

Takeaways Report

Chattanooga, Tennessee • September 16–18, 2026



“You can win, or we can win.”

— Andy Wood, President & CEO, Tennessee Aquarium

Ten Takeaways from Chattanooga

From September 16–18, 79 business and civic leaders from across Acadiana visited Chattanooga. These ten takeaways highlight what we learned and how those lessons can inform work here at home.

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Collaboration Takes Practice

Chattanooga's leaders described collaboration as a practice, not a trait: listening, accepting offers of help, working through disagreement, and delivering on commitments.

Mayor Tim Kelly called it **radical collaboration**.
Sonia Stewart emphasized the relationships and trust needed to make it work.

"Collaboration is a choice — 'The Way' takes practice."

— Missy Rogers, Noble Plastics



Delegates on the bus to the Tennessee Aquarium.

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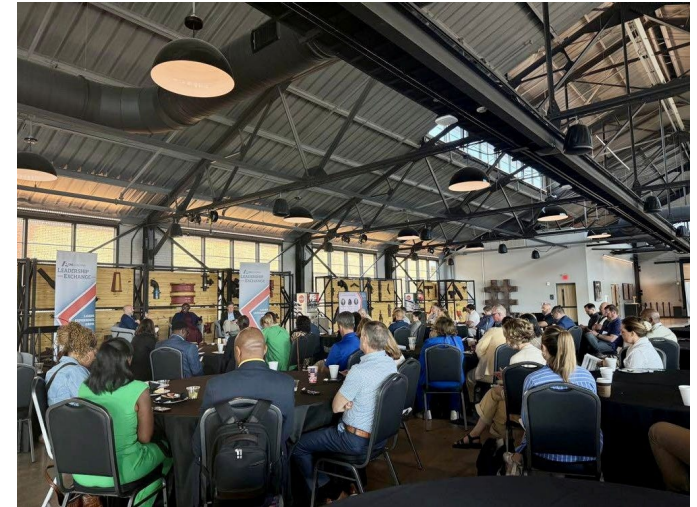
Candid conversations and follow-through can strengthen the partnerships needed to advance shared priorities in Acadiana.

Clear Roles Support Lasting Progress

River City Company focuses on downtown development, Chattanooga 2.0 coordinates education and talent work, and the Chamber leads economic development. Their **distinct roles** — each with staff and funding of its own — help sustain work through leadership changes.

“We have to make sure what we’re building is perpetual — that it outlives [any one company] being part of the council.”

— Ben Johnson, Techneaux | Lafayette Regional Technology Council



Coca-Cola Pattern Shop at Erlanger Park, Chattanooga.

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Advancing existing efforts and ideas brought home from the trip requires clear responsibilities, dedicated staff time, and sustained funding.

Downtown Investment Supports Economic Development

Chattanooga's downtown supports recruitment, tourism, local business, and civic confidence. Karen Hundt's planning lessons: connected public spaces, focused investment, and public participation.

Downtown makes up about **3.4% of Chattanooga's land area**, yet in FY2025 it generated **21% of the City's General Fund revenue** through sales and property taxes. Downtown's tax revenue also helps fund Hamilton County Schools.



Walnut Street Bridge, Chattanooga.

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Chattanooga's experience offers useful lessons for Lafayette's Downtown Redevelopment Plan, particularly the value of connected public spaces and sustained investment.

Major Investments Need Long-Term Support

Chattanooga paired major investments with long-term support. Private funding built the Tennessee Aquarium, followed by more than three decades of reinvestment and expansion.

EPB built its fiber network to strengthen the electric grid and has kept upgrading it for more than 15 years. That network now supports quantum research. CEO Janet Rehberg tied that commitment to EPB's mission: improve quality of life.



Tennessee Aquarium, Chattanooga.

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Major investments in Acadiana should have a clear public purpose and a long-term plan for operations, maintenance, and reinvestment.

Philanthropy Is More Than Grants

The Community Foundation of Greater Chattanooga uses loans, real estate, impact investing, and guarantees alongside grants to finance projects beyond the reach of conventional lending.

The Lyndhurst Foundation's sustained support helped shape downtown and riverfront revitalization through planning and public spaces.

The Benwood Foundation's early investment in talent initiatives helped attract national funders.

“Risk-taking money, first-in money... employers need a proof point before they will invest.”

— Keri Randolph, Benwood Foundation

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Involving philanthropic partners early lets them help shape an approach and decide whether it fits their mission and resources.

The Announcement Is the Beginning

Winning Volkswagen was the start of years of work: **dedicated staff support**, a close working relationship with the company, and coordination on workforce and infrastructure as needs became clear.

Preparation came first, too — public investment readied the site before Volkswagen ever visited.

“Extreme collaboration, extreme frustration, incredible results for the community.”

— Charles Wood, on “service after the sale” with Volkswagen



The panel for our “Transforming Leadership” session.

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Supporting SpaceX and other major job-creating investments after the announcement will be a continuing priority for Acadiana.

Employer Partnerships Strengthen Career Pathways

At the Construction Career Center, the Associated General Contractors connect the center to many employers for instruction, equipment, work experience, and hiring.

Shorter class blocks made it easier for students to participate within their school schedules.



Construction Career Center, Chattanooga.

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Employer partnerships and flexible scheduling offer practical lessons for LPSS's career-center planning and other career pathways across Acadiana.

Housing Policy Is Part of Growth Planning

Chattanooga's approach showed how zoning, development processes, incentives, and financing shape what gets built. The city rewrote its zoning code for the first time in decades and made its incentives scalable, sized to each project and its public benefit rather than all-or-nothing.

Councilwoman Raquetta Dotley emphasized involving residents early and keeping them informed as projects move forward.

“Success for this district looks like every neighborhood thriving the way that it wants to.”

— Councilwoman Raquetta Dotley,
City of Chattanooga

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Lafayette's housing needs assessment can help partners identify which barriers and tools deserve closer attention.

Plans Need a Path to Implementation

Chattanooga's downtown story connected a long-term vision with individual projects. River City Company's work and the discussion of the Foundries District showed the importance of identifying **what comes next**, who can carry it forward, and how it can be funded.

The Foundries District discussion illustrated how land assembly and a public anchor can support subsequent private development.



Delegates at Erlanger Park in the Foundries District.

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Lessons for Lafayette's Downtown Redevelopment Plan: connect the vision to specific projects, clarify responsibilities, and identify the resources needed to move forward.

Follow-Through Builds Confidence

Participants want to see progress on what the delegation brings home — a point made plainly at the debrief and in the surveys. Several offered their time and connections to help.

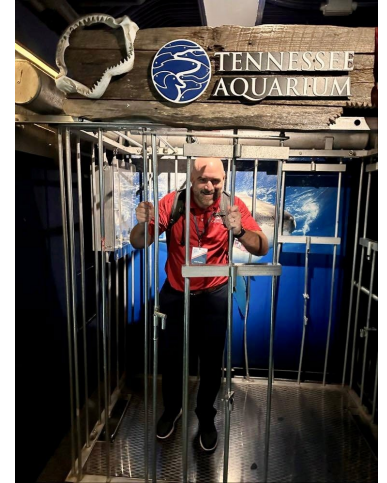
The Lafayette Regional Technology Council shows what follow-through looks like: an idea from the Grand Rapids trip that became a working council.



Delegates at the Community Connections Dinner.

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Applying these lessons to work already underway — and connecting offers of help to specific needs — can turn enthusiasm into progress.



Where the Lessons Came From

Quotations come from signed surveys, session remarks, and the closing debrief, lightly edited for clarity.

Transforming Jobs & the Economy

Charles Wood, Chattanooga Area Chamber of Commerce

Transforming Place: Chattanooga 1.0

Bruz Clark, Lyndhurst Foundation • Karen Hundt, Retired City Planner & Urban Designer • Dawn Hjelseth, River City Company

Transforming Vision into Impact

Mayor Tim Kelly and Councilwoman Raquetta Dotley, City of Chattanooga • moderated by Miles Huff

Transforming Place: The Next Chapter

Andy Stone, Perimeter Properties

Transforming Technology

Janet Rehberg, EPB

Transforming Talent

Keri Randolph, Benwood Foundation (moderator) • Jessica Friedman, Chattanooga 2.0 • Pam Gitta, Chattanooga State Community College • Glenn Perry, Hamilton County Schools • Susan Cowden, AGC East Tennessee

Idea Exchanges

Downtown & Urban Core, River City Company • Philanthropy, Community Foundation of Greater Chattanooga • Technology, The Enterprise Center • Construction Career Center tour

Transforming Leadership

Charles Frazier, CARTA • Matt Bedsole, Invest Chattanooga • Sonia Stewart, Chattanooga 2.0 • Andy Wood, Tennessee Aquarium • moderated by Geoff Millener and Miles Huff

Delegation input

Closing debrief facilitated by Ben Berthelot • 58 written evaluation and takeaways surveys

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 AQ Studios Architecture

Stuart Billeaud
 JB Mouton

Stephen Broussard
 Bayou Vermilion District

Eric Crozier
 AQ Studios Architecture

Jake Guidry
 Fidelity Bank

Will LaBar
 CGI

Carlee Alm-LaBar
 Strong Towns | William C.
 Schumacher Family
 Foundation

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 Lafayette Neighborhoods'
 Economic Development
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Craig Campbell
 ADG Engineering

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 The Acadiana Advocate

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 Pinhook Foundation

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 City of Opelousas

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Millicent Nugent
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William C. Schumacher Family
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Rachel Shields
Louisiana Economic
Development

Sam Viator
Castle Row Construction LLC

Melanie Matte
Oil Center Association

Samuel Oliver
Acadiana Center for the Arts

Janece Riser
St. Landry Economic
Development

Latweeta Smyers
Lafayette Housing Authority

Andrew Ward
Acadiana Veteran Alliance |
The Boot

Elizabeth Miller
Acadia Parish Chamber of
Commerce & Economic
Development

Destin Ortego
Opportunity Machine

Dr. Mechelle Roberthon
MKR Development

Michael D. Soileau
LFT Fiber

Jennifer Whitmore
Billeaud Companies

Paul Molbert
Ochsner Lafayette General

Ryan Pécot
Stirling Properties | Adopted
Dog Brewing

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First Horizon Bank

Jeremy Rogers
FMOL Health | Our Lady of
Lourdes

Jennifer Stelly
St. Martin Economic
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Todd Mouton
Pugh Family Foundation

Alex Prochaska
Jones Walker LLP

Troy Romero
MacLaff, Inc.

Mark Stipe
Kean Miller

Senator Brach Myers
Louisiana State Senate |
Oceans Healthcare

Jude Ramsay
Catalyst Bank

Jaci Russo, P.C.M.
brandRUSSO

Mike Tarantino
Iberia Industrial Development
Foundation

