

# The Case for Regional Alignment

MASTERS LEADERSHIP  
CLASS OF 2022

GULF COAST  
BUSINESS  
COUNCIL  
leadership for regional solutions.

## 2022 GULF COAST BUSINESS COUNCIL MASTERS LEADERSHIP BLUE PRINT GULF COAST INITIATIVE - YEAR 5

### INTRODUCTION

This whitepaper is the capstone of Blueprint Gulf Coast, the culmination of five years of investigation and visioning around the region's future prosperity. It has been spearheaded by a diverse, cross-sector group of coast leaders and professionals, part of the Business Council's 2022 Masters Leadership Class.

Our backgrounds include culture and museums, development and construction, engineering and planning, healthcare and social services, public policy and education, manufacturing, finance, tourism, and more.



This connectivity across sectors has always been key to the Masters Leadership Program. The collaborative vision is informed not only by the colleagues in this class, but by the findings of every Masters class that preceded us.

The solution we are proposing addresses a problem that has been identified and wrestled with for years, not only by the Masters Leadership classes, but also by all who are pushing to grow Coastal Mississippi's economies and improve its quality of life.

In 2017, the Masters Leadership Class kicked off Blueprint Gulf Coast by studying the Coast's economic pillars. They noted in their whitepaper an inefficiency owed to a lack of alignment.

*"We are spending a huge amount of time and resources on duplicative half-measures."*

The 2018 class tackled Community Development. Through data, dialogue, and case studies of other markets, the class concluded that increased coordination and the prospect of incoming Gulf Coast Restoration Fund dollars could supercharge the region.

*"Not only do we lack regional coordination, but we end up spending more to do less."*

Harrison

Jackson

In 2019, the Masters Leadership Class shined a light on the evolving economy and the changing playbook for economic development. As always, there was no silver bullet, but instead a need for a “holistic approach” that leveraged synergies across multiple sectors.

*“Coastal Mississippi can no longer solely rely on manufacturing jobs...[We must cultivate] growing industries in the Blue and Space Economy while maintaining the quality jobs we currently provide.”*

For the past two years, this class has met, traveled, researched, and strategized, reaching back for the wisdom of past classes, while incorporating recent lessons and new post-COVID paradigms. Over these many years, one common theme shines through. And it is the same spirit embodied by the Masters Leadership program itself: Regional Alignment. The power of shared investment, expertise, and strategic coordination can and does transform communities and regions. Regional Alignment is the solution, and we have a plan to implement it.

## DEFINING THE REGION

When aiming for Regional Alignment, it is first critical to define the region that is to be aligned. For those of us that live and work in Coastal Mississippi, it is easy to define the region as the three coastal counties, those with the 228-area code. But from an outsider’s perspective, the region is perhaps somewhat more ambiguous. In addition to Hancock, Harrison and Jackson counties, those with an outside perspective often view Pearl River, Stone and George counties as part of our region. When one delves into the specifics, it starts to make sense that Coastal Mississippi is a six-county region.

It is a commonly known fact that of the major employers in Hancock and Jackson Counties, a significant portion of their workforces reside in Pearl River and George counties. According to NASA, almost 1,500 employees working at the John C. Stennis Space Center reside in Pearl River County. Other data shows similar trends for employees of Chevron and Ingalls Shipbuilding residing in George County. Circumstantial evidence derived from driving on Highway 49 in Gulfport during morning and afternoon rush hour suggests that Wiggins and surrounding areas of Stone County count many of their residents as employees of various Harrison County-based employers.

This symbiotic relationship of employment base and bedroom communities naturally lends itself to the inclusion of Pearl River, Stone and George counties as part of our Coastal Mississippi region. The inclusion of these counties in our region is further supported by legislation creating the Gulf Coast Restoration Fund (GCRF), which lumps these counties into the region affected by the BP Oil Spill. So, when ensuring that our region is properly aligned, it is our recommendation that Pearl River, Stone and George Counties be included in the process.

## REGIONAL ALIGNMENT

Over the past five years, the Masters Leadership classes of the Gulf Coast Business Council (GCBC) have looked at several different models of regional collaboration. Most of the models include some form of a regional governing body with decision-making authority granted through enabling legislation. They also require representation and even fiscal commitments from all the jurisdictions in the defined region. This type of overarching regional organization and enabling legislation does not currently exist in Mississippi, and to try to establish such would likely be a very long-term endeavor, even with political support.

After five years of recommending regional collaboration, the 2022 Alumni Masters Leadership Class is taking steps now to implement a framework for regional alignment that can be executed quickly and without the necessity of direct political action. This framework for regional alignment is described and depicted below.

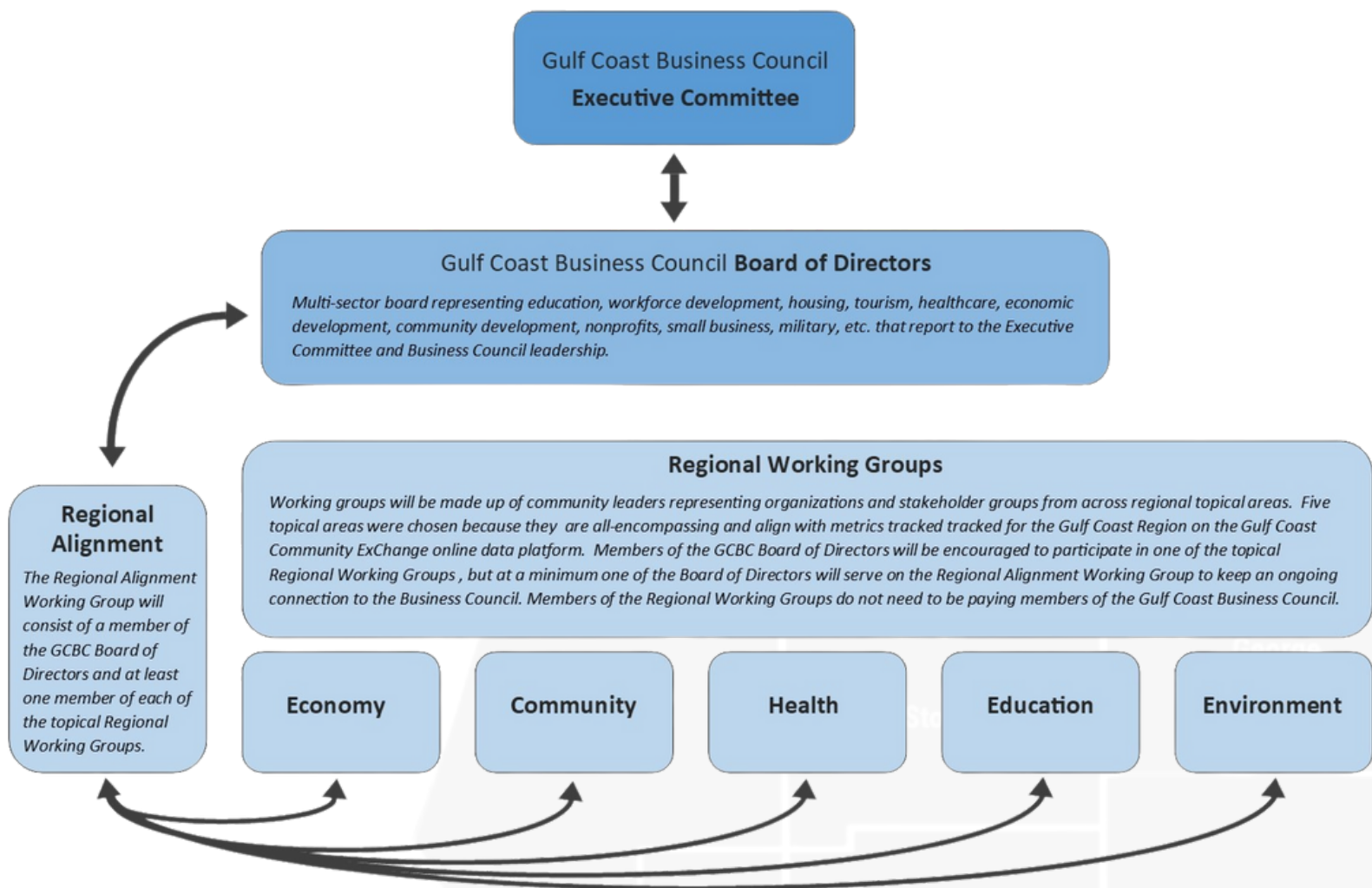


Figure 1: Regional Alignment Framework for the Mississippi Gulf Coast

The proposed framework for regional alignment does not call for the creation of a new organization but does suggest a strong connection to the GCBC. The GCBC has always had a very engaged Executive Committee but a less active Board of Directors. As the Business Council works to reinvigorate its Board of Directors, our Masters Leadership Class recommends recruiting board members from a variety of sectors with regional interests. Economic development no longer exists in a silo and supporting the growth of business and talent retention/attraction on the Mississippi Gulf Coast will take a multi-sector, regional effort.

In conjunction with this effort, the 2022 Alumni Masters Leadership Class is forming a Regional Alignment Working Group (RAWG) as shown in Figure 1. We would like to see this RAWG be recognized and supported as a working group of the GCBC. This would mean that along with several members of the Alumni Masters Leadership Class, there would always be at least one member of the GCBC Board of Directors chairing the working group in an official capacity and reporting back to the Board of Directors.

Alongside the RAWG, we envision several other working groups, also depicted in Figure 1, made up of community leaders representing existing organizations, agencies, and stakeholder groups from across regional topical areas. A representative from each of these topical working groups would also serve on the RAWG. We have selected five initial topical areas for the working groups that align with metrics tracked for the Gulf Coast region on the Gulf Coast Community ExCHANGE online data platform: Economy, Community, Health, Education, and Environment.

Data tracking, especially when tied to local data and indicators, is a high priority for our Masters Leadership Class and the GCBC. This regional alignment effort will be much stronger when goals and measurable objectives are tied with data tracking. The Gulf Coast Community ExCHANGE is an existing, region-specific data platform already established to monitor data across sectors, so it makes sense to utilize this tool as we pursue regional alignment.



Figure 2: Snapshot of Gulf Coast Community ExCHANGE



The goal of the topical Regional Working Groups will be to facilitate collaboration across regional borders and regional sectors in order to promote the Mississippi Gulf Coast Region as a cohesive entity and to help eliminate unnecessary inter-regional competition.

Topical working groups will be asked to set clear goals and objectives, meet regularly throughout the year, and report to the RAWG. The RAWG can also help coordinate cross-sector meetings throughout the year between one or more of the topical working groups if that is desired.

The RAWG is the lynchpin of this regional alignment effort. One member of the GCBC Board of Directors should continuously chair the RAWG to keep an ongoing connection to the Business Council. In addition, other members of the GCBC Board of Directors should be encouraged to participate in the topical Regional Working Groups as they are able.

Working group members should not be required to be paying members of the GCBC. Recruitment of group members should be far-reaching with an intentional effort to include representation from minority, underserved and vulnerable populations.

The RAWG, through its Chair, will report to the GCBC Board of Directors; thus, always being in good communication with the GCBC Executive Committee, leadership, and staff. The RAWG will also set and track goals and measurable objectives. In addition, the RAWG will work closely with Business Council leadership and staff to plan and coordinate an annual Regional Alignment Summit as described below. It is anticipated that the various topical working groups will also participate significantly in the Summit.

## THE CHALLENGE

In our region, there are numerous agencies and organizations that perform similar activities for their respective counties, municipalities or charters. These agencies and organizations provide outstanding services for their purview, but often directly compete for scarce resources in furtherance of their goals. Rarely, if ever, in our opinion, do any of these organizations or agencies work together with a concerted effort to further the goals of the region.

George

Not only do we compete against other regions for opportunities and resources, but often, we compete against ourselves. Through this inter-region competition, we find that the Mississippi Gulf Coast region presents mixed messaging and lack of cohesion to outsiders that could be solved by aligning our efforts across multiple industry sectors to promote the region as a whole, instead of individual municipalities, cities or communities.

Harrison

Jackson

## REGIONAL ALIGNMENT SUMMIT

The 2022 Alumni Masters Leadership Class recommends that one of the first activities of the RAWG should be to assist the GCBC in planning and hosting a Regional Alignment Summit to be held annually. While this Summit could be an extension of the Business Council's State of the Coast Economy address, it is more likely that it will be a separate event held in the fall. The overall purpose of the Regional Alignment Summit is threefold:

- To promote the benefits of enhanced regional alignment for Coastal Mississippi;
- To be a forum for information and resource-sharing between organizations and stakeholder groups already working in the region; and
- To be a venue where national leaders on regional alignment strategies can be brought in as an educational resource.

We see the Regional Alignment Summit as a way to build momentum, excitement and a common language around Coastal Mississippi's potential as a regional powerhouse in the national arena. While the details of the Summit will be worked out through collaboration between the RAWG and the GCBC leadership, we propose the following as a general vision/structure for the event:

The Summit will open with a keynote speaker who has been instrumental in implementing a thriving regional collaboration and demonstrate how effective the collaboration can be at moving the region's economy forward. An interactive general session panel will also be included to facilitate the opportunity for speakers to share their successes and challenges while also providing attendees with a format to ask questions.

Lunch will feature a notable keynote speaker to support the Regional Alignment strategy. The afternoon will lead to various breakout sessions and topical Regional Working Group meetings. Here, attendees will have the opportunity to collaborate within their prospective topical areas that align with the strategic focus areas identified by the Regional Alignment Group.

The Regional Alignment Summit will also be the annual capstone meeting for the Regional Working Groups. This is where groups will establish goals for themselves for the coming year and report progress toward the goals from previous years. The group meetings will also facilitate interaction with the public at large, where interested parties will be able to provide input for the groups to consider in furthering their goals. This also allows for the groups to be held accountable for working toward a common goal with the public interest in mind.

Harrison

Jackson

## CONCLUSION

We have reviewed whitepapers from the last five years, and each class has come to the same conclusion in one form or another: Regional Alignment is a requirement for positive growth on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Collaboration is the key to our region's success.

This proposal in no way should be construed as a recommendation to replace or usurp existing entities. Rather, we are proposing a forum for conversation, collaboration, and inclusion.

The reasoning behind the regional alignment is included in the previous class whitepapers and can be found at [www.msgcbc.org/programs](http://www.msgcbc.org/programs). Our goal is to implement a plan based on these findings, and these are our next steps:

### Developing the Regional Alignment Working Group

To solidify the RAWG, which will drive this initiative as a cross-sector collaboration so we can more effectively leverage resources for the region. This group will be committed to dedicating time and resources to bring this initiative to life.

RAWG will be comprised of active participants currently involved in advancement across the following areas: Economic Development, Community Development, Health, Education, and Environmental Stewardship. RAWG will be charged with four actions:

- bringing awareness to projects and needs in these areas,
- collaborating through their connections to bring these projects together so they may be put into action,
- presenting projects to an appropriate source for funding, and
- once funding is secured, putting that project into action.

### Launching the inaugural Regional Alignment Summit

A short-term goal of the RAWG and GCBC is to launch an inaugural Regional Alignment Summit. Here, leaders from across all six counties will be invited to share their recent successes and anticipated needs for the next year in the key focus areas as well as extend open invitations to those interested to work with the RAWG. This event will also bring to the region speakers from other areas of the U.S. who have faced similar challenges in regional alignment to lead breakout sessions. During these sessions, we can learn about their successes and failures and apply those lessons to our own challenges.

The Gulf Coast Business Council's Masters Leadership Classes have been recommending Regional Alignment for years, and each time the Gulf Coast Business Council has agreed that the concept is viable and necessary. It's time to put this plan into action, and we invite you to join us as part of this collaborative effort.

## REFERENCES

- [2019 White Paper | The Evolving Economy](#)
- [2018 White Paper | Community Development in Coastal Mississippi](#)
- [2017 White Paper | Blueprint Gulf Coast Year One - Pillars of Prosperity](#)

