TUNICA COUNTY
MISSISSIPPI

ECONOMIC MOBILTY & OPPORTUNITY

FIVE-YEAR STRATEGIC PLAN 2025-2029

ADOPTED BY TUNICA COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS DECEMBER 2024

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VISION STATEMENT

To support economic mobility and create equitable opportunities for all residents of Tunica County by developing a skilled, adaptable, and diverse workforce that drives sustainable economic growth and prosperity. We aim to ensure a competitive edge in the regional and global economy while breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty through innovative workforce development, industry diversification, community-based initiatives, and access to quality, affordable housing. Our goal is to enhance the quality of life for all residents, enabling them to achieve upward economic mobility and long-term financial security, regardless of their starting point.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Tunica County, once known as America's poorest county, has demonstrated remarkable resilience in transforming its economy. However, significant challenges remain, with a 27.6% poverty rate, a 16.7% population decline from 2010 to 2020, and pressing housing affordability concerns. Through selection in ICMA's 2024 Economic Mobility and Opportunity Cohort, the county is positioned to address these challenges systematically.

Current State

Tunica County's economy remains heavily dependent on gaming and hospitality, with accommodation and food services contributing 45.7% of its $683 million GDP. The county faces challenges including limited industry diversification, educational attainment gaps, housing affordability issues, and persistent poverty.

Strategic Priorities
The five-year strategic plan focuses on:
- Enhancing the existing Workforce Training Center
- Developing renewable energy and data center industries
- Creating economic opportunities through certified vendor programs
- Implementing community-based food security initiatives
- Expanding and diversifying the agricultural sector
- Enhancing access to capital through innovative financial programs
- Improving housing affordability and quality
- Developing mixed-income housing solutions

Implementation Approach
The plan will be executed through partnerships with:
- Local educational institutions
- Major employers
- Community organizations
- Housing authorities and developers
- Federal partners through the Rural Partners Network and Thriving Communities Program
- Regional economic development entities

Anticipated Outcomes
By 2029, the county aims to achieve:
- Reduced poverty rates from current 27.6%
- Increased median household income from $38,402
- Improved workforce participation above 60.9%

- Enhanced educational attainment rates
- Expanded business opportunities in target sectors
- Strengthened food security
- Increased affordable housing units
- Improved housing stability rates

2. CURRENT ASSESSMENT

Understanding Tunica County's current economic and demographic landscape is crucial for developing effective strategies to enhance economic mobility and opportunity. This assessment examines key indicators including population trends, labor force participation, educational attainment, and major industries, providing a foundation for the strategic initiatives outlined in this plan.

Demographics and Labor Force
Tunica County's demographic profile from the 2020 Census reveals:
- Total Population: 9,440 (with a 16.7% decrease from 2010 to 2020).
- Labor Force: The labor force participation rate is 60.9% for the total population age 16 years and older, with female participation at 56.2%.
- Employment: Total employment in the county stands at 6,478.
- Education: Educational attainment shows:
    - High school graduate or higher (age 25+): 81.9%.
    - Bachelor's degree or higher (age 25+): 16.1%.
- Income and Poverty:
    - Median household income: $38,402 (in 2023 dollars).
    - Per capita income: $22,574 (in 2023 dollars).
    - Poverty rate: 27.6%.

Key Industries and Economic Indicators
The Gross Domestic Product of Tunica County is $683 million, with the largest contributing sector being Accommodation and Food Services at 45.7% of GDP. This dominance indicates a need for economic diversification. Top industries include:
1. Arts, entertainment, and recreation
2. Accommodation and food services
3. Retail trade
4. Educational services
5. Public administration

Tunica County's economy shows two major areas of strength:
The agricultural sector is one of the county's strongest industries. This means farming and agricultural activities play a much bigger role in the local economy compared to most other places in the country. The accommodation and food services sector reflects the county's strong gaming and hospitality presence. This sector includes seven major casino employers that together provide thousands of jobs in the area.

Top Five Major Employers
1. Gold Strike Casino Resort (973 employees)
2. Horseshoe Casino and Hotel (804 employees)
3. Tunica County School District (350 employees)
4. Hollywood Casino - Tunica (317 employees)
5. Fitzgerald's Casino - Tunica (242 employees)

Employment and Unemployment

The unemployment rate in Tunica County stands at 3.8% as of October 2024. This figure represents a significant improvement from previous years and is now comparable to state and national averages. Despite this positive trend, the county remains committed to further reducing unemployment through targeted workforce development initiatives and job creation efforts.

Educational Attainment

Educational attainment in Tunica County has improved in recent years but still lags behind state and national averages:

- High school diploma or higher: 80.5%
- Bachelor's degree or higher: 13.7%

This suggests a need for improved educational opportunities and workforce training programs.

3. GOALS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Based on Tunica County's current assessment and economic indicators, which include a 27.6% poverty rate, $38,402 median household income, and 45.7% GDP dependence on accommodation and food services, the following goals and opportunities have been identified to advance economic mobility and opportunity for all residents. These strategic priorities address our key challenges, including population decline (-16.7% from 2010-2020), educational attainment gaps, and industry concentration, while leveraging our strengths in agriculture and tourism. Each goal and opportunity has been strategically selected to transform Tunica County's economic landscape through workforce development, industry diversification, and community-based initiatives, supporting our vision of breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty and creating sustainable pathways to prosperity.

Goals
1. Increase workforce skills and employability
2. Enhance business collaboration and industry diversification
3. Foster a culture of continuous learning and innovation
4. Improve educational attainment and reduce the skills gap
5. Develop renewable energy and data center industries
6. Promote local small business participation in county projects and events
7. Reduce poverty and address food insecurity through community-based initiatives
8. Leverage and expand the agricultural sector while promoting diversification
9. Improve housing affordability and quality for workforce retention and attraction
10. Enhance residential stability through housing initiatives

Opportunities
1. Leverage existing tourism and hospitality infrastructure for transferable skills
2. Capitalize on strategic location near Memphis to attract new industries
3. Develop targeted training programs for emerging sectors
4. Enhance partnerships with educational institutions
5. Implement programs to retain and attract skilled workers
6. Capitalize on growing renewable energy sector and demand for data centers
7. Develop certified vendor program for local small businesses
8. Utilize public spaces for sustainable food sources
9. Create mixed-income housing developments near employment centers
10. Leverage federal and state housing programs for development
11. Develop workforce housing to support industry growth
12. Implement housing rehabilitation programs to improve existing stock

4. STRATEGIES AND ACTIONS

The following strategies and actions represent Tunica County's comprehensive approach to achieving economic mobility and opportunity. Each strategy includes specific actions and measurable metrics to track progress over the five-year implementation period, ensuring accountability and allowing for adjustments as needed to achieve optimal outcomes.

1. Enhance Training Programs

Strategy: Develop comprehensive workforce training initiatives aligned with industry needs.

Actions:
a) Improve the existing Workforce Training Center in partnership with local community colleges and universities.
b) Implement sector-specific training programs focusing on high-demand skills in tourism, healthcare, and technology.
c) Develop a digital literacy program to improve basic technology skills across the workforce.

Metrics:
- Number of participants in training programs
- Percentage of program graduates securing employment within 6 months
- Improvement in digital literacy rates

2. Increase Partnerships with Local Businesses

Strategy: Foster strong collaborations between businesses, educational institutions, and workforce development agencies.

Actions:
a) Create a Tunica County Workforce Advisory Board with representatives from key industries, education, and government.
b) Implement a business retention and expansion program to support existing employers.
c) Develop a mentorship program connecting experienced professionals with job seekers and students.

Metrics:
- Number of active business partnerships
- Job creation and retention rates
- Satisfaction rates of participating businesses and mentees

3. Develop Apprenticeship and Internship Programs

Strategy: Create hands-on learning opportunities to bridge the gap between education and employment.

Actions:
a) Establish apprenticeship programs in key industries, including hospitality, healthcare, and skilled trades.
b) Partner with local high schools to implement a youth apprenticeship program.
c) Create a summer internship program for college students to retain young talent.

Metrics:
- Number of apprenticeships and internships created
- Conversion rate of apprentices and interns to full-time employees
- Feedback from participating businesses and students

4. Improve Educational Attainment

Strategy: Enhance access to higher education and promote lifelong learning.

Actions:
a) Implement a county-wide scholarship program for residents pursuing higher education or vocational training.
b) Develop online and distance learning options in partnership with regional colleges and universities.
c) Create adult education programs focusing on GED preparation and basic skills development.

Metrics:
- Increase in high school graduation rates
- Growth in post-secondary enrollment and completion rates
- Number of adults participating in continuing education programs

5. Attract and Retain Skilled Workers

Strategy: Develop initiatives to address population decline and attract skilled workers to Tunica County.

Actions:
a) Implement a marketing campaign highlighting career opportunities and quality of life in Tunica County.
b) Develop a relocation assistance program for skilled workers in target industries.
c) Create a young professionals network to engage and retain young talent.

Metrics:
- Net migration rates

- Increase in working-age population
- Retention rates of young professionals

6. Develop Renewable Energy and Data Center Industries

Strategy: Position Tunica County as a hub for renewable energy and data center development.

Actions:
a) Conduct a feasibility study for renewable energy projects, focusing on solar and wind power potential.
b) Develop incentives and streamlined permitting processes for renewable energy and data center projects.
c) Create workforce training programs specifically tailored to renewable energy and data center industries.
d) Establish partnerships with renewable energy companies and data center operators to attract investment.

Metrics:
- Number of renewable energy and data center projects initiated
- Amount of investment attracted in these sectors
- Number of jobs created in renewable energy and data center industries

7. Implement a Certified Vendor Program

Strategy: Develop a program to certify and promote local small businesses for county projects and events.

Actions:
a) Establish criteria and certification process for local small businesses.
b) Create a database of certified vendors accessible to county departments and project managers.
c) Implement a policy requiring a percentage of county contracts to be awarded to certified local vendors.
d) Provide training and support to help local businesses obtain necessary certifications.

Metrics:
- Number of businesses certified in the program
- Percentage of county contracts awarded to certified local vendors
- Economic impact of the certified vendor program on local businesses

8. Promote Economic Mobility and Opportunity

Strategy: Implement initiatives to enhance economic mobility and create opportunities for all residents.

Actions:

    a) Establish a microloan program for local entrepreneurs and small businesses.

    b) Create a mentorship program connecting successful local business owners with aspiring entrepreneurs.

    c) Develop financial literacy and business management training programs for residents.

    d) Implement a "second chance" employment program for individuals with barriers to employment.

Metrics:

- Number of microloans issued and businesses started
- Participation rates in mentorship and training programs
- Improvement in income mobility metrics for program participants

9. Implement Community-Based Food Security Initiatives

    Strategy: Develop sustainable, community-driven solutions to address food insecurity and promote healthy eating habits.

    Actions:

    a) Establish community gardens in strategic locations throughout Tunica County, prioritizing food desert areas.

    b) Construct a public fishing pier at the Tunica Museum to provide residents with access to fresh fish.

    c) Plant fruit trees and edible landscaping along the proposed walking trails at the Tunica Museum.

    d) Create a seed library and gardening education program at the local library or community center.

    e) Develop a community-supported agriculture (CSA) program connecting local farmers with residents.

    Metrics:

- Number of community gardens established and participants involved
- Pounds of produce harvested from community gardens and fruit trees
- Number of residents utilizing the fishing pier
- Participation rates in gardening education programs
- Reduction in food insecurity rates among county residents

10. Strengthen and Diversify the Agricultural Sector

    Strategy: Capitalize on the strong agricultural base while promoting diversification and value-added agriculture.

    Actions:

a) Develop programs to support sustainable and innovative farming practices.
b) Establish an agricultural technology training program in partnership with local educational institutions.
c) Promote agritourism initiatives to complement the existing tourism sector.

Metrics:
- Increase in agricultural GDP contribution
- Number of new value-added agricultural businesses created
- Enrollment and completion rates in agricultural technology programs
- Growth in agritourism revenue

11. Enhance Access to Capital for Economic Mobility

Strategy: Improve access to capital for Tunica County residents and businesses to foster economic mobility and entrepreneurship.

Actions:
a) Establish partnerships with local banks and credit unions to create microloans and small business lending programs.
b) Develop a county-sponsored seed fund for high-potential local startups.
c) Implement financial literacy programs to help residents better manage and access capital.
d) Create a local angel investor network to support early-stage businesses.
e) Leverage federal programs like the Small Business Administration's (SBA) loan guarantees and Small Business Investment Company (SBIC) program.

Metrics:

- Number of new small business loans issued in the county
- Total amount of capital accessed by local businesses and entrepreneurs
- Number of participants in financial literacy programs
- Increase in local business formation rates
- Number of successful applications for federal funding programs

12. Leverage Federal Initiatives for Community Development

Strategy: Maximize benefits from federal programs like the Rural Partners Network (RPN) and Thriving Communities Program (TCP) to drive resources into Tunica County.

Actions:
a) Engage with RPN Community Liaison to navigate federal programs and resources.
b) Apply for TCP technical assistance to enhance competitiveness for federal aid.
c) Create a task force to coordinate RPN and TCP efforts.
d) Implement training for county officials on utilizing federal resources.
e) Organize regular community forums to gather input on local priorities.

    f)   Utilize SBA loan guarantees and SBIC program to increase access to capital for local businesses.

Metrics:
- Number of federal programs accessed through RPN and TCP
- Amount of federal funding secured for county projects
- Number of community members engaged in RPN and TCP initiatives
- Improvement in local capacity to navigate federal resources
- Number of infrastructure and community development projects initiated

13. Addressing Housing Issues

Strategy: Improve housing affordability, quality, and availability in Tunica County to support workforce retention and attract new residents.

Actions:
a) Conduct a comprehensive housing needs assessment to identify gaps in the current housing market.
b) Develop a mixed-income housing initiative to increase affordable housing options.
c) Implement a home repair and weatherization program for existing low-income homeowners.
d) Create incentives for developers to build workforce housing near major employment centers.
e) Expand the first-time homebuyer assistance program to promote homeownership.

Metrics:
- Number of new affordable housing units created
- Percentage of income spent on housing by county residents
- Number of homes repaired or weatherized
- Number of residents assisted through the first-time homebuyer program
- Overall housing vacancy rates

14. Create a Comprehensive Resource Portal

Strategy: Develop an online resource portal to centralize information and services for Tunica County residents, businesses, and potential investors.

Actions:
a) Design and launch a user-friendly website that serves as a one-stop resource for county services, economic development initiatives, and community programs.
b) Integrate information from the Biden-Harris Administration's Rural Partners Network, leveraging Tunica County's selection in the initial cohort.
c) Include sections for job listings, training opportunities, business resources, and community services.

d) Develop a mobile app version of the portal for increased accessibility.
e) Include information on available capital sources, including local, state, and federal funding opportunities for businesses and entrepreneurs.

Metrics:
- Number of unique visitors to the portal
- User engagement metrics (time spent, pages visited)
- Number of services accessed through the portal
- Feedback from residents and businesses on portal usefulness

5. IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE

The following timeline outlines the phased implementation of Tunica County's Economic Mobility and Opportunity initiatives over a five-year period. This strategic rollout ensures a systematic approach to program development, allowing for proper resource allocation, stakeholder engagement, and continuous evaluation of outcomes. The timeline is designed to build upon early successes while maintaining flexibility to adapt to changing needs and opportunities.

Implementation Timeline

Year 1:
- Establish Workforce Development Infrastructure
- Grand re-opening of the Workforce Training Center
- Convene the Tunica County Workforce Advisory Board
- Launch digital literacy program
- Develop and launch apprenticeship programs
- Launch Business Support Programs
- Implement business retention and expansion program
- Establish certified vendor program criteria
- Launch microloan program for entrepreneurs
- Create coordination task force for federal initiatives
- Initiate Food Security Projects
- Identify community garden locations and begin site preparation
- Design and obtain permits for Tunica Museum fishing pier
- Develop fruit tree and edible landscaping plan
- Develop Digital and Financial Infrastructure
- Design resource portal website
- Establish financial institution partnerships
- Launch financial literacy programs
- Begin Renewable Energy Initiative
- Conduct feasibility study for renewable energy projects
- Conduct housing needs assessment and develop action plan
- Apply for federal funding opportunities

Year 2:
- Expand Education and Workforce Programs
- Implement county-wide scholarship program
- Launch summer internship program
- Begin skilled worker attraction campaign

- Implement "second chance" employment program
- Advance Food Security Initiatives
- Launch community gardens with workshops
- Begin fishing pier construction
- Implement edible landscaping
- Establish seed library program
- Enhance Business Development
- Create certified vendor database
- Launch agricultural technology training
- Implement sustainable farming practices
- Create seed fund and angel investor network
- Complete Digital Infrastructure
- Launch website with RPN integration
- Launch home repair and weatherization program; develop incentives for workforce housing
- Expand first-time homebuyer assistance program
- Implement capacity-building programs

Year 3:
- Expand Existing Programs
- Launch youth apprenticeship program
- Develop online learning options
- Begin renewable energy workforce training
- Implement vendor contract policies
- Advance Food Security and Agriculture
- Complete fishing pier
- Launch CSA program
- Open food processing incubator
- Launch agritourism campaign
- Enhance Economic Mobility
- Launch relocation assistance program
- Implement entrepreneur mentorship program
- Expand community gardens
- Begin construction of new mixed-income housing developments
- Begin large-scale infrastructure projects

Years 4-5:
- Program Evaluation and Scaling
- Assess all initiatives' impact on economic mobility
- Evaluate food security and agricultural programs
- Review certified vendor program effectiveness

- Strategic Development
- Attract major renewable energy/data center project
- Develop innovative financing solutions
- Continue expanding housing initiatives based on ongoing assessments and community feedback
- Create long-term sustainability plan