

# DALTON, GEORGIA

## Believe Greater Dalton



*Market Street Services was a great fit for our community. Their ability to deliver research-based recommendations that also took into account the needs of an individual community was exactly what we needed. The result was a strategy that resonated with citizens as well as civic and business leaders immediately. We didn't have to sell the strategy to the community. It sold itself and allowed us to generate immediate momentum as we entered the implementation phase.*

Rob Bradham, President & CEO, Greater Dalton Chamber of Commerce

### **Background**

Greater Dalton is widely known as the "Carpet Capital of the World." The Northwest Georgia community was the birthplace of the tufted carpet industry, and today the region and its surroundings produce more than 85 percent of the carpets and rugs sold in the United States according to The Carpet and Rug Institute. However, as the housing market collapsed during the Great Recession, so too did demand for carpeting. Unemployment in Greater Dalton peaked at more than 13 percent in April 2009, and according to the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the Dalton metro area experienced the third-worst job loss among the nation's 381 metro areas during the recession. Even as the floor covering industry recovered in the mid-2010s, the community faced several other threats to its future prosperity, such as low educational attainment rates, steady resident out-migration to other regions, and high levels of childhood poverty. Additionally, the community was showing signs of "planning fatigue" resulting from several recent strategic processes that had gained limited traction.

Leaders in Greater Dalton understood that they needed a bold strategy to address the community's challenges. They also recognized that this strategy must be developed through an engaging, volunteer led-process and include actionable, measurable recommendations. On behalf of the community, the Greater Dalton Chamber of Commerce retained Market Street Services in 2016 to facilitate an eight-month process that resulted in a holistic community and economic development strategy. A dynamic steering committee of 23 public, private, and non-profit leaders guided the process. Early on, the committee determined that success must come through a highly focused strategy that was differentiated from past efforts and around which the community could rally. Accordingly, the group came together around a strategic framework – **Believe Greater Dalton** – consisting of six high-impact key initiatives: 1. Create an Education Partnership to Align Greater Dalton's Talent Pipeline; 2. Sustain a Best-Practice Economic Development Program; 3. Create a Scalable Physical Hub for Entrepreneurship in Downtown Dalton; 4. Pursue a Competitive and Diverse Housing Stock; 5. Establish Downtown Dalton as a "Destination District"; and 6. Launch a Campaign to Enhance Community Pride.

### *Implementation Highlights*

With the strategic plan in place, the community launched the Believe Greater Dalton initiative on January 1, 2018. In just a short amount of time, Greater Dalton has already made significant process, including early wins related to each of the six key initiatives.

- In October 2017, more than 300 people attended the Believe Greater Dalton rollout event. According to organizers, the event generated significant enthusiasm in the community and helped identify new “champions” for the strategy’s key initiatives. Believe Greater Dalton built on this early momentum in January 2018 by hiring a project manager to coordinate strategic implementation activities.
- Local stakeholders worked to bring together a range of key community partners – including two public school districts – to form the Believe Greater Dalton Education Partnership. The Partnership is utilizing a “collective impact” model to align the local talent pipeline “from cradle to career.” In August 2018 the Partnership hired its first full-time director.
- In May 2018, the Greater Dalton area secured one of its largest economic development project wins in recent years. Hanwha Q CELLS Korea, a solar module manufacturer, announced that it will create more than 500 jobs and invest \$150 million in a new manufacturing facility at a certified site at Whitfield County’s Carbondale Business Park. The win is especially significant in that it serves to diversify the region’s manufacturing base.
- The Dalton Innovation Accelerator (DIA) opened its doors in October 2018 to offer office space and counselling to local startups. The facility is located in the historic Landmark Building, a former hotel in Downtown Dalton, in office space donated by a local real estate development firm that was instrumental in its creation. DIA is also in the process of planning the second annual PitchDIA business startup contest. The first contest in 2018 received 61 entrants from Greater Dalton and other communities from Atlanta to Chattanooga, and winners received prizes valued at over \$30,000.
- Research and public input revealed that many individuals who work in Greater Dalton choose to live elsewhere because they cannot find quality housing in the community. As recommended in the strategy, Believe Greater Dalton commissioned a housing study that supported this finding and uncovered a local housing market with aging stock and limited “churn.” With this information in hand, stakeholders are seeking to “prime the pump” for new housing development. Potential options include forming a non-profit housing developer to lead initial investments.
- Downtown Dalton has seen significant progress with numerous new business openings and the dedication of the Burr Performing Arts Park in May 2018. To complement the “organic” momentum, Believe Greater Dalton engaged the University of Georgia’s Carl Vinson Institute to develop a new downtown master plan that was unveiled in February 2019.
- Believe Greater Dalton has utilized a variety of social and traditional media channels to communicate implementation progress and generate enthusiasm. Stakeholders report that these efforts – along with the entirety of the initiative – has significantly increased community pride and inspired a renewed “belief” in Greater Dalton in just a matter of months.