlotte: 1,039).
- Average Home Price: \$299,000 in Highlands, the lowest among peer counties.
- Price per Sq Ft: \$191, also on the lower end, suggesting lower housing demand or more affordable construction.

Understanding the Why »

- The low average wage and high poverty rate suggest limited economic mobility and highlight the need for better-paying job opportunities.
- While the low cost of living and home values offer affordability, they may also signal a lack of economic dynamism and limited demand for housing.
- The low number of housing permits, especially for multi-family units, indicates slow residential development and potential barriers to population growth or workforce housing.
- The lower home prices and price per square foot reinforce the narrative of subdued market activity, which can deter investment and limit the appeal to new residents and businesses.
- Together, these factors point to a need for targeted economic and housing strategies to support sustainable growth.

Government & Fiscal Position

- Highlands County's total budget: \$187.8 million, smallest among benchmarked counties.
- Government Spending per Resident: \$1,769, much lower than Charlotte: \$5,975, Clay: \$2,360, Pasco: \$2,194.
- Millage Rates: Government Operating: 7.6 (highest), School Board: 5.34 (lowest).

- Government Debt Per Resident: \$223, the lowest, suggesting low borrowing but potentially underinvestment.
- Public Safety: 40.05% of the total budget, the highest proportional allocation among peers.
- Transportation & Physical Environment: Combined, they represent ~33% of the budget.
- Human Services + Economic Environment + Culture & Recreation: Together make up only ~8%, indicating limited investment in social, economic and community amenities.
- Other Uses: Just 1.69%, whereas Pasco and Charlotte spend over 25% of their budgets here.
- County FTEs: Only 440 employees, with the lowest average salary at \$51,418, compared to Charlotte: \$71,748, Clay: \$69,193, Pasco: \$61,495

Understanding the Why »

- Lean government operations with low spending and low debt.
- Heavy emphasis on public safety and infrastructure, but limited funding toward economic development, social services and recreation.
- A very conservative fiscal posture, potentially limiting responsiveness to growth or development opportunities compared to higher-spending peers.

Demographic Overview

Figure 1: Demographic Overview

		Highlands County, Florida	45-Minute Drive Time	Highlands & Surrounding (8 County Region)	Florida	USA
DEMOGRAPHICS						
Current Population (ACS)		103,808	276,998	1,579,959	21,928,881	332,387,540
Population Estimates ⁴		107,614	-	1,685,814	22,610,726	334,914,895
2020 Population (ACS)		104,574	-	1,479,687	21,216,924	326,569,308
2015 Population (ACS)		98,328	-	1,306,609	19,645,772	316,515,021
*Annual Population Growth ⁴		0.9%	-	2.6%	1.5%	0.6%
People per Square Mile		105.7	-	219.7	421.4	94.8
Median Age ²		54.1	46.1	42.5	42.4	38.5
LABOR FORCE						
Civilian Population – age 16 years and over	Current Labor Force Size	37,960	106,520	717,187	10,555,633	167,857,207
	Labor Force Participate Rate	42.9%	46.0%	55.6%	59.2%	63.3%
	2020 Labor Force Size	37,504	-	649,542	10,240,825	164,759,496
	2020 Labor Participation Rate	42.3%	-	53.9%	58.8%	63.2%
Current Prime-Age Labor Force Participation Size	22,490	65,561	463,797	6,757,770	107,055,165	

	Highlands County, Florida	45-Minute Drive Time	Highlands & Surrounding (8 County Region)	Florida	USA
2020 Prime-Age Labor Force Participation Rate	76.4%	71.3%	79.3%	82.5%	83.0%
Unemployment Rate Dec 2024 (Seasonally adjusted)	4.9%	-	4.2%	3.5%	4.2%
Veterans (Age 18-64)	2,423	6,801	41,647	647,586	8,636,019
Veterans Labor Force Participation Rate (Age 18-64)	65.8%	62.2%	69.6%	75.1%	77.1%
Total Employment (2024Q3) – All Industries	31,805	82,649	548,218	10,813,524	166,047,787
Four-Quarter Moving Average from 2024Q3 – All Industries	-0.1%	1.3%	1.9%	1.9%	1.4%
Mean Commute Time (Min.)	22.1	26.0	30.3	27.9	26.7
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT, Ages 25-64					
Educational Attainment (H.S. Diploma or Higher)	84.3%	79.7%	87.3%	90.0%	89.8%
Educational Attainment (Assoc Degree or Higher)	28.5%	23.7%	33.2%	44.1%	45.0%
No High School Diploma	15.6%	20.3%	12.7%	10.00%	25.1%
High School Graduate	34.1%	36.5%	32.6%	26.90%	19.7%
Some College, No Degree	21.7%	19.5%	21.5%	19.00%	9.2%
Associate degree	10.3%	8.5%	10.8%	11.00%	22.4%
Bachelor's Degree	12.4%	10.3%	15.6%	21.50%	13.4%
Postgraduate Degree	5.8%	4.9%	6.8%	11.60%	25.1%
SOCIAL					
2023 Total Housing Units	57,605	137,281	696,388	9,915,957	140,943,613
Median House Value (owner-occupied) ²	\$155,900	\$146,011	\$227,274	\$292,200	\$281,900
2020 Total Housing Units	55,919	-	655,819	9,562,324	138,432,751
Annual Average Wage	\$46,365	\$47,006	\$51,012	\$66,049	\$72,405
Cost of Living Index	90.6	90.9	94.1	103.0	100.0
Poverty Level (of all people)	15.6%	19.7%	14.6%	12.9%	12.5%
Households Receiving Food Stamps/SNAP	14.9%	17.3%	14.9%	13.0%	11.5%
Disconnected Youth ³	5.5%	6.4%	3.4%	2.6%	2.5%
Children in Single Family Homes (% of all children)	42.1%	42.2%	39.4%	38.3%	34.0%

County Benchmarking

Figure 2: Economic Overview Benchmarking

	Highlands County	Charlotte County	Clay County	Pasco County	Florida
Current Population (ACS)	102,339	189,900	219,650	569,211	331,097,593
Annual Population Growth	0.9%	2.3%	1.7%	2.9%	0.6%
Current Labor Force Size (16 and over)	37,916	72,081	108,229	2603,64	167,857,207
Average Age	54.1	59.9	39.9	43.9	42.4
Labor Force Participate Rate (16 and over)	43.5%	42.3%	62.5%	55.7%	63.3%
Prime-age (25-54) Labor Force Part. Rate	76.9%	78.4%	83.3%	80.1%	82.3%
Educational Attainment (Assoc Degree or Higher)	28.5%	34.2%	40.5%	40.4%	45.0%
GDP	\$3.141B	\$6.924B	\$6.956B	\$18.009B	\$1.579T
Annual Average Wage	\$46,365	\$52,495	\$51,878	\$52,246	\$72,405
Job Growth (2023Q2 – 2024Q2)	1.2%	3.8%	2.5%	2.8%	1.6%
Wage Growth (2023Q2 – 2024Q2)	3.7%	3.1%	4.6%	2.4%	3.6%
Cost of Living Index	90.6	101.0	90.7	94.6	100.0
Poverty Rate	15.6%	10.5%	9.4%	11.8%	12.9%

Figure 3: Government Spending & Revenue Benchmarking

	Highlands County	Charlotte County	Clay County	Pasco County	Source
Number of Municipalities	3	1	4	6	FAC
Single Family Permits	641	4,637	1,633	7,400	HUD - 2022
Average Home Price	\$299k	\$389k	\$369k	\$350k	Realtor.com
Price per square foot	\$191	\$232	\$195	\$207	Realtor.com
Multi-Family Permits	22	1,039	195	358	HUD - 2022
Mileage Rate (County Gov't Operating)	7.6	6.25	5.54	6.33	FDOR 2024
Mileage Rate (School Board)	5.34	6.5	6.23	6.33	FDOR 2024
Special Districts	14	33	24	95	EDR 2023-2024
Government Spending Per Resident	\$1,769	\$5,975	\$2,360	\$2,194	EDR 2023-2024
Government Debt Per Resident	\$223	\$871	\$401	\$1,046	EDR 2023-2024
Total County FTE	440	2,353	1,709	5,610	EDR 2023-2024
Average County FTE Salary	\$51,418	\$71,748	\$69,193	\$61,495	EDR 2023-2024

Figure 4: County Benchmarking Budget Line Items

	CHARLOTTE	CLAY	HIGHLANDS	PASCO
Government Services	\$153,940,822	\$100,850,485	\$28,782,022	\$363,284,784
Public Safety	\$245,845,413	\$162,631,718	\$75,205,593	\$414,312,811
Physical Environment	\$482,001,153	\$40,185,153	\$29,235,823	\$237,633,148
Transportation	\$187,030,555	\$147,415,779	\$32,650,271	\$193,388,988
Economic Environment	\$4,866,923	\$6,094,023	\$5,534,342	\$58,892,449
Human Services	\$38,913,781	\$57,389,633	\$5,444,152	\$21,934,662
Culture & Recreation	\$92,035,312	\$23,260,896	\$4,394,374	\$44,501,953
Other Uses	\$486,072,158	\$183,949,819	\$3,179,179	\$944,696,576
Court Related	\$8,045,974	\$7,470,094	\$3,359,822	\$4,798,340
Total	\$1,698,752,091	\$729,247,600	\$187,785,578	\$2,283,443,711

Figure 5: County Benchmarking Budget Line Items Percent of Total

	CHARLOTTE	CLAY	HIGHLANDS	PASCO
Government Services	9.06%	13.83%	15.33%	15.91%
Public Safety	14.47%	22.30%	40.05%	18.14%
Physical Environment	28.37%	5.51%	15.57%	10.41%
Transportation	11.01%	20.21%	17.39%	8.47%
Economic Environment	0.29%	0.84%	2.95%	2.58%
Human Services	2.29%	7.87%	2.90%	0.96%
Culture & Recreation	5.42%	3.19%	2.34%	1.95%
Other Uses	28.61%	25.22%	1.69%	41.37%
Court Related	0.47%	1.02%	1.79%	0.21%
Total	\$1,698,752,091	\$729,247,600	\$187,785,578	\$2,283,443,711

SWOT + Leverage Points »

Based on stakeholder engagement and data analysis, VisionFirst identified the Highlands County's economic development strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. This analysis relied on qualitative input as well as industry knowledge.



STRENGTHS

- Strategic location with proximity to Orlando and Tampa, with access to major highways.
- Lower taxes and housing costs than other Florida regions.
- Expanding Career & Technical Education (CTE) programs aligned with industry needs.
- Willing leadership in county and municipalities to improve coordination.
- Strong downtown redevelopment through small business growth.



WEAKNESSES

- Infrastructure deficiencies exist with limited water, sewer and broadband expansion hindering growth.
- Limited budget capacity and appetite to be innovative to develop new amenities and infrastructure opportunities.
- Perceptions around development policies prove challenging for willing developers.
- Public service gaps in social services for homelessness as well as children.



OPPORTUNITIES

- Leverage exposure from television programming to heighten county's brand to new residents, tourists and businesses.
- Identify state and federal grants and partnerships for water, sewer and broadband projects.
- Incentivize the growth of logistics, healthcare and manufacturing sectors.
- Improve coordination with departments to enhance customer service and transparency.
- Leverage the potential of new property becoming available with declining citrus industry.



THREATS

- Declining citrus industry impacts land use and economy.
- Segments of residents are resistant to growth and new developments.
- Workforce housing shortages impact recruitment.
- Perception that frequent leadership turnover is creating policy instability.

Leverage Points

Far too often SWOT analyses are conducted for discovery purposes only. VisionFirst goes beyond the initial step of conducting the analysis and develops strategies to leverage or capitalize on opportunities and to minimize or mitigate weaknesses.

These strategies, or "leverage points," highlight the most urgent and impactful actions the economic development team should take to strengthen its position, fulfill its mission and enhance the county's competitiveness for jobs and investment.

STRENGTH	LEVERAGE POINTS
Willing leadership in county and municipalities to improve coordination.	Host strategic planning sessions with municipalities to align priorities and funding opportunities.
Strong downtown redevelopment through small business growth.	Build off downtown redevelopment to other portions of town especially as big box stores continue to close.
WEAKNESSES	LEVERAGE POINTS
Inconsistent zoning and development policies prove challenging for willing developers, especially for housing.	Create a task force of public and private stakeholders to improve understanding and land use consistency policies.
Infrastructure deficiencies exist with limited water, sewer and broadband expansion hindering growth.	Pursue state and federal funding to expand critical infrastructure and support growth in underserved areas.
Public service gaps in social services for homelessness as well as children.	Coordinate with non-profit community on providing wrap around services
OPPORTUNITIES	LEVERAGE POINTS
Identify grants and partnerships for water, sewer and broadband projects.	Use legislative delegation combined with Florida's focus on rural communities to access funding for critical infrastructure improvements.
Incentivize the growth of logistics, healthcare and manufacturing sectors.	Reimagine the incentives offered to interested business prospects to promote growth in targeted sectors.
THREATS	LEVERAGE POINTS
Segments of residents are resistant to growth and new developments.	Build communications tools to enhance resident engagement in county activities demonstrating strategic priorities and spending associated with the expenditures.
Perception that frequent leadership turnover is creating policy instability.	Develop onboarding and continuity plans to reduce policy disruption from leadership changes.

Highlands County as a System »

Government operates as an interconnected system, which is responsive to residents' needs, shaped by elected officials' policies, implemented by staff and stakeholders and evaluated by measurable outcomes.

The strategic plan process and subsequent pillars are created to guide the system. Local goal setting and policy making is complex. It demands the best of local officials, staff and even residents. Each must look at the county holistically - rather than individually - to foster a system delivering prosperity for the county today and tomorrow.

The goals, priorities and policies adopted by Highlands County government impact everyone in the community – residents, businesses, customers and visitors. The pathway, priorities and policies determine what services will be provided, the level of those services, what kinds of development will occur and ultimately the community's future.

Consider Figure 6 below in relation to the local government system.¹ When goals are clearly defined and assigned, stakeholders can determine effectiveness. When staff and resources are allocated, stakeholders can measure efficiency. When rules and policies are developed and reported, stakeholders can understand progress and celebrate successful outcomes.

Figure 6: Local Governance System

	Goals	Organization	Fiscal	Personnel	Procedures	Information	
WHAT	Vision & Values	Residents	Bonds & Taxes	Service Levels	Initiatives	Public Outreach	POLICY LEVEL
	Strategies & Goals	Commissioners	Budgets & Debt Management	Salary & Benefits	Ordinances	Engagement	
HOW	Strategic Plan	County Administrator	Finance Plan	Recruitment & Retention	Policies & Procedures	Annual Report	ADMINISTRATIVE LEVEL
	Department Plan	Department Heads	Budget Control	Professional Development	Standards & Benchmarks	Monthly Updates	
	Team Plan	Employees	Service Delivery	Smart Goals & Performance	Operations	Measures & Progress	
	Effectiveness		Efficiency		Monitoring		

¹ Municipal Research & Services

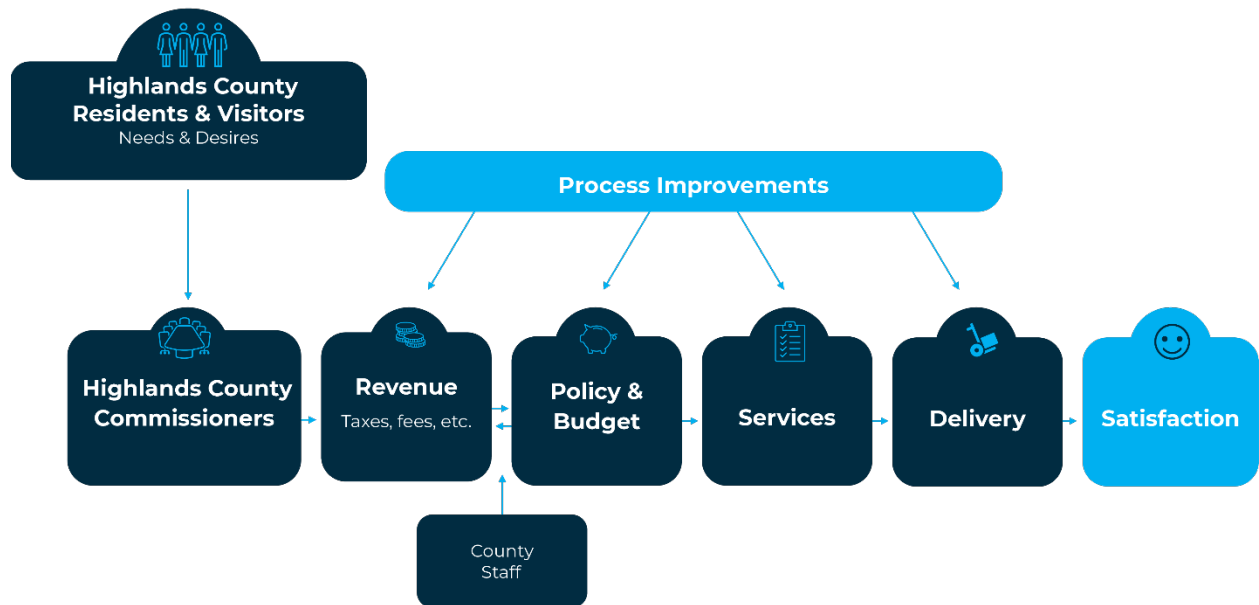
However, prior to the development of goals and policies for Highlands County, it is important to gain an understanding of how current government operations were working as a system and adjust as needed.

Figure 7 outlines Highlands County as a system. In the system there are opportunities for improvement in processes that lead to successful outcomes. Using the same principles of Kaizen, which are widely recognized in the automotive industry, the same four steps can be applied to improving the system of government - **Plan, Do, Check and Act**.

1. Identify opportunities for change and make a **plan** to improve or change. This requires analyzing input and data collection. Policy decisions made with valid data and input will lead to more efficient government and less decision-making made on emotions.
2. Take action (**do** something) to implement the plan on a smaller scale as a test run to validate results.
3. Study (**check**) the results to see if desired results were obtained and adjust, as necessary.
4. Implement (**act**) the new process or improvement steps.

For Highlands County's system to be high performing in implementing the plan, the four steps will need to be constantly utilized. **However, what remains constant is the focus of the residents at the top of the system driving prioritization and process improvement while recognizing achievement.**

Figure 7: Highlands County as a System



Vision, Mission + Values »

Highlands County has already taken the most important first step toward building a vibrant economy by committing to a shared vision for the future and recognizing the possibilities sparked in part by Hometown Takeover. Now is the time to build on that momentum and propel the community forward with purpose. To do so, the community must rally around a clearly defined “North Star” or vision that guides all those involved in implementing the plan.

VisionFirst believes communities are more likely to achieve lasting success when residents, organizations and government share a united vision. This North Star, which resonates with all who have a role in shaping the future of Highlands County, is essential for focusing efforts, guiding action, inspiring commitment and measuring progress.

Aligning these foundational elements with community priorities and the county’s operational structure builds trust and confidence among residents and stakeholders. In considering Highlands County’s priorities, stakeholder input focused on:

- Delivering proactive, efficient and customer-focused government services.
- Creating, retaining and sustaining quality jobs and a strong education system.
- Enhancing recreation and cultural amenities to offer diverse and enriching experiences.
- Preserving and maintaining the county’s natural resources for long-term benefit.
- Celebrating and supporting the county’s agricultural heritage and industry.
- Promoting a safe, thoughtfully planned and well-connected community.
- Modernizing public programs, services and facilities to meet current and future needs.



PEOPLE

Highlands County
Residents



VISION + MISSION



GOALS (4 Ws)

Who | What
Why | For Whom



IMPLEMENTATION & COLLABORATORS

Staff | Community
Partners



STRATEGY & TACTICS



OUTCOME



VIBRANT HOLISTIC ECONOMY

From these ideas, VisionFirst utilized the "Four W's": who you are, what you do, why you do it and for whom – to define the vision and understanding of the county's mission and values.

The 4 W Visioning Process »

Who are you?

We are the residents of Highlands County, along with county elected officials, county leadership and dedicated county staff.

What do you do?

We provide essential services that support daily life and long-term growth, including public safety, emergency response, infrastructure, transportation, recreational opportunities, regulatory oversight and permitting.

Why do you do it?

We are committed to creating a safe, welcoming community that supports residential and business growth, leading to a stronger, more diverse tax base and the opportunity for a vibrant quality of life.

For whom?

We serve the people of Highlands County — residents, visitors, businesses and all who rely on county services.

Based on the interviews and engagement, VisionFirst developed a draft vision, mission and values for the county to guide their efforts. However, this representation and iteration will need to be discussed by staff and elected officials.





Vision »

A thriving, safe and welcoming Highlands County where residents, visitors and businesses prosper through thoughtful planning, strong services and shared community values.



Mission »

We are dedicated to being customer-focused while providing essential services that support growth, safety and a vibrant quality of place for the people of Highlands County.



Values»

Core values help define and drive an organization's behavior and should be integrated into daily operations. VisionFirst recommends adopting the following core values to promote a positive organizational culture for employees and ensure the delivery of county government services that the residents of Highlands County value.

- **Service:** We are committed to delivering responsive, reliable and customer-focused services that enhance daily life.
- **Collaboration:** We work together across departments and with our community to achieve shared goals and lasting results.
- **Integrity:** We uphold transparency, accountability and ethical practices in all that we do.
- **Stewardship:** We preserve and protect our natural, economic and cultural resources for current and future generations.
- **Innovation:** We embrace forward-thinking approaches to meet evolving community needs and deliver modern solutions and amenities.
- **Safety:** We prioritize public safety as the foundation for a strong, resilient community.
- **Opportunity:** We strive to create an environment that supports growth, offers access to quality services and makes Highlands County a desirable place to live, work and invest.

Vibrant Community Platform »

Vibrant communities don't happen accidentally, but rather through the intentional choices, commitments and actions of residents and leaders working together for a common vision for the future. While each community or region brings its own unique assets, resources, culture, identity and challenges, VisionFirst Advisors believes there is a platform on which vibrant communities are built.



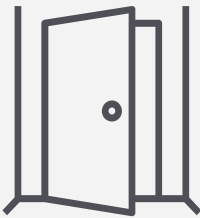
VISION

Vision comes first! It is an agreed-upon common destination, the North Star to which all those engaged in or impacting economic development may focus their efforts. *What is your identity?*



TALENT

Communities should look beyond data. Align education and training to inspire workforce to pursue the path that best **utilizes their talents** and provides value to the community.



OPPORTUNITY

Opportunity provides the foundation for a vibrant community. Leaders must create and sustain an ecosystem that provides job opportunities for people to enjoy a good quality of life and pursue their dreams.



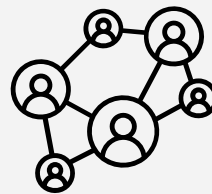
ENGAGEMENT

Citizens and leaders must be invested in the community's future and **engaged in its success**. It is critical to make decisions and direct growth for the benefit of all citizens.



PLACE

Communities are living systems. Growth should be purposefully directed to empower people to help the community flourish, sustain its citizens and attract others **to their place**.



TELLING THE STORY

Vibrant communities **share their story** internally to inspire progress and externally to highlight what makes them exceptional.

Four Priority Pillars | Foundations for the Future »

As Highlands County embraces this moment of renewed attention and opportunity for rural Florida, it is essential to have a clear and actionable framework to guide growth and decision-making. Building on community priorities and informed by stakeholder insight, VisionFirst has developed four strategic pillars to serve as the foundation for this plan.

These pillars represent the county's most important goals. Each is grounded in its core services and reflect what is needed to foster a vibrant future. From fiscal responsibility to infrastructure improvements, from neighborhood vitality to smart growth strategies, each pillar outlines a direction for meaningful progress.

Together, they provide a roadmap for policy, budgeting and day-to-day decision-making, all anchored by a commitment to delivering transparent and customer-focused services to residents, businesses and visitors alike.

Figure 8: Four Pillars (Goals)



ENSURING IMPLEMENTATION SUCCESS

To develop the key recommendations, VisionFirst closely evaluated the current staff capacity, and the demands placed on each county department. Drawing from data analysis, trend evaluation and best practices, the resulting four strategic pillars and one cross-cutting goal are designed to strengthen Highlands County's economic, community and social growth while enhancing overall quality of place.

Each goal is supported by a corresponding set of tactics and key partners critical to successful implementation. Achieving the goals and tactics will require strong coordination across county departments as well as collaboration with external stakeholders. To help guide efforts, tactics are categorized as follows:

- **Implement:** Highlands County will lead and execute these initiatives directly.
- **Facilitate:** Highlands County will collaborate with partners to jointly develop and implement these efforts.
- **Advocate:** Highlands County will support and encourage cities, regional organizations and state agencies to undertake or implement these actions.

Timeframes for implementation are defined as:

- **Short-Term:** 6 to 18 months
- **Mid-Term:** 18 to 36 months
- **Long-Term:** 36 to 60 months

This structured approach ensures accountability and steady progress in realizing Highlands County's vision for a thriving community.

Accountable & Proactive Government Services.

ACCOUNTABLE & PROACTIVE GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Goal: Highlands County focuses on providing needed services and programs through fiscally responsible revenue generation, accountable spending and a customer-focused approach.

Highlands County is committed to delivering high-quality government services that are transparent, responsive and aligned with community needs. As the county grows and evolves, so too must its approach to governance. By strengthening coordination with municipalities, special taxing districts and constitutional offices, the county can improve service delivery, reduce duplication and ensure that public resources are used effectively.

This pillar outlines tactics to enhance internal alignment, foster regional partnerships and elevate customer experience, all while maintaining a strong focus on fiscal responsibility and measurable outcomes.

Partners: Town of Lake Placid, City of Sebring, City of Avon Park, special taxing districts and constitutional offices.

Success Measures:

1. Increase in interagency collaboration projects initiated through annual strategic retreats and development of department strategic action plans aligned to countywide goals.
2. Improvement in customer satisfaction scores across all departments.
3. Number of shared service agreements or joint funding applications executed annually.
4. Increased transparency through public access to departmental plans and performance dashboards.
5. Annual cost savings or efficiency gains from coordinated service delivery.

Tactic: Host an Annual Strategic Planning Retreat with Municipalities, Special Taxing Districts and Constitutional Offices

Implement, Short-Term

The county should lead the development and facilitation of a facilitated annual retreat that brings together the county administrator, deputy administrator, city managers and administrators and key department heads to align strategic objectives, coordinate initiatives and identify opportunities for shared services and collaboration. With the new strategic plan in place this must be a priority in beginning the implementation of this plan. It is also pertinent to include special taxing districts and constitutional offices such as the Clerk of Courts, Tax Collector, Property Appraiser and Sheriff's Office. The retreat should be structured to encourage open dialogue with sessions focused on aligning priorities and improving efficiencies. Select sessions should include representatives from education, healthcare, business and nonprofit sectors to promote broader alignment across the community. Workshops and breakout discussions should lead to specific with a final summary capturing shared objectives.

Why?

Regional collaboration helps align priorities, optimize resources and build consistency in pursuing funding and initiatives. Including constitutional offices and special taxing districts is essential because they play a critical role in service delivery, budgeting and public trust. Their participation ensures that strategic planning reduces duplication and strengthens coordination. In addition, using a neutral third-party facilitator would ensure discussions remain structured and focused, creating a productive environment where consensus can be built effectively.

Action Steps:

1. Organize a facilitated annual strategic planning retreat including city administrators as well as county staff leadership.
2. Facilitate a discussion regarding the top five objectives for the fiscal year that offer the most potential for coordination and optimization.
3. Produce and present a "Countywide Strategic Priorities" summary each year that aligns with the county's strategic plan to elected officials.

Examples of Success:

- Invite business, education and civic partners to expand collaboration potential.
- Launch at least one shared service project or grant application annually that originated from retreat discussions (e.g., joint public safety grant, regional transportation study).

Tactic: Develop Departmental Action Plans Aligned with the Strategic Plan

Implement, Short-Term

Each Highlands County department should develop a Strategic Action Plan that directly aligns with the county's overarching strategic goals. These plans will outline specific tactics that support countywide priorities, designate responsible staff or teams and include realistic timelines for implementation. While Highlands County benefits from capable and highly productive department heads, this strength can sometimes lead to a "heads-down" focus within individual departments. Departmental action plans help encourage cross-departmental collaboration and prevent operational silos. Plans should be practical enough to guide daily operations while remaining flexible to adapt to changing needs. Departments should present progress updates to county leadership twice a year to ensure accountability and alignment.

Why?

Departmental action plans ensure that all parts of Highlands County government are working on shared goals, focusing their efforts where they can have the greatest impact. This approach promotes consistency and measurable progress across the organization, while reinforcing collaboration among high-performing teams.

Action Steps:

1. Provide each department with a template aligning goals to the countywide strategy.
2. Require departments to submit plans with timelines, responsible staff and measurable outcomes.
3. Convene a countywide review session to discuss departmental plans, identify areas of overlap and foster cross-departmental collaboration.

Examples of Success:

- Each department submits a two-page annual strategic action plan tied to county priorities.
- Host a "Strategic Alignment Workshop" annually for presentation and peer review.

Best Practice: [McHenry Government, Illinois](#) has a dedicated webpage not only to the county's strategic plan but other department and master plans including transportation, infrastructure and food assessment. Developing a one-stop location for residents and businesses to understand the county's goals provides additional transparency and engagement. [El Paso, Colorado](#) and [Tompkins County, New York](#) also offer dedicated pages with varying forms of tracking progress.

Tactic: Introduce Customer Service Standards and Training

Implement, Short-Term

Establish formal customer service standards across all Highlands County departments to ensure consistent, high-quality interactions both with the public and among internal county teams. While departments such as Administration, Business Services and other support functions may not interact directly with the public, they play a critical role in serving internal stakeholders. These internal relationships are just as important and should be guided by the same principles of responsiveness and professionalism. All staff should complete customer service training tailored to their roles and regular feedback will be gathered from both residents and internal departments to identify areas for improvement and recognize outstanding service.

Why?

Excellent service, whether to the public or between departments, builds trust and enhances the efficiency and effectiveness of county operations. Recognizing internal departments as service providers helps foster a culture of mutual respect and accountability across the organization.

Action Steps:

1. Develop clear customer service standards, including expectations for response times, professionalism and internal collaboration.
2. Implement mandatory customer service training for all staff, tailored to both public-facing and internal service roles.
3. Launch a user-friendly feedback tool for residents and internal departments and publish quarterly satisfaction summaries.

Examples of Success:

- Post a “Commitment to Service” pledge in all county offices with a QR feedback link.
- Recognize outstanding service through an annual awards program for both public-facing and internal service excellence.

Best Practice: Customer Service Criteria Framework – King County, WA: King County developed a [comprehensive customer service framework](#) as part of its strategic governance efforts. The framework includes agency-level and executive-level criteria that define expectations for responsiveness, professionalism and collaboration across all departments. It emphasizes both external and internal service delivery, incorporates mandatory role-specific training and uses feedback tools to drive continuous improvement and recognize excellence.

Tactic: Establish an Employee Development and Capacity-Building Program

Implement, Mid-Term

Highlands County Board of County Commissioners is committed to being an employer of choice attracting, developing and retaining top talent. While the county benefits from a dedicated workforce, turnover has been a challenge in the past, impacting continuity and institutional knowledge. To address this, the county should invest in a structured employee development program that includes formal training, cross-training and mentorship opportunities. The program should focus on leadership development, technology skills, customer service and financial management, with clear pathways for professional growth and advancement. This initiative should also support long-term succession planning and help build internal capacity to meet future needs. Regularly update programs based on staff feedback and new challenges to keep learning relevant, rewarding and directly tied to the county's future success.

Why?

A highly skilled, well-supported workforce is essential to delivering consistent, high-quality services. Investing in employee development not only improves performance and morale but also strengthens the county's ability to retain talent and prepare future leaders from within.

Action Steps:

1. Launch a government employee academy offering certifications in leadership, customer service and technology.
2. Create mentorship and cross-training programs to build internal bench strength.
3. Tie professional development completion to performance reviews and advancement opportunities.

Examples of Success:

- Launch an annual "Highlands County Government Academy" with recognized certifications.
- Offer incentives for employees to earn outside certifications relevant to their roles.

Best Practice: Good Governance Open Survey - New Hanover County, NC: New Hanover County's strategic plan features key metrics related to good governance objectives. To gather ongoing feedback, the county developed a [short survey](#) to gauge performance.

Tactic: Prioritize and Redevelop the County's Website

Implement, Mid-Term

Highlands County's website serves as the first point of contact for residents, businesses and visitors seeking information and services. While the site was previously updated to meet ADA compliance standards, the redesign was largely technical in nature and did not fully address usability, content clarity or modern functionality. Comprehensive redevelopment is now recommended to improve user experience, enhance transparency and ensure the site reflects the county's commitment to accessibility, responsiveness and digital service delivery. The new website should be mobile-friendly, easy to navigate and structured around the needs of its users.

Why?

Websites are the digital front door to government. A well-designed, user-centered website provides transparency, builds public trust, improves access to services and reduces the burden on staff by making information easier to find and understand.

Action Steps:

1. Conduct a user experience audit and gather feedback from residents, businesses and staff to identify key improvements.
2. Redesign the website with a focus on intuitive navigation, mobile responsiveness and clear content organization. Suggested main menu headers include Residents, Business, Government, Services and Connect. Include photos of key employees and associated contact information.
3. Establish a content governance plan to ensure information remains accurate, timely and accessible.

Examples of Success:

- Launch a redesigned Highlands County website with improved search functionality and service-based navigation.
- Include interactive tools such as service request forms, event calendars and department directories.
- Track and publish website analytics to monitor usage and continuously improve the site.

Best Practice: Citizen-First Website Redesign – Fairfax County, VA: Fairfax County launched a major [website](#) redesign focused on accessibility, usability and citizen engagement. The project was guided by extensive public feedback, analytics and collaboration across more than 50 county agencies. The new site features a streamlined, topic-based menu structure that simplifies navigation and helps users quickly find services. It also includes a mobile-responsive design, ADA-compliant features and a customizable search engine. The county's approach earned multiple national awards and was recognized for its use of open-source technology, inclusive design and commitment to continuous improvement through user feedback and testing.

Tactic: Streamline and Digitize Key Processes

Implement, Mid-Term (and ongoing)

Continue building on VisionFirst's 2022 recommendations by expanding online services for permitting, licensing, records requests and reporting to make it easier for residents and businesses to access what they need. Focus on reducing paperwork, cutting wait times and improving convenience while making staff processes more efficient and user-friendly. As part of this effort, prioritize improvements to the county's website to ensure it is modern, easy to navigate and fully supports expanded online services.

Why?

Modernized digital services support the county's vision for smart growth, efficient governance and improved quality of life. Streamlining services aligns with the county's goals of responsive government and enhanced citizen engagement.

Action Steps:

1. Identify top citizen interactions that can be automated or moved online (e.g., permitting, licensing).
2. Invest in a secure, mobile-friendly online services portal.
3. Improve website functionality and content department by department utilizing a website taskforce and a strict timeline.

Examples of Success:

- Launch a "One-Stop Online Services Center" for 24/7 access to government services.
- Reduced average permit processing times through automation and digital submission and promote these improvements.
- Increase resident satisfaction with online services, measured through quarterly feedback surveys.

Best Practice: Richland County, South Carolina Online Business Service Center: The [Business Service Center](#) handles business licensing, local accommodations tax, and hospitality tax requirements for Richland County.

Tactic: Launch a Centralized Transparency Portal

Implement, Long-Term

Long-term, the county should develop an easy-to-navigate online platform where residents can access real-time information on budgets, expenditures, project updates and performance metrics. Focus on creating a transparent and user-friendly system that builds public trust, encourages engagement and showcases the county's commitment to accountability. Over time, expand the platform's features to include interactive tools, dashboards and other resources that make government data more accessible and understandable.

Why?

A one-stop transparency portal builds trust with residents, supports accountability and allows the public to easily monitor government operations and spending.

Action Steps:

1. Conduct an audit of existing data sources (budgets, projects, service delivery stats).
2. Procure a user-friendly digital platform or enhance the county website to house transparency tools.
3. Assign a transparency officer or cross-departmental team to maintain and update the portal monthly.

Examples of Success:

- Create a public dashboard that visually tracks capital projects, budget performance and service requests by department.
- Add a "Transparency at a Glance" widget on the homepage with quick stats updated monthly.

Consistent & Smart Growth Planning.

CONSISTENT & SMART GROWTH PLANNING

Goal: Highlands County is committed to sustainable growth through consistent implementation of business-friendly regulations, ensuring development aligns with community needs and long-term prosperity.

As Highlands County continues to grow, it must do so in a way that is intentional, equitable and aligned with long-term community goals. Smart growth planning ensures that infrastructure, land use and economic development are coordinated to support vibrant neighborhoods, protect natural resources and attract private investment. By streamlining regulations, engaging stakeholders and modernizing internal processes, the county can create a more predictable and transparent development environment. This approach not only supports housing and job creation but also strengthens the county's ability to compete regionally and deliver high-quality services. Through collaboration with municipalities, developers and industry partners, Highlands County can shape a future that is both prosperous and sustainable.

Partners: Town of Lake Placid, City of Sebring, City of Avon Park, special taxing districts, developers, local industry

Success Measures:

1. Reduction in average permitting and zoning review times.
2. Increased participation in stakeholder engagement sessions and planning workshops.
3. Number of projects supported through the Business Concierge Program.
4. Increase in infill and mixed-use development projects approved annually.
5. Number of joint infrastructure or planning initiatives with municipalities and special districts.

Tactic: Evaluate Existing Committees and Councils

Implement, Short-Term

Highlands County currently supports a wide range of advisory boards, task forces and committees, many of which focus on growth, development and community services. While citizen engagement is vital, overlapping responsibilities and outdated mandates can lead to inefficiencies and overextended staff. A structured evaluation will help ensure that each group aligns with the county's strategic goals and contributes meaningfully to its future direction.

Why?

With limited staff capacity and a strong reliance on volunteer participation, it is essential to ensure that every committee is purposeful and aligned with the county's strategic pillars. Streamlining the committee structure will reduce duplication, free up staff time and better leverage the community's intellectual capital.

Action Steps:

1. Compile a complete inventory of active committees, councils and advisory boards.
2. Evaluate each group's purpose, participation levels and relevance to the strategic plan's goals and strategies.
3. Recommend eliminating, combining or reassigning groups based on alignment and impact.

Examples of Success:

- Establish a streamlined, goal-aligned committee structure that supports the county's four strategic pillars.
- Publish updated committee roles and performance metrics to improve transparency and accountability.
- Reallocate staff time from duplicative support roles to high-impact strategic initiatives.
- Enhance volunteer engagement by focusing efforts on fewer, more impactful committees.

Tactic: Enhance the Planning & Zoning Commission for Stakeholder Engagement

Implement, Short-Term

Following the committee evaluation, Highlands County should strengthen the role of the existing Planning & Zoning Commission and Board of Adjustment by creating structured opportunities for stakeholder engagement. This effort would formalize avenues for developers, engineers, planners and community members to provide input on proposed regulation changes and identify systemic issues impacting development.

Why?

The Planning & Zoning Commission already plays a central role in shaping land use policy. By expanding its engagement with key stakeholders through advisory subcommittees or public input forums, the county can promote transparency, ensure regulations are practical and foster trust. A more collaborative process leads to more efficient development reviews and stronger community outcomes.

Action Steps:

1. Establish a standing Development Stakeholder Subcommittee under the Planning & Zoning Commission, composed of industry professionals and community representatives.
2. Schedule joint workshops with the P&Z Commission and stakeholders to review proposed code or process changes before public hearings.
3. Implement feedback mechanisms to evaluate how stakeholder input influences decisions and identify areas for process improvement.

Examples of Success:

- Streamlined permitting and site plan review processes based on feedback from developers and engineers.
- Host regular informational sessions or Q&As to educate the public and development community on regulatory processes and updates.
- Increased community participation in zoning discussions through targeted educational workshops and communication efforts.

Tactic: Develop a Business Concierge Program

Implement, Short-Term

Highlands County is home to a diverse economic base, ranging from agriculture and logistics to healthcare and small business. The county's 2050 Comprehensive Plan and Economic Development Strategy emphasize attracting new businesses, supporting existing industries and enhancing quality of life. To support these entities, the county should establish a Business Concierge Program that provides personalized assistance to new and expanding businesses – of all sizes. This program would guide businesses through regulatory processes and coordinate interactions with various county departments. This effort should be conducted in close coordination with the economic development staff, but not exclusively economic development related.

Why?

Businesses, both small and large, often face delays due to fragmented processes and unclear points of contact within government offices. A concierge approach, especially for high-impact projects, can accelerate timelines and improve the county's reputation as a place to invest.

Action Steps:

1. Assign dedicated staff within Development Services and Economic Development to guide businesses through permitting, licensing and regulatory process. Ensure they are empowered to escalate and resolve issues quickly.
2. Offer expedited permitting, fee waivers and coordinated reviews for projects that align with county priorities such as job creation, industrial investment or the development of new housing. This should be especially true for projects led by the Highlands County Economic Development (HCED).
3. Establish a county ombudsman to serve as a liaison between businesses and county departments, ensuring efficient communication and problem-solving. This role should report directly to county leadership to maintain accountability. In the future consider expanding staffing to allow for a citizen services team to directly assist residents as well as businesses.

Examples of Success:

- Partner with the Florida Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at South Florida State College to provide additional resources and training.
- Develop a robust "Start a Business in Highlands" portal to centralize information and resources for entrepreneurs.

Best Practice: Charleston County, South Carolina - Charleston County operates an [Ombudsman Office](#) dedicated to providing impartial assistance, resolving issues and ensuring fair treatment for all residents and stakeholders. The office aims to enhance transparency, accountability and trust in county services and operations.

Tactic: Streamline Permitting and Zoning Processes

Implement, Mid-Term

Highlands County's Development Services Department and Zoning Division play a central role in shaping growth through land use decisions, permitting and code enforcement. However, as the county continues to grow, it must modernize and align its permitting and zoning processes across departments and jurisdictions to reduce delays, support economic development and promote smart, sustainable growth.

This effort should include regional coordination with municipalities and neighboring counties, as well as internal alignment of planning documents such as the 2030 Comprehensive Plan and the Land Development Regulations. Where full integration isn't feasible, clear cross-referencing and communication tools should be implemented to improve clarity for developers and residents.

Why?

Efficient, transparent and predictable development processes are essential to attracting investment and ensuring that growth aligns with infrastructure capacity and community values. By streamlining these processes, Highlands County can reduce confusion, improve customer service and strengthen its competitiveness for state and federal funding.

Action Steps:

1. Establish and publish standard review and approval timelines for zoning changes, site plans and permits. Use performance metrics to track and improve turnaround times.
2. Identify and prepare key sites for expedited development, especially those aligned with economic development goals, such as industrial parks or mixed-use corridors.
3. Work with municipalities (e.g., Sebring, Avon Park, Lake Placid) and neighboring counties to align land use plans, infrastructure investments and growth boundaries.
4. After complex or delayed permitting and rezoning cases, hold structured debriefs with staff, applicants and stakeholders to identify bottlenecks and opportunities for process improvement.

Examples of Success:

- Use of EDA and FDOT planning funds to support regional planning initiatives.
- Adopt uniform application checklists and timelines across jurisdictions.
- Develop an outreach strategy to explain planning tools and benefits to residents and stakeholders.
- Host joint public workshops to gather input and promote transparency.

Tactic: Develop Plans for Targeted Growth Corridors

Implement, Long-Term

Convene a coordinated planning initiative with local municipalities and regional partners to identify and prioritize strategic growth corridors. This initiative should include structured engagement with city officials, chambers of commerce, Main Street organizations, education partners, workforce boards and industry leaders. The goal is to define specific geographic areas with high potential for economic and community development, housing and multimodal connectivity. Planning discussions should be informed by the Highlands County Transit Development Plan (2025–2034), the Florida Department of Transportation’s US 27 Mobility Analysis and relevant land use and demographic data to ensure alignment with existing transportation and infrastructure priorities. Once growth corridors are defined, the county should integrate findings into its comprehensive planning framework, targeting infrastructure investments, zoning updates and incentive programs to stimulate private-sector investment.

Why?

Focusing growth efforts along well-defined corridors ensures efficient use of public resources and provides clarity for investors and developers. This targeted approach will prioritize infill development, support mixed-use development and improve overall quality of life while ensuring growth is intentional and supported by existing and planned infrastructure.

Action Steps:

1. Convene relevant stakeholders to identify and prioritize high-potential growth corridors.
2. Develop coordinated area plans that align zoning, infrastructure and workforce strategies to support targeted development.
3. Adopt necessary policy and zoning changes to enable investment and ensure readiness for economic opportunities.
4. Develop resources that accelerate and promote development in the identified corridors.

Examples of Success:

- Identification and promotion of two to three high-impact corridors ready for commercial or mixed-use development.
- Strategic infrastructure investments (broadband, road improvements, water/sewer upgrades) that unlock new development opportunities.

Best Practice: [Indian River County](#) engages in “opportunity purchases” for advanced right of way acquisition. When a parcel comes up for sale on a corridor planned for widening, the county may either purchase the whole parcel or a portion of the parcel and sell the residual. Funds for land acquisition come from a combination of traffic impact fees, a six-cent local option gas tax and a one-cent county-wide sale tax.²

² Hillsborough County: [Corridor Planning & Preservation Best Practices](#)

Improved Infrastructure & Amenities.

IMPROVED INFRASTRUCTURE & AMENITIES

Goal: Highlands County invests in the modernization of transportation infrastructure and quality of place amenities by leveraging funding sources to build vibrant community spaces to attract new residents and visitors.

Modern infrastructure and high-quality amenities are essential to creating a livable, connected and economically competitive county. As Highlands County grows, it must invest in both the foundational systems that support daily life—such as roads, utilities and broadband—and the community spaces that enhance quality of life, including parks, trails and cultural venues. These investments not only improve resident satisfaction but also help attract new businesses, visitors and talent. By aligning infrastructure planning with community input and leveraging diverse funding sources, the county can deliver projects that are both fiscally responsible and deeply impactful. This section outlines strategies to modernize infrastructure, expand recreational opportunities and strengthen Highlands County's identity as a vibrant place.

Partners: Town of Lake Placid, City of Sebring, City of Avon Park, Florida Department of Transportation, Florida Department of Commerce, Highlands County Tourist Development Council, community organizations, private developers and residents

Success Measures:

1. Completion of a Five-Year Parks and Recreation Master Plan with prioritized projects.
2. Number of residents participating in participatory budgeting processes.
3. The amount of discretionary funding allocated to community-selected amenity projects.
4. Launch of a flagship indoor recreational facility or adaptive reuse project.
5. Growth in tourism-related revenue and visitor counts year over year.

Tactic: Implement Participatory Budgeting Practices for Amenity Development

Implement, Short-Term

Engage residents in a formal participatory budgeting process that allows them to directly help prioritize a portion of discretionary county spending. Through community meetings, online voting and facilitated workshops, residents can propose, refine and vote on projects that address local needs such as public space improvements, youth programming or neighborhood beautification. This process not only strengthens trust in local government but also helps to align spending with the priorities and values of the people.

Why?

Direct resident participation in budget decisions increases transparency, improves fairness and builds public support for county initiatives. It fosters a stronger sense of civic engagement and ensures that limited discretionary resources are allocated where they will have the greatest impact on community quality of life.

Action Steps:

1. Designate a defined portion of the discretionary budget (e.g., \$100,000 annually) for amenity-based projects proposed and selected by residents.
2. Host a series of public engagement events and workshops, both in-person and online, where residents can propose ideas and discuss feasibility with staff.
3. Create a transparent voting process using secure online platforms and paper ballots to select top projects, then publicly track progress on implementation.

Examples of Success:

- Allow residents to vote annually on how to allocate \$100,000 for priority projects.
- Begin with project categories that align with the strategic plan's tactics.
- Use online polls and outreach to maximize community involvement.

Tactic: Develop a Five-Year Parks and Recreation Master Plan

Implement, Mid-Term

Create a Five-Year Parks and Recreation Master Plan with a paramount focus on developing a multi-use, multi-generational recreational facility. This facility should serve as a central hub for year-round indoor activities such as pickleball, bowling and fitness programs, ideally through the adaptive reuse of vacant retail space. The master plan will also guide strategic investments in parks; facility upgrades and equitable access to programs across the county.

Why?

While Highlands County boasts over 100 lakes and appears rich in outdoor amenities, the reality is that most of these lakes are privately owned or have limited public access. Without lakefront property, many residents are unable to enjoy these natural resources. A structured recreation plan ensures that all residents, regardless of location or income, have access to quality recreational opportunities. It also enhances grant competitiveness and supports long-term planning for maintenance, growth and innovative facility development.

Action Steps:

1. Conduct a countywide recreation needs assessment to gather resident input and identify service gaps.
2. Prioritize the siting, funding and development of a flagship indoor recreational center.
3. Create an inventory of existing facilities and prioritize upgrades and replacements.
4. Identify underserved areas for pocket parks and future acquisitions.
5. Pursue state and federal grants, public-private partnerships and other funding mechanisms.

Examples of Success:

- Launch design and feasibility planning for a multi-use center in a vacant commercial building.
- Secure capital grant funding to renovate aging playgrounds and athletic courts.
- Utilization of entrance fees, rentals and concessions to limit budget impacts.
- Establish neighborhood-scale parks in infill locations near town centers and residential areas.

Best Practice - Macon Mall Rejuvenation Project: World's Largest Pickleball Court Facility - [Rhythm and Rally Sports and Events](#). The 150,000-square-foot pickleball facility offers climate- and is located inside the former 1.1 million square foot Macon Mall, which opened in 1975 and is now undergoing a major rejuvenation project. In addition to Rhythm and Rally, there is a new 10,000+ person outdoor amphitheater that was built and government offices are already moving into new, more customer-friendly spaces, including the Board of Elections, Planning & Zoning, the Middle Georgia Regional Commission, library branch, Mayor's Literacy Alliance and more.

Tactic: Encourage Intensified Tourism Initiatives

Implement, Mid-Term

Highlands County received unprecedented national exposure through the production of *Hometown Takeover*, which spotlighted downtown Sebring and showcased the ongoing efforts of the Community Redevelopment Agency to boost brand awareness and tourism. This moment created a surge of interest and positioned the county as a destination worth discovering. Now is the time to build on that momentum by expanding the focus beyond Sebring and highlighting the full range of experiences Highlands County offers. From the charm of downtown Lake Placid and the historic character of Avon Park to the excitement of the Sebring International Raceway and the natural beauty of its many lakes and state parks, the county is rich with diverse attractions that appeal to today's travelers. By providing continued investment, strategic marketing and local collaboration, Highlands County can connect these assets into a cohesive tourism strategy that drives sustained growth and broadens the economic impact across the entire region.

Why?

Highlands County is well-positioned to benefit from growing tourism trends and should intensify its efforts to attract visitors. The rise of the "townsizing" movement shows a strong interest in small towns that offer authentic experiences, a slower pace and unique local charm. Experiential travel is also on the rise, with most Millennials and Gen Z travelers seeking hands-on activities, local goods and connections with residents. Sustainable tourism is another key trend, with a large majority of travelers looking for eco-friendly options and businesses that support local communities. Outdoor adventure continues to grow in popularity, especially water-based activities, family-friendly experiences and dark sky tourism. By aligning with trends, Highlands County can draw more visitors and strengthen its local economy.

Action Steps:

1. Provide transportation links during peak tourism weekends such as race events to connect key destinations like downtown Sebring, Lake Placid, Avon Park and Highlands Hammock State Park. This not only spreads economic activity across the county but also increases visitor exposure to local businesses and attractions.
2. Collaborate with the Sebring International Raceway to attract and promote additional motorsports events, including a "Festival of Speed" that could feature car racing, motorbike competitions, karting and female-only race events.
3. Develop a county-wide tourism trail or passport program that guides visitors through must-see locations across Sebring, Lake Placid, Avon Park and natural attractions.
4. Launch a targeted digital marketing campaign that capitalizes on the Hometown Takeover exposure by showcasing the full range of Highlands County's destinations. Feature stories, itineraries and visuals that highlight small-town charm, outdoor adventures and sustainable tourism experiences. *(See best practice as a way to engage residents and visitors)*

Examples of Success:

- Continued county investment in experience enhancements such as wayfinding signage, lighting, outdoor seating and public art to encourage longer visitor stays and increase spending at local businesses.
- Foster programs to support tourism entrepreneurs, develop regional culinary tourism initiatives, enhance retail offerings and support experience-based businesses that connect communities and attractions.

Best Practice: [Georgia's Rural Center photo contest](#) highlights photographs that capture a moment, landscape, people, product or service that represents what rural Georgia to residents and the community. Photos can be in one of five categories: water tanks; agriculture and natural resources; communities, organizations, leadership in rural Georgia; downtown in rural Georgia; people of rural Georgia.

Tactic: Reinstate Impact Fees to Responsibly Fund Infrastructure Needs

Implement, Mid-Term

Following the Great Recession, Highlands County enacted a moratorium on impact fees to spur economic recovery and attract development. Promoted by Highlands County Economic Development (HCED), the policy was seen as a competitive advantage by reducing upfront costs for investors. However, with continued growth and a stabilized economy, the original justification has faded. Development has increased demands on transportation, public safety and parks, making it essential for new projects to contribute to the infrastructure they rely on. Reinstating a fair, defensible impact fee structure now offers a fiscally responsible way to fund critical improvements without shifting the burden to existing taxpayers.

Why?

Reinstating impact fees helps the county maintain service levels as it grows, reduce reliance on general fund dollars for infrastructure and demonstrate fiscal stewardship to residents and funding agencies. When development pays for itself, the county is better positioned to plan, build and maintain high-quality public facilities that benefit everyone.

Action Steps:

1. Finalize the impact fee study and publicly share its findings to build awareness and support.
2. Develop an implementation plan with phased-in rates, clear timelines and project priorities tied to revenue.
3. Engage stakeholders including municipalities, developers and residents through public meetings and informational materials explaining how the fees will be used and what outcomes they will support.

Examples of Success:

- Offer reduced impact fees for infill development to encourage smart growth in targeted redevelopment zones.
- Use impact fee revenues to fund road improvements near growing subdivisions, reducing traffic congestion and improving safety.
- Apply collected fees toward park upgrades in newly developed areas, ensuring recreational access keeps pace with population growth.

County Comparisons: Pasco County, FL expanded impact fees to support school capacity, fire rescue services and mobility improvements aligned with new growth corridors. Charlotte County, FL reinstated and updated its fees to fund targeted transportation upgrades and enhance public safety infrastructure.

Tactic: Establish an Annual Coordination Process to Ensure Exemption Accuracy and Maximize Revenue

Implement, Mid-Term

As Highlands County continues to evolve from its historically agricultural roots, new development will play an increasingly important role in shaping the local economy and expanding the county's tax base. To ensure that this transition supports long-term fiscal health, the county should establish an annual coordination process with the Property Appraiser's Office to review and validate property tax exemptions. This collaborative effort will help ensure exemptions remain accurate and compliant, while also identifying opportunities to capture revenue that may otherwise be lost due to outdated or ineligible exemptions.

Why?

A proactive, partnership-based approach to exemption oversight supports both transparency and fiscal responsibility. As land use shifts and development increases, exemptions that were once appropriate may no longer apply. By working together, the county and the Property Appraiser can ensure that assessments reflect current conditions—protecting public revenue while respecting the integrity of the appraisal process.

Action Steps:

1. Schedule an annual meeting between County Administration and the Property Appraiser's Office to review exemption categories and identify parcels for follow-up.
2. Develop a shared reporting framework to track exemption status, changes and outcomes.
3. Prioritize review of high-value or high-acreage parcels, especially those transitioning from agricultural to residential or commercial use.
4. Educate landowners on exemption requirements and the importance of maintaining accurate records.
5. Report findings annually to the County Commission, highlighting revenue impacts and opportunities for policy refinement.

Examples of Success:

- Identification and removal of expired exemptions on parcels no longer in active use, resulting in increased tax revenue.
- Discovery of improperly claimed homestead exemptions on non-owner-occupied properties.
- Reinvestment of recovered revenue into infrastructure, parks and public safety services.

Tactic: Integrate Smart Growth Principles

Implement, Mid-Term

Adopt smart growth principles to promote infill development, preserve natural resources and enhance the overall quality of place. By focusing on infill development, mixed-use neighborhoods and efficient infrastructure planning, the county can manage growth effectively. Utilizing a holistic perspective, Highlands County can accommodate new growth within strategically planned areas and undertake thoughtful investment into infill, placemaking and transportation. Municipalities, neighborhoods and development districts can be treated differently, depending on their unique qualities and aspirations. This layered approach optimizes the value created through investment and opens fiscally sustainable pathways to fund and finance the growth in the right place at the right time. Ultimately, enabling density is key to growing while lowering costs.

Why?

Smart growth strategies help reduce urban sprawl, lower infrastructure costs and create vibrant communities. Implementing these principles aligns with the county's comprehensive plan and supports long-term sustainability.

Action Steps:

1. Encourage infill development and redevelopment in existing urban areas.
2. Promote walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods to reduce infrastructure strain.
3. Track metrics such as permit turnaround times and satisfaction ratings to assess performance.
4. Publish an annual report to showcase progress and identify areas for improvement.
5. Ensure infrastructure planning (roads, water, sewer, broadband) is synchronized with planned growth and regulatory updates.

Examples of Success:

- Use performance metrics to reduce average permit turnaround times.
- Coordinate infrastructure upgrades with identified growth areas to support development.

Best Practice: [NewTown Macon Developers Academy](#) is an intensive six-class course designed to equip aspiring developers with the skills to undertake real estate projects in downtown Macon. With a focus on bridging the gap between available housing stock and the interests of local developers, this program provides participants with the resources, connections and knowledge needed to succeed in real estate development.

Tactic: Explore the Development of a Regional Utility Authority to Consolidate Water and Wastewater Services Countywide

Implement, Long-Term (Aspirational)

Reliable water and wastewater infrastructure are essential to public health, environmental protection and economic development. In Highlands County, utility services are currently managed independently by the municipalities of Sebring, Avon Park and Lake Placid, with no centralized system serving the unincorporated areas. This fragmented approach limits the county's ability to plan comprehensively, attract new investment and ensure equitable service delivery. While the creation of a regional utility authority would be a significant undertaking—requiring coordination, negotiation and long-term commitment—it represents a strategic opportunity to build a more resilient, efficient and future-ready utility framework. As such, it should be considered a long-term goal aligned with the county's vision for sustainable growth and regional success.

Why?

A regional utility authority would enable Highlands County to consolidate governance, standardize service delivery and coordinate infrastructure investment across all areas. It would enhance the county's ability to secure funding, respond to regulatory changes and support economic development by ensuring consistent utility access and capacity for new residential, commercial and industrial projects.

Action Steps:

1. Conduct a feasibility study to evaluate the benefits, costs and logistics of forming a regional utility authority.
2. Bring together municipal leaders and community partners to explore options and build consensus.
3. Create interlocal agreements outlining governance, responsibilities and service standards.
4. Identify funding sources and develop a phased plan, starting with small collaborative efforts.
5. Finalize legal formation, transition operations and begin unified service delivery.

Examples of Success:

- Launch of a thoughtfully planned regional utility authority that reflects local needs and priorities.
- Proactive utility infrastructure development aligned with growth and economic opportunity.
- Improved coordination and service delivery across municipal and unincorporated areas.
- Increased access to state and federal funding through unified planning and governance.

Best Practice: The [Toho Water Authority](#) in Osceola County demonstrates how regional governance can enhance service quality, reduce costs and support rapid population and economic growth.

Vibrant & Attractive Neighborhoods.

VIBRANT & ATTRACTIVE NEIGHBORHOODS

Goal: Highlands County fosters thriving neighborhoods by incentivizing new housing growth, ensuring personal safety and advocating for educational programs.

Neighborhoods are the heart of Highlands County's identity and quality of life. Whether in historic downtowns, rural lands or emerging residential areas, the county's future depends on its ability to create places where people want to live, raise families and invest in their futures. This means supporting housing growth, improving neighborhood infrastructure and fostering a sense of safety and belonging. By working collaboratively with municipalities, CRAs, developers and community organizations, Highlands County can revitalize aging areas, expand housing options and support lifelong learning. These efforts will help retain current residents, attract new ones and ensure that every neighborhood, regardless of size or location, thrive.

Partners: City of Sebring, City of Avon Park, Town of Lake Placid, Community Redevelopment Agencies (CRAs), Highlands County School Board, local developers, neighborhood associations, civic groups and nonprofit organizations.

Success Measures:

1. Number of Neighborhood Action Plans completed and implemented.
2. Increase in housing starts, including affordable and senior housing units.
3. Participation rates in early literacy volunteer programs and student reading outcomes.
4. Amount of SHIP or other housing-related funding allocated annually.
5. Number of new or improved public spaces and community amenities in targeted neighborhoods.

Tactic: Create Neighborhood Action Plans

Implement, Long-Term

Develop Neighborhood Action Plans tailored to the unique needs of Highlands County's diverse communities, including neighborhoods in Sebring, Avon Park, Lake Placid and unincorporated areas. These plans will guide targeted investments in infrastructure, housing and placemaking to revitalize aging neighborhoods, support population retention and enhance quality of life. By partnering with local CRAs and actively engaging residents through workshops, walking tours and surveys, the county can foster neighborhood pride and ensure that improvements reflect community priorities.

Why?

Well-maintained and connected neighborhoods help retain residents, attract newcomers and support community stability. By identifying specific issues at the neighborhood level, the county can direct targeted investments where they will have the greatest impact, such as improving roads and lighting, enhancing walkability or expanding housing choices.

Action Steps:

1. Select and prioritize neighborhoods for planning based on infrastructure conditions, community input and demographic trends.
2. Hold in-community public workshops, surveys and walking tours to identify local needs such as housing, lighting or beautification.
3. Develop clear recommendations for each neighborhood plan that align with the county's overall strategic and comprehensive plans.

Examples of Success:

- Design sidewalk networks, bike paths and lighting upgrades in older neighborhoods to improve safety and walkability near schools and parks.
- Identify vacant lots or blighted homes for housing infill or renovation programs to stabilize and grow the population.
- Partner with neighborhood groups on signage and public space enhancements such as community gardens that build community identity and encourage engagement.

Best Practice: [City of Tallahassee's Neighborhood First](#) is a neighborhood-led planning initiative that provides a structure for residents to engage in leadership roles and focused working groups to develop a strategic neighborhood plan that serves as a blueprint for community revitalization. Residents, organized through Community Action Teams and focused working groups (Priority Area Teams), identify neighborhood priorities, concerns, strategies and action steps, potential partners and provide leadership for implementation of these plans. The process, staffed by the City of Tallahassee Neighborhood Affairs Division, is designed to engage multiple partners to help realize the community's vision.

Tactic: Implement Policies and Initiatives that Add Housing Stock

Implement, Long-Term

Given the relatively stagnant population growth of less than 5,000 people from 2011 to 2023, Highlands County should take a proactive approach to increasing housing availability by updating land use and development policies, removing regulatory barriers and encouraging diverse housing types including rental units. These efforts can expand access to housing that meets the needs of potential residents while simultaneously serving an aging population.

Why?

Increasing the supply and variety of housing is critical to attracting and retaining residents, supporting the workforce and maintaining affordability as statewide demand continues to rise.

Action Steps:

1. Update policies related to land and housing development to reduce administrative costs, keep pace with national and regional trends and improve quantity and quality.
2. Identify areas of the county with the most community amenities including retail, recreation, arts and revise policies to allow for new housing starts to include affordable, moderate income and senior households in those areas.
3. Conduct regular updates to rental policies based on the changing market, affordability and building trends and communicate any updates to the public as part of an outreach and education effort.

Examples of Success:

- Use of Florida's State Housing Initiatives Partnership (SHIP) program funds to support down payment assistance and rehabilitation for low- and moderate-income households
- Update zoning regulations to support accessory dwelling units, duplexes and townhomes near commercial corridors and services
- Offer density bonuses or fee reductions for developments that include workforce or senior housing units

Best Practice: The [City of Fayetteville](#) developed a program for permit-ready architectural designs for residential construction. The purpose of the Fayetteville Permit Ready Building Design Program is to help residents save time and money in the permitting process. By using designs that are pre-reviewed by the City's Development Services Department, applicants can lower their overall costs and time to build a home since the permit-ready plans are provided by the city. There are approximately 30 designs to choose from, including a variety of single-family homes, townhomes, duplexes and "backyard cottages." The building types selected have been based on a market study, existing zoning requirements and feasibility of rolling out the project.

Tactic: Champion the Creation of an Early Literacy Volunteer Program

Advocate, Long-Term

To support long-term educational success and reduce dropout rates, Highlands County should establish a volunteer-based early literacy program targeting students in kindergarten through third grade. This public-private initiative would pair trained volunteers with young readers for regular one-on-one support and intervention. With more than 30 percent of the county's population aged 55 to 74, the region is well positioned to tap into a pool of experienced adults who can make a lasting impact on local students.

Why?

Children who are not reading proficiently by the end of third grade are four times more likely to drop out or fail to graduate from high school. That risk doubles for low-income black and Hispanic students. Supporting early readers with intervention increases their chances of success across all subjects in later grades and strengthens the future workforce.

Action Steps:

1. Partner with local schools, community organizations and libraries to launch a 50+ reading buddy program supported by a public-private task force
2. Develop a volunteer training curriculum focused on phonics reading strategies and age-appropriate engagement tools
3. Identify participating elementary schools based on literacy needs and track program outcomes including reading progress and volunteer retention

Examples of Success:

- Recruit retired educators, faith-based volunteers and civic groups for weekly tutoring commitments
- Seek funding through local foundations, state education grants and business sponsorships to provide books and materials

Best Practice: The [AARP Foundation's Experience Corps](#) is a volunteer program that trains people over 50 to tutor students to become better readers by the end of third grade. Not only is the program proven to improve students' reading skills, but it also builds critical social and emotional skills they need for successful learning now and later in life. Currently, the Experience Corps program operates in 18 communities across the United States. The program has supported thousands of students during a school year and studies show:

- Among 2,573 students with at least two test scores, 95.3% showed improvement on at least one key metric.
- 98% of volunteer tutors reported that Experience Corps helped them stay physically and mentally active and build digital and workforce skills.

Figure 9: Elementary 3rd Grade ELA Achievement & School Grade

	Grade 3 English Language Arts Achievement	2024 Grade
Park Elementary School	73	B
Sun 'N Lake Elementary School	71	B
Avon Elementary School	58	C
Cracker Trail Elementary School	56	B
Lake Country Elementary School	55	B
Memorial Elementary School	51	C
Fred Wild Elementary School	48	B
Lake Placid Elementary School	46	A
Woodlawn Elementary School	45	B

Tactic: Facilitate the Creation of Resources to Assist Vulnerable Populations

Facilitate, Long-Term

Collaborate with local partners to identify and address service gaps that impact the health, mobility and well-being of vulnerable residents. By focusing on underserved groups such as older adults, individuals with disabilities and those facing chronic health challenges, the county can improve access to critical services and help ensure that all residents can thrive. Coordination with healthcare providers, nonprofits and transportation agencies will be essential to expand support and maximize resources.

Why?

Reaching vulnerable populations strengthens community resilience, reduces health disparities and supports public safety. A proactive approach helps the county better plan for growing needs while improving outcomes for those most at risk.

Action Steps:

1. Partner with local organizations to develop and deploy a health survey or community assessment to determine gaps in service delivery.
2. Expand transportation options for older adults, individuals with disabilities and other vulnerable groups.
3. Partner to produce education materials for residents regarding access to available health services including chronic disease, substance abuse and mental health services.

Examples of Success:

1. Host resource fairs in key communities that offer mobile health screenings, information about health services and delivery of food pantry meal kits.
2. Establish a transportation voucher program for medical appointments or grocery trips.

THANK YOU



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