



REPORT & RECOMMENDATIONS

Funding Feasibility & Goal Assessment for



**Mobile
Chamber**

**Partners
For Growth**
Funding Economic Development

Mobile, AL
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	1
Fundamental Elements of Campaign Success	4
Key Findings	5
NCDS Recommendations	14
Exhibits.....	19
A) Prospectus	
B) Questionnaire	
C) Interview List	
D) Investment Range Table	

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction / Situational Overview

Since 1985, the Mobile Area Chamber of Commerce (Mobile Chamber) has delivered focused and strategic economic development programming through a series of multi-year initiatives, funded by public and private stakeholders through successive fundraising campaigns. NCDS has managed all of these campaigns, each of which secured increased funding over the preceding one. The Chamber's economic development efforts are implemented under the *Partners for Growth* (PFG) brand. The 2022 campaign raised over \$13 million for the *Leading Team Mobile* initiative, which will conclude in 2027. Chamber and PFG leaders began planning for the 2028-2032 plan (currently called "*Team Mobile*") earlier this year, and NCDS was again retained to conduct a feasibility analysis and goal assessment in advance of the next campaign.

From April 27 to June 16, 2026, NCDS representatives conducted **confidential interviews** with **83 people representing 60 companies**, institutions, and municipal governments. Using a carefully designed questionnaire (Exhibit B), the interviews attempted to elicit candid feedback regarding:

- Local economic conditions and Mobile's assets and impediments to economic development
- Perceptions of the Chamber and the PFG program's value and accomplishments
- Strategies, goals, and objectives of the proposed 2028-2032 *Team Mobile* plan
- Potential levels of financial support for the initiative
- Candidates for campaign leadership
- Other issues that could influence campaign outcomes

The following is a brief summary of the most pertinent findings and recommendations:

Stakeholders are Bullish on Mobile

In meetings with a broad cross-section of businesses and institutions, respondents consistently rated Mobile's economic climate as "healthy," "growing," and "on fire." Optimism for the future is rooted in the region's mix of strong industrial sectors, its competitive advantages in logistics and trade, and recent/ongoing investments in and attention to workforce and education. **Most importantly, a majority recognize that Mobile's growth and success has not been "accidental." They acknowledge that intentional and strategic efforts by the Chamber, PFG, local governments, and others deserve much of the credit for Mobile's economic performance.** They also cited a number of challenges and concerns that could hinder future

prosperity (infrastructure, schools, housing, etc.) and expressed a desire for more professional/white collar jobs.

PFG's Proposed 2028-2032 Plan is "On Target"

Interviewees widely endorsed the "Draft Overview" (Exhibit A) of the Partners for Growth proposed 2028-2032 program of work. The plan's core areas of strategic focus – New Business Attraction, Existing Business & Expansion Support, Talent & Workforce Development, Site Development & Infrastructure, and Investor Relations & Community Engagement – are viewed as **logical priorities and responsive to the community's current needs and opportunities**. As is always the case at this point in the process, more details regarding tactical and organizational implementation will be required for fundraising success (particularly for PFG's role in Site Development & Infrastructure). Many respondents also suggested a careful review of the proposed performance metrics to ensure they are sufficiently ambitious and that they accurately reflect PFG's influence and impact. We anticipate that our "program refinement" process at the campaign's outset will produce a "final" version that will be well received by current and prospective investors.

Key Leaders and Investors Want Clarity Regarding Chamber CEO Transition

Many investors and leaders – especially those closest to the Chamber's "inner circle" – were adamant in expressing an **urgent need for a leadership succession plan and that the PFG campaign should not proceed without one**. Many commended Bradley Byrne for his leadership over the past four years, especially the stability he brought to the Chamber during a time of need and uncertainty. But most assert that now is an opportune time for the Chamber to look forward and to install its next chief executive. These opinions are driven in part by the very positive impressions of David Rodgers and his "readiness" to assume the mantle of organizational and community leadership. The Chamber's navigation of this issue will directly impact the PFG campaign.

Recommended Campaign Goal: \$15.5 Million

Because of the many positive factors identified during the confidential interview process (and conveyed throughout this report), NCDS is confident in projecting yet another increase for PFG's next five-year fundraising campaign. Based on our "sample" and the indications they provided, **we believe a 15% increase over the previous campaign is appropriate and achievable.** Campaign success will depend on commitment and attention to sound processes and objectives, especially:

- Program refinement
- Prospect identification and evaluations
- Active engagement of influential volunteer leaders
- A strong and compelling "case for support" that connects the dots between PFG's efforts and objective economic impacts and data
- Personalized solicitations that resonate with each investor's interests
- Effective and efficient prospect management
- Campaign/PFG centric communications and events

As with previous campaigns, reaching and exceeding the goal will require capacity-level investments from PFG's public-sector partners (the City and County) and its other current top 25 investors. Our interviews with these investors suggest they are all **inclined to at least maintain their current investment level and will consider modest increases, conditional on the CEO succession plan mentioned above.** The campaign should target increased and new investments through "sector strategies" and by evaluating the Investor Advisory Council and other opportunities for high-value engagement.

FUNDAMENTAL ELEMENTS OF CAMPAIGN SUCCESS

The success of any fundraising campaign is largely dependent on the organization's "asking rights." The relative strength or weakness of asking rights are reflected across a handful of fundamental elements that help to predict fundraising potential and to inform campaign strategy. For economic development organizations like the Mobile Chamber/Partners for Growth these elements include:

1. **Compelling Need or Opportunity**

How important is economic and community development to those who will be asked to invest? Is there consensus about specific threats or opportunities that must be addressed for the community to grow and prosper?

2. **Perceived Organizational Competence & Capabilities**

Does the organization have a track record of success and achievement? Are its programs and staff known, understood, and viewed positively? Does it communicate with and engage effectively with supporters, partners, and allies?

3. **Effective Plan**

Is the proposed plan aligned with community needs/opportunities, and does it resonate with investors? Does it have goals and metrics that correlate with community value, impact, and return on investment? Is it "doable" based on the organization's capacity and proposed budgets?

4. **Credible & Influential Volunteer Champions**

Leaders of influence and financial means should be associated with and committed to the organization. Alternatively, there should be strong reasons to believe the organization could readily recruit leaders of appropriate stature and influence.

5. **Financial Capacity and "Giving Culture" of Constituency**

Public and private sources of support should have the financial capacity to fund the organization and be inclined to provide more than "token" investments. Top investments commensurate with the proposed campaign goal are most critical and should be readily identified.

6. **Urgency, Competition, and Other Factors**

Is there a sense of urgency to fund the organization NOW? Are there other campaigns/organizations competing for the same sources of funding? Are there local/national factors that may impact investment decisions?



KEY FINDINGS

1. Compelling Need or Opportunity

NCDS asked interviewees a series of questions whose answers indicate the perceived need for aggressive, strategic economic development efforts. This portion of the discussion covered local economic conditions; the performance of their own business or industry; Mobile's strengths and weaknesses; and familiarity with local economic development efforts and factors.

How optimistic are you about near and long-term prospects for economic growth?

	Very	Moderately	NOT Optimistic	Unsure
Total #: 48	31	10	0	7
Percentage:	65%	21%	7%	15%

What are Mobile's greatest assets/opportunities for economic growth?

Most frequent responses:

- Strategic Gulf Coast Location
- Steady employment growth in key industrial sectors
- Port of Mobile Expansion & Investment
- Higher Education Institutions
- Healthcare
- Trade, logistics, supply chain
- Quality of Place / Lifestyle

Challenges, obstacles, or impediments to economic growth?

Most frequent responses:

- Road infrastructure/funding for I-10 bridge
- Baldwin County
- Need for more white-collar/professional jobs
- Skilled workforce for key employers
- Housing
- Perception of Public K-12 Schools
- National/Global conditions & events (interest rates, tariffs, war, etc.)

Representative Comments:

"Our momentum is obvious. It's the fruit of past investments and good leadership at the City, County, and the Chamber."

"Our bank is very bullish on Mobile. All lights are green."

"Mobile's workforce training is miles ahead of where it once was."

"The sky's the limit!"

"I've never seen the local economy as good as it is now. Business is booming."

"Perceptions of the Mobile Public School System aren't good."

"Too many people are choosing to live in Baldwin County. There are a number of reasons for that, but it's bad for Mobile."

"Road and transportation infrastructure to get employees to work is an impediment."

"Training programs and institutions are helping, but we need a bigger pipeline for skilled/technical jobs."

"Mobile is in a good place, but we need more higher-paying, professional jobs."

"We've got a world-class medical school doing groundbreaking research. We should capitalize on that."

"We're becoming a regional leader in logistics and supply chains."

"In Alabama, only Huntsville is doing better."

"I'm really worried about the lack of funding for the new Mobile River Bridge and Bayway."

"The biggest challenge is economic headwinds – the Iran war, inflation, oil prices, and rising interest rates."

"Affordable housing for young families is critical to Mobile's growth."

"There is a ton of potential on the horizon, but we must get our infrastructure and public school system in order to reach that potential."

"Available housing and public education are clear challenges in Mobile."

Analysis:

For fundraising purposes, we interpret the above opinions and comments as positive indications of likely support for a robust plan that addresses community needs and opportunities. The community's economic stakeholders (as represented by our interviewees) have seen meaningful progress in recent years and are optimistic about near- and long-term opportunities for growth and prosperity. Importantly, many of them acknowledge the role and

value of the Mobile Chamber/PFG in achieving this success. Equally important, they recognize the challenges, threats, and obstacles that must be navigated for sustained economic vitality. **The need for the Chamber to continue delivering aggressive and strategic economic development initiatives is clear and undisputed.**

2. Perceived Organizational Competence and Capabilities

The portion of our interviews that focused specifically on the Chamber and Partners for Growth revealed a “mixed bag” of opinions and perceptions.

Representative Comments:

“The economic development team is second to none.”

“Bradley and David are top-notch. You couldn’t have two better leaders.”

“No other organization along the I-10 corridor performs as well as the Mobile Chamber.”

“There have been a lot of staff changes and turnover. Some of that was probably needed, but it may also signal internal problems.”

“The Chamber is doing a fine job.”

“David Rodgers is a rock star. They can’t lose him.”

“The current staff appears to be talented and hard-working.”

“David is great, and he’s done a great job developing a team that is active, responsive, and effective.”

“We consider the Chamber an important partner and voice for us.”

“Bradley’s leadership came at the right time.”

“We operate in a lot of communities, and the Chamber here stacks up favorably against those in other places.”

“Our firm clearly benefits from our investment in Partners for Growth.”

“My only criticism is that the government affairs team could be more aligned with the economic development team.”

“This isn’t new, but there is a degree of ‘chamber fatigue’ due to the number of sponsorship requests.”

“Chamber staff is solid, but the departments seem siloed and disconnected. We need better communication between the departments.”

“The Chamber could use some of its higher-profile events to highlight some of the work being done by its investors – like the Port.”

"I'm on the board, and we never seem to have serious conversations."

"It's a high-performing organization, but there are rumblings that Bradley's leadership style is creating friction both inside and outside the building."

"Bradley was the right guy at the right time, four years ago. I hate to say it, but I'm not sure that's still the case."

"It's a beloved and important Mobile institution. But we risk losing a lot of momentum and goodwill if we don't transition from Bradley to David."

"Fundraising for the next PFG campaign will be extremely difficult without a clear plan for leadership transition."

"I've heard that our federal delegation – in particular our two Senators – have said they won't support Mobile initiatives until there is a change in Chamber leadership. If that's true, it's a problem."

"It's no secret that some high-profile business leaders are threatening to pull their investment in PFG and the Chamber because of their differences with Bradley."

Analysis:

Opinions of any organization that wants to raise big money matter. Viewed from that perspective, **stakeholder opinions of the Chamber/PFG – as reflected in the comments above – should be carefully evaluated by the Executive Committee and the Board of Directors.** Additional context and analysis will also appear in subsequent sections of this report.

We understand that every opinion about the Chamber and PFG stems from a different perspective and is based on each respondent's knowledge of and interactions with the organization. Many of our interviewees are "insiders" (current and former board members, large investors, active members, etc.). Others are less active or less connected to the Chamber. Those two camps were equally complimentary of the Chamber/PFG and appreciative of its efforts on behalf of the community, and its impact on their businesses. The concerns and questions regarding executive leadership came exclusively from the "insiders" who should be in a position to see more and know more. **Based on these "insider" opinions, we strongly recommend a near-term decision and a subsequent announcement about the Chamber's plan and timeline for a leadership transition.** The consensus among interviewees is that "the time is right" and that David Rodgers is the obvious/desired choice for the Chamber's next CEO. NCDS is not in a position to dictate personnel decisions to any client. We can, however, assert that **the PFG campaign should not be launched until such a decision has been made and communicated to the Chamber's constituency.**

3. Effective Plan

Interviewees received a copy of the PFG 2028-2032 "Draft Program of Work" (Exhibit A) prior to their confidential discussion with NCDS. Most read it in advance, and many had "marked it up" for our discussion – a very encouraging sign. Those who had not read it were given time to review it during our meeting.

Representative Comments:

"Workforce development is the largest challenge in front of us, so I'm glad to see them lean in more on that."

"This is all good, but I'd really like to see more focus on attracting white-collar/professional/ and managerial jobs."

"All of these objectives are critical to our continued success."

"I'm concerned about mission creep and the Chamber trying to be all things to all people. Childcare is important, but the Chamber doesn't have the staff profile to address this need. And when the Chamber gets in front of an issue, others step back."

"I see the vision. And I like it."

"The overall plan is fantastic. It makes great strategic sense and delivers tangible results."

"Consider including a bullet, or focus area, of recruiting white-collar jobs and people to live in Mobile. Baldwin County is growing, but we find it difficult to recruit employees from there to work in North Mobile County."

"The government affairs and economic development teams should be more aligned. And if government affairs is being restricted by membership funding, maybe put them inside economic development. We can't afford to have them operating in a limited capacity."

"I like the focus on site development and infrastructure but would like to hear more about how they think they can move that needle. Where is the money for that?"

"A lot of out-of-town firms come in and do work here but have no presence and don't invest in our community. That seems like an opportunity..."

"I'm really impressed with the work the Chamber – and others – are doing in workforce training. Keep it up."

"They made a big jump in investor relations since the last campaign, but we'd welcome more opportunities to get engaged and be in the loop."

"We can't stop recruiting new companies, but there are plenty of opportunities to grow the ones already here."

"It's a solid plan, and I'll support it. I think we should get more ambitious about a headquarters or a large regional corporate office."

"The plan's priorities are on target. Details matter, but it's really a matter of trusting David and his team to execute, and they continue to earn that trust."

"It's focused, but still comprehensive and a lot of work. Does the Chamber have enough economic development staff to deliver on this? I don't believe they do."

Proposed Goals & Metrics:

"I think the metric for new primary jobs could be increased, given our current trajectory."

"A 25% fundraising increase deserves a jobs goal that is not 30% less than the current production."

"Consider distinguishing new jobs from new companies locating here vs. expansions of existing firms."

"Is there a way to measure and track 'upward mobility'?"

"These are the right areas to measure progress, but I need more context to judge the numbers."

"They seem fine, but I don't have enough information to know how ambitious they are."

"Do these objectives justify a \$16.5 million fundraising goal? I really can't say."

"For us, it's all about workforce. I'm not sure how they can measure that. I know that WE measure turnover, number of open positions, and how long it takes to fill them. Employers know if things are getting better or worse, but that's not really an objective metric."

Analysis:

NCDS has "tested" hundreds of multi-year economic plans in communities across the U.S. Because the "sausage-making" of economic development is often a mystery even to the most interested stakeholders, it is always difficult for them to evaluate and comment on the tactical details of a plan like this. **What matters most – from a fundraising perspective – is that they agree with the plan's priorities and objectives and that the plan's strategic focus will likely achieve those objectives. From that perspective, PFG's proposed 2028-2032 plan is "on target" and clearly aligned with what interviewees believe are Mobile's economic development needs and opportunities.** Even better, there is a high degree of trust and confidence in the Chamber's economic development team to execute and implement, even if much of what they do is not fully known or understood. NCDS still recommends a thoughtful **"program refinement" process at the campaign's outset to:**

- Fully validate (and explain where necessary) the plan's strategies and tactics
- Ensure that the multi-year budget (i.e., the campaign goal) will support the plan's execution
- Establish goals and metrics that:
 - Convey progress, impact, and value
 - Are realistic, yet sufficiently ambitious to merit the community's investment

- The Chamber can show direct influence on their achievement (*but for PFG...*)
- Benefit a cross section of industry sectors and business types
- Can be used to produce compelling return-on-investment solicitations
- **Produce a strong sense of buy-in and ownership among key leaders and investors**
(*"what they help write, they'll help underwrite"*)

4. Credible & Influential Volunteer Champions

For any fundraising campaign, **credible and influential volunteers are a prerequisite to success.** For the Chamber to achieve an ambitious fundraising goal, it will be essential to enlist a small cadre of the community's most influential and respected leaders who can:

- Establish the "plan" and the campaign to fund it as **vital to the community's economic growth and prosperity.**
- **Persuade stakeholders to "do their part"** to achieve shared goals and objectives.
- **Validate the plan** to be implemented as the right strategies, led by the right people, and in partnership with the right allies.
- **Serve as proxies for all investors** to ensure effective execution, fiscal responsibility, and accountability for results.
- **Assist the campaign** in identifying viable prospects, opening doors for in-person solicitations, and resolving pending pledge decisions.

With anticipated changes to the Chamber's leadership team, it will be especially important to enlist and deploy leaders who will actively engage with the campaign to:

- Promote confidence in and enthusiasm for the Chamber's future
- Support the transition by limiting distractions for staff - including time and effort spent on fundraising
- Make the case that the new team must have the resources they need to succeed

NCDS is encouraged by the number of interviewees who indicated a willingness to assist the campaign, even in a limited role. But **we must find a handful who will step up to truly lead and ensure campaign success.** Our campaign process is designed to minimize the time commitment required from volunteers and to leverage their leadership and influence for maximum impact. A list of candidates to engage as "champions" is included in the recommendations section of this report.

5. Financial Capacity and "Giving Culture" of Constituency

As proven by the success of eight previous campaigns, the Mobile business community understands the importance and impact of collectively investing in the Chamber's economic development initiatives. The "giving culture" is as strong as any community in the country. Key stakeholders and employers (with only a few notable exceptions) have always responded with capacity-level commitments, and the City and County have provided significant financial support that typically accounts for approximately 40% of the campaign goal. Smaller investors across a range of business sectors have also reliably invested at "fair and proportionate" levels. Based on interviewees' indications, **most investors are satisfied with their investments in PFG and will support the next campaign.** But their ability and willingness to increase their support each cycle is not "unlimited." The tested goal of \$16.5 million is not necessarily unachievable, but our confidence in securing a 25% increase over the previous campaign is not high. Many investors will consider a modest increase, while most are inclined to continue investing at current levels. We should also expect some decreases and "decline to invest" decisions from the ranks of over 150 current investors. **Our evaluation of a variety of factors suggests a 15% increase is appropriately ambitious, but achievable.** Reaching and exceeding a \$15.5 million goal will require perfect campaign execution and strategies that include:

- Identifying and securing 15-20 new investors
- Maintaining the percentage of the campaign total provided by the top 10 investors (54%) and the top 25 investors (66%)
- Targeting specific sectors that directly benefit from PFG's efforts for new and increased investments
- Consider increasing the minimum investment level to \$2,000/year
- Evaluate the "price of admission" for the Investor Advisory Council **AND** explore other ways to offer investors meaningful opportunities to engage in the work of PFG

Our analysis and projections for a feasible campaign goal depend on the Chamber's executive leadership transition plan being satisfactory to key investors and community influencers. Without a clear plan and a timeline for execution, many investors could reduce or even withdraw their PFG investments. As mentioned earlier, we should not launch the campaign until the transition plan and schedule are announced publicly.

6. Urgency, Competition, and Other Factors

Other than "the usual suspects," our interviews did not identify any organizations or campaigns that would "compete" with PFG for financial support or hinder this campaign. It is worth noting

that many interviewees view “other Chamber asks and programs” as competing with PFG, and that their support for these asks limits how much they can invest in PFG. Nevertheless, we do not anticipate any negative impacts from other community fundraising efforts.

The “urgency” of the PFG campaign is defined by the Chamber’s 2028-2032 economic development program of work and the expiration of current commitments in 2027.

One additional “minor” but potentially important factor should be noted. A number of investors, particularly those in the “development” arena (real estate, construction, architecture, engineering, etc.), mentioned their **frustration with “out-of-town” firms** that benefit from Mobile’s growth and the work of PFG but don’t invest in the community – including PFG. This issue merits further understanding and discussion to either facilitate more work/contracts for Mobile-based companies or to secure PFG investments from the out-of-town beneficiaries.

NCDS RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are in response to and in proportion to the aforementioned key findings. Adherence to and execution of these recommendations will create the conditions needed to reach or exceed the funding goal.

Campaign Recommendation, Goal, and Timing

NCDS recommends a five-year, public-private goal of \$15.5 million (\$3.1 million per year). Current PFG investments total \$2.7 million per year, so we are suggesting a 15% increase as “aggressive but achievable.” The tested goal of \$16.5 million **may** be achievable with perfect campaign execution, the successful acquisition of several new large investors, and minimal erosion of current investments. **Effective implementation of our recommendations and careful attention to the primary issues identified in this report will be necessary to reach and exceed the recommended goal.** Refining the multi-year strategic plan, with input from key stakeholders to clarify its strategies and tactics and validate measurable goals and objectives, will be the critical initial objective, with core fundraising activities to occur thereafter. The final (publicly announced) goal should not be set until the campaign *Case for Investment* has been developed and the campaign’s ultimate trajectory has been established by the lead investors in the “quiet phase” of the campaign.

Based on our findings during the feasibility stage, a **ten-month campaign timeline** is recommended. This is a very aggressive timeline, and it will require unwavering focus and support from all those involved—volunteers, staff, and the entire community. NCDS will design, monitor, and to a large extent, drive this timeline, providing timely feedback and adjustments as appropriate. This estimate of funding potential and campaign timeline is based on a variety of positive factors identified during the confidential interview process and our firm’s extensive experience in evaluating similar situations.

Leadership and Organization

Mobile is fortunate to have the quality and quantity of leaders necessary to orchestrate a winning campaign. Although some have indicated their desire to be part of the team rather than lead it, we believe that, if properly challenged and enlisted, the area’s most effective individuals will respond positively to a call to serve.

When NCDS asked interviewees to identify leaders who must be out front and visible to ensure that this important endeavor succeeds, more than thirty names were mentioned.