

# Economic Development Strategic Plan – Stakeholder Engagement Summary

In late February and late March, a series of roundtable discussions and interviews were conducted as part of the engagement process for the development of the new economic development strategic plan. The meetings were arranged by staff in partnership with elected and appointed officials; leaders in key sectors as well as key economic development, workforce, education, and entrepreneurial support organizations; and County staff leadership across the organization. In total, the Resonance team heard from more than 100 stakeholders as part of this process in sessions lasting 45-75 minutes. Each session was designed to identify challenges, and highlight opportunities to strengthen Albemarle's economic future. Resonance provided the following summary from their time meeting with stakeholders.

## Stakeholder Engagement Themes

Across all sectors, a few clear themes emerged:

**Albemarle's assets are real—but underleveraged.** From UVA's research engine and Rivanna Station's federal presence to the County's food economy and quality of life, Albemarle has ingredients that most places would envy. Yet these assets are not always aligned, visible, or activated in a way that maximizes their economic potential.

**Albemarle's land use policies, zoning code, and development review process creates barriers for market needs.**

Stakeholders consistently pointed to land constraints, outdated and restrictive zoning, insufficient lab and industrial space, and slow permitting timelines as key bottlenecks. Site, building, and infrastructure gaps are a challenge to fill as a result and have resulted in lost opportunities.

**Talent is strong—but not "sticky."** The region attracts and produces high-quality talent, especially from UVA and PVCC. But mid-career recruitment, retention, and career-building pathways are limited. Rising housing costs, limited visibility into career options, and the pull of bigger metros are driving people away just when they're ready to contribute.

**The ecosystem is collaborative—but fragmented.** Albemarle is home to passionate leaders and strong support organizations. But stakeholders described a landscape of disconnected efforts, unclear points of entry, and duplicated systems. Whether in workforce development, entrepreneurship, or agribusiness, there's a need for better coordination and more inclusive access to support.

**Albemarle's identity is powerful—but still unclear.** There is no shortage of pride in the region. But stakeholders voiced confusion about the County's external image, especially its positioning as a place to do business and not just as a place for leisure. A clearer, bolder identity—one that speaks to innovation, inclusion, and impact—is needed to attract investment, talent, and policy support.

**Economic development must be bold, focused, and values-aligned.** Stakeholders are ready for the County to lead—with a strategy that picks smart bets, invests in infrastructure, and delivers measurable outcomes. But they also emphasized the importance of maintaining Albemarle's character. Growth should reflect the region's values, benefit a broad range of residents, and strengthen—not replace—what makes the County special.

## Sector Themes: Intelligence & National Security

### **The County is home to a high-clearance workforce—but retention is a growing challenge.**

Albemarle's proximity to Washington, D.C. and the presence of Rivanna Station give it access to a skilled and security-cleared workforce—an enormous advantage for defense and intelligence firms. But that talent pool is fragile. Companies struggle to retain workers due to housing affordability, limited lifestyle amenities, and the perception that the region lacks a robust tech ecosystem. Without deliberate action, this advantage could erode. A thin labor market leads to high turnover, internal poaching, and difficulty recruiting from outside the region.

### **Albemarle's innovation pipeline starts with UVA—but too many spinouts scale elsewhere.**

UVA plays a critical role in seeding the local defense and cybersecurity ecosystem. Many companies are either direct spinouts or led by UVA alumni. But when it comes time to grow, firms often leave Albemarle in search of commercial space, capital, or a deeper bench of specialized talent. Stakeholders see a major opportunity for the County to strengthen the pipeline between university research and local business expansion.

**The region's national security identity is strong—but underrecognized.** Despite major assets like Rivanna Station and a cluster of cleared employers, Albemarle is not widely seen as a national security hub. The confidential nature of the work makes storytelling difficult—but not impossible. Stakeholders stressed the need for a clearer narrative that frames defense and cyber as innovative, inclusive, and critical to the nation's future.

**Messaging matters—Albemarle needs a clear voice to grow its defense and cyber brand.** Participants were clear: you can talk about this work without breaching security. Marketing Albemarle as a national security and cyber innovation hub is both possible and necessary. Strategic messaging—especially from elected leaders—can elevate the County's profile, attract talent, and solidify its identity as a place where serious, mission-driven work happens.

**Infrastructure gaps— water, sewer, and buildable land—are holding back sector growth.** Albemarle's national security cluster faces major infrastructure bottlenecks. Water and sewer systems are limited by the jurisdictional area designated decades ago and older systems are aging out of usefulness. Growth areas are constrained. High land and construction costs make it difficult to develop the secure, specialized facilities these firms require. Developers are unlikely to take on SCIF-ready or advanced facility construction without public support or incentives.

**Rivanna Station signals public investment—but needs to be part of a broader corridor strategy.** The presence of Rivanna Station and growth opportunities provided by Rivanna Futures sends a clear signal: Albemarle is serious about the defense and intelligence sector. But the station cannot operate in a vacuum. Stakeholders want the County to build on that investment by planning an innovation corridor—an integrated approach that includes infrastructure, workforce, land use, and adjacent industry support. An innovation corridor strategy could help unlock new investment and align public and private priorities.

**There is a window to attract federal investment and defense-related activity outside of D.C.** Shifting federal priorities—particularly within the Department of Defense—are creating openings for localities like Albemarle to position themselves for long-term growth. While defense spending remains strong, federal agencies are under pressure to reduce the concentration of activity in the National Capital Region. Albemarle's mix of developable land, intellectual capital, and mission-aligned institutions gives it a credible claim to be a relocation or expansion site. The County has a chance to position Rivanna Futures as a solution to D.C. congestion—offering scale and readiness without compromising mission.

**Rivanna Futures is a rare and compelling asset—but needs strategic activation.** Unlike much of Albemarle's constrained land supply, Rivanna Futures offers scale, proximity to UVA, and a degree of insulation from neighborhood opposition. But

to fully unlock its potential, the site needs deliberate coordination across land-use planning, infrastructure investment, and sector-specific branding. Regional partners, including Greene County, see Rivanna Futures as a potential growth node for the broader region, especially in areas like life sciences, national security, and light industry. However, permitting timelines, infrastructure readiness, and the ease of doing business will ultimately determine whether momentum can be sustained.

### *Sector Themes: Biosciences, Life Sciences, and Medical Devices*

**The County's biosciences sector has early stage support but lacks the infrastructure to scale.** The region has all the ingredients for starting life sciences ventures—strong research institutions, supportive peers, and angel capital—but few resources to help companies reach scale. Charlottesville ranks high in seed capital and boasts two active angel groups, but Series A and commercialization-stage support is scarce. Startups frequently struggle to secure lab space and scale-up facilities once they leave the university setting, and many ultimately relocate to other regions. Stakeholders emphasized the need for specialized equipment access, grant-writing assistance, and clearer paths for growth-stage firms.

**Mid-level and experienced biosciences talent is the sector's biggest pain point.** Companies consistently struggle to hire experienced professionals. High cost of living, limited dual-career support, and a lack of family-friendly recruitment packages make it difficult to attract and retain mid-career talent. Some companies are promoting from within, but this is a long-term fix. Others rely heavily on consultants or expensive out-of-region recruiters to fill critical roles.

**Career pathways in biosciences need to be more visible to everyone in the community.** Stakeholders expressed concern that the talent pipeline is too dependent on UVA grads. High school students and nontraditional candidates often lack exposure to the sector or clarity on how to pursue life sciences roles. There is strong demand for technicians, fermentation specialists, and regulatory support staff—jobs that don't require PhDs but are still hard to fill. Participants called for more transparency around roles, training expectations, and long-term career trajectories.

**Albemarle has untapped potential to become a bio-manufacturing hub.** Central Virginia has land, workforce, and research depth that could support downstream biomanufacturing, but there's no unifying strategy to guide development. Stakeholders referenced the BioSTL model as a potential blueprint, and highlighted the opportunity to align land use, permitting, and infrastructure planning to accommodate future investment. Without a shared vision, the County risks missing out on this growing national demand.

**The sector's culture must shift from "quality of life" to "culture of commercialization."** While Albemarle's livability is a competitive advantage, stakeholders warned that too much emphasis on lifestyle risks undercutting the County's credibility as a place for serious innovation. Messaging should lean into the region's collaborative and high-performance potential and make a stronger case for Albemarle as a place to scale.

**Long-term momentum depends on continued public sector leadership and strategy.** There's excitement in the ecosystem, but stakeholders were clear: without sustained political support and infrastructure investment, the momentum could stall.

### *Sector Themes: Agribusiness and Food Processing*

**Albemarle's local food economy is strong—but growth is outpacing infrastructure.** Participants described a vibrant and increasingly sophisticated local food and beverage ecosystem—ranging from turkey farming to distilling, cold brew canning, and food science startups. Yet this energy is being held back by aging infrastructure and a lack of strategic public investment. Farms and processors face frequent power and internet outages, escalating energy costs, and inadequate facilities to support cold storage, co-packing, or USDA-certified processing. These gaps not only add cost and complexity but

also threaten the long-term viability of local production.

**Land access and zoning policy are outdated—and misaligned with agribusiness needs.** A recurring theme was the difficulty of securing land to grow. Food producers and processors are often left with few or no affordable options in the Development Area. Rural Area land is available and can be affordable, but zoning codes don't accommodate the technology or spatial requirements of today's agribusiness sector. The result is a competitive disadvantage—pushing businesses to expand outside the county.

**Agritourism is a major missed opportunity under current regulations.** Albemarle has a reputation for scenic farms, wineries, and breweries—but producers face real barriers when trying to convert that appeal into diversified revenue. Homestay restrictions, event venue limitations, restrictions on food service, and burdensome permitting prevent farms from offering lodging, restaurants, weddings, and other hospitality services that are common elsewhere in Virginia and create diversified income streams for businesses to manage their bottom lines.

**Workforce shortages are compounded by seasonal demand and housing barriers.** Agribusiness workforce needs shift with the season, but nearly every producer reported difficulty filling both seasonal and full-time roles. The problem isn't just availability—it's affordability. Housing costs in Albemarle far exceed what many farm businesses can afford to pay.

### *Sector Themes: Business and Financial Services*

**Albemarle's professional talent base is strong—but its potential is underutilized.** The region benefits from a wealth of professional, highly educated residents—many with experience in finance, consulting, innovation, and other knowledge-based industries. However, this talent is not always connected to local firms or civic initiatives. Many professionals live in the region but work remotely or for firms outside Albemarle. The workforce extends well beyond UVA, including seasoned experts across sectors. More local engagement opportunities, advisory roles, and entrepreneurial support could help retain and mobilize this talent for regional benefit.

**Housing affordability and lack of robust transit is a growing threat to talent retention and economic mobility.** Rising home prices, accelerated by pandemic-era in-migration, are straining the region's ability to retain early-career talent and support equitable growth. Transplants from higher-cost markets are contributing to price inflation, while young professionals and working families increasingly struggle to stay in the region. Housing costs are limiting Albemarle's ability to recruit and retain across income levels, impacting both business and civic life.

### *Sector Themes: Real Estate Development*

**The development review process is too slow—and it's costing Albemarle business.** Participants stressed that Albemarle's review, permitting and approval timelines are significantly longer than in peer communities. The current review process is overly linear, requiring multiple resubmissions and lacking mechanisms for concurrent review steps. Developers cited examples of other localities, such as Chesterfield and Fairfax, that offer consolidated comment cycles, enforced timelines, and the ability to submit building permits before final site plan approval. In contrast, Albemarle's delays can extend timelines by 18–24 months for site plan approval, with an additional 4+ months for building permits—making it harder to get financing and launch projects.

**The County's land use plans often serve as barriers rather than guides for development.** Rather than supporting forward-looking growth, Albemarle's comprehensive plan is often used to limit development—sometimes based on obscure textual

references or static land designations. Participants described frustration with reluctance to update land use maps or support rezonings due to one factor, even when proposals aligned with several other stated county goals. Key intersections like Shadwell and Crozet were cited as places with high potential that remain constrained by legacy zoning and planning frameworks that no longer reflect current market needs.

**Communication gaps—internally and externally—undermine trust and efficiency.** Developers described silos between plan reviewers from different departments and/or agencies, unclear expectations, and limited collaboration with County staff. Inconsistent messaging from different public bodies involved in reviews—such as the ARB and the Planning Commission—slows down approvals and increases uncertainty. Staff are seen as enforcing regulations rather than helping projects succeed. Participants called for a culture shift—toward planners as “advocates, not referees”—and cited Chesterfield’s multi-departmental review meetings as a model for proactive, problem-solving dialogue.

**Land use policies are increasing development costs—and pricing Albemarle out.** High land costs, limited industrial and commercial inventory, rigid permitting, and long approval timelines were identified as key drivers of Albemarle’s growing uncompetitiveness in the market by creating a high-cost, high-risk environment to do business.

### *Ecosystem Themes: Entrepreneurship and Business Support*

**Albemarle’s startup ecosystem is collaborative and values-driven—but not yet scalable.** Entrepreneurs praised the region’s culture of openness, personal connection, and peer support. The small-scale environment makes it easy to network, share resources, and build trust. But once businesses gain traction, they often run up against physical, financial, and policy constraints that limit their ability to grow in place. Light industrial and lab space is limited and expensive. Founders benefit from access to mentors, accelerators, and a strong service-provider network—but many lack clear next steps to scale.

**There is a gap between startup support and long-term business sustainability.** While early-stage programs and resources are strong, many businesses plateau after 3–5 years due to a lack of financial tools, real estate, and operational support.

**Albemarle’s capital ecosystem is vibrant—but not well-aligned with local business needs.** Two active angel groups and a pool of private investors exist in the region—but the capital is often directed outside the County. Participants called for a more place-based investment strategy that supports diverse business types and encourages local reinvestment.

**The entrepreneurial brand of Albemarle is quiet and fragmented.** Participants see the potential to lean into Albemarle’s distinctiveness—small, smart, connected, and creatively energized—and build a more visible brand for values-driven entrepreneurship.

**Policy and permitting friction undermines the ease of doing business.** Entrepreneurs consistently raised concerns about regulatory hurdles—especially for home-based and micro-businesses. While individual staff were seen as helpful, the overall process is outdated and cumbersome - particularly for solo entrepreneurs or under-resourced founders.

**Support systems are strong—but not always visible or inclusive.** Organizations offer high-quality services, but many entrepreneurs don’t know what’s available or where to start. Participants called for better coordination, more outreach, and a “no wrong door” approach to accessing resources.

### *Ecosystem Themes: Workforce Development*

**The region has a passionate workforce development ecosystem—but needs stronger alignment.**

Participants consistently pointed to the community's deep commitment to workforce development. From higher education to nonprofits, there's a shared desire to support both jobseekers and employers. Albemarle benefits from strong institutions and trusted intermediaries. However, the system can feel fragmented—many actors are working in parallel without a shared framework or unified goals. Employers aren't always sure where to go for help, and duplication of efforts can slow progress. A more intentional, sector-based strategy could connect these siloed efforts and create stronger outcomes for both workers and businesses.

**Albemarle's middle-skill talent gap is a central workforce challenge.** While the region has strong pipelines for entry-level and advanced roles, middle-wage, middle-skill jobs remain hard to find. Training and technical education programs exist—especially at PVCC—but are often underused or overlooked. Career paths in fields like HVAC, welding, and advanced manufacturing offer solid wages and opportunities for advancement, but they lack the visibility and cultural support needed to drive enrollment and growth.

**Workforce development still carries a stigma—and that limits who benefits.** Despite years of outreach, workforce development is still too often seen as remedial or as part of a social safety net, rather than as a core strategy for economic mobility. Stakeholders agreed that the County and its partners must do more to reposition workforce training as a competitive, future-ready path—not a fallback plan.

**Access—not just awareness—is a barrier.** Even when workforce programs exist, many residents can't take advantage of them. The rising cost of housing, lack of public transit, childcare challenges, and digital access gaps all emerged as structural barriers that prevent talent from participating in the local economy.