PALMETTO RESEARCH REGION

LEAD THE REGION.
SHAPE THE FUTURE.

An Advisory Group
to Elevate the I-77 Corridor
between Charlotte, NC & Columbia, SC

PALMETTO RESEARCH REGION

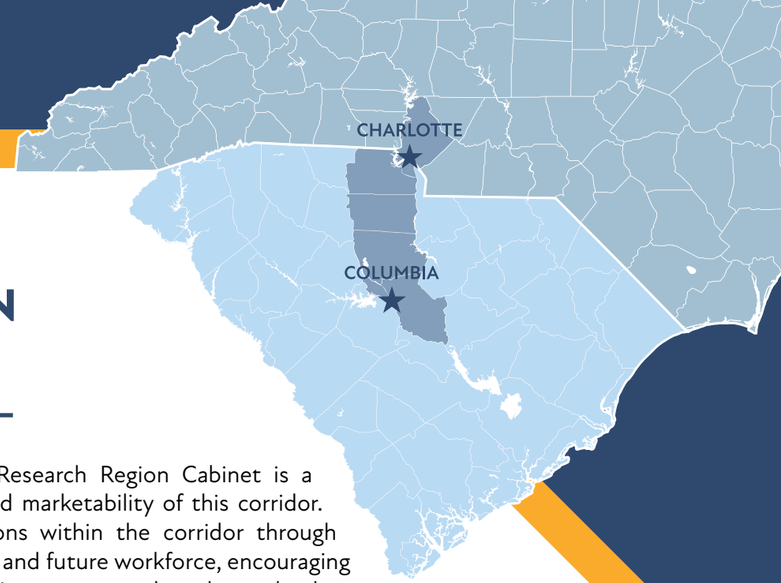
CALL TO ACTION FOR THE PALMETTO RESEARCH REGION

The I-77 Corridor between Charlotte, NC and Columbia, SC is at a crossroads. A robust marketplace in waiting can become one of two outcomes: (1) a hotbed of distribution and warehouse development, furthering a service economy as has existed for generations, or (2) a corridor of commercial and industrial activity enticing high wage employers in the fields of Advanced Manufacturing, Life Sciences, Corporate Headquarters and other related industries. As elected officials, business leaders, educational entities, and interested parties, we have a choice to make. Do we wait for the market to determine our future? Or, do we collaborate, finding opportunities to redefine this key corridor?

If left to the general marketplace, the SC Department of Employment and Workforce forecasts in its 10-year employment projections (2022-2032) that Transportation and Material Moving Occupations are anticipated to have the highest increase in the number of jobs compared to all other sectors including healthcare, education, and protective services.[1] With an average median pay of $42,770 for delivery truck drivers[2], the people of South Carolina and the I-77 corridor will continue to struggle with basic expenses including housing, health, and food. Additional pressure will be added to non-profits and governmental entities to fill in the gaps to support their people.

If intentional and deliberate leadership is exercised, the continued successes of the Palmetto Research Region can be a precursor to higher wages, a more robust and fair tax base, and ultimately, greater development as a magnet for additional community investment. Recent successes in the healthcare field include The Pearl in Charlotte, a $1.5 billion innovation district including Wake Forest's School of Medicine, and USC's School of Medicine, a $300 million education and research facility in the heart of Columbia. Along with Scout Motors $2 billion investment in Blythewood, SC and financial powerhouses in Uptown Charlotte (Bank of America, Wells Fargo, and Truist) and Fort Mill, SC (LPL Financial), the I-77 corridor has a proven track record for recruiting and retaining long-term, high-value employers and businesses. Our continued ability to be an economic engine in the southeast is contingent upon our ability to leverage this momentum away from lower-value industries and towards future facing, innovative industries.

[1] https://dew.sc.gov/labor-market-information-blog/2024-08/long-term-employment-projections-2022-2032
[2] https://www.bls.gov/ooh/transportation-and-material-moving/



THE PALMETTO RESEARCH REGION CABINET

The establishment of the Palmetto Research Region Cabinet is a concrete step in raising the profile and marketability of this corridor. This group exists to raise expectations within the corridor through encouraging investment in our existing and future workforce, encouraging increased additional investment in utility systems and roadways, land use planning (conservation opportunities, zoning and design guidelines) and a value-based incentive structure for sought after development. The purpose of this body is not to enter into the field of economic development as the Charlotte Regional Business Alliance, SC Department of Commerce, I-77 Alliance and economic development offices located in each political subdivision that presently exist throughout the Corridor; rather, it is to issue an ongoing call to seek the highest and best use for the long-term benefit of the people living and moving into this region.

In this regard, the composition of the Palmetto Research Region Cabinet is a diverse and impactful group of individuals who offer a wealth of talent, knowledge and experience in various aspects of this field. Their role is to consult and advise relevant stakeholders in long-term decision making based on a prioritization of values, not just numbers. The form and fashion of the Palmetto Research Region Cabinet may change over the course of time, but its mission of a collaborative approach to influencing macroeconomic trends to enhance the quality of development in the corridor between Charlotte, NC and Columbia, SC is paramount.

CABINET MEMBERS

Co-Chair: Derick Close, CEO, Springs Creative

Co-Chair: Gary Simrill, Former SC House Majority Leader

Secretary: Mayor John Gettys, City of Rock Hill

Member: Dr. James Chappell, President & CEO, SCBio

Member: Tracy Dodson, COO, Charlotte Regional Business Alliance

Member: Ken Haynes, Enterprise EVP & President Greater Charlotte Region Atrium Health

Member: Sara Hazzard, President & CEO, SC Manufacturers and Commerce

Member: Dr. Stacey Moore, President, York Technical College

Member: Thomas Rhodes III, Partner, Rhodes Companies

Member: Senator Tim Scott, US Senate

Member: Dr. Edward Serna, President, Winthrop University

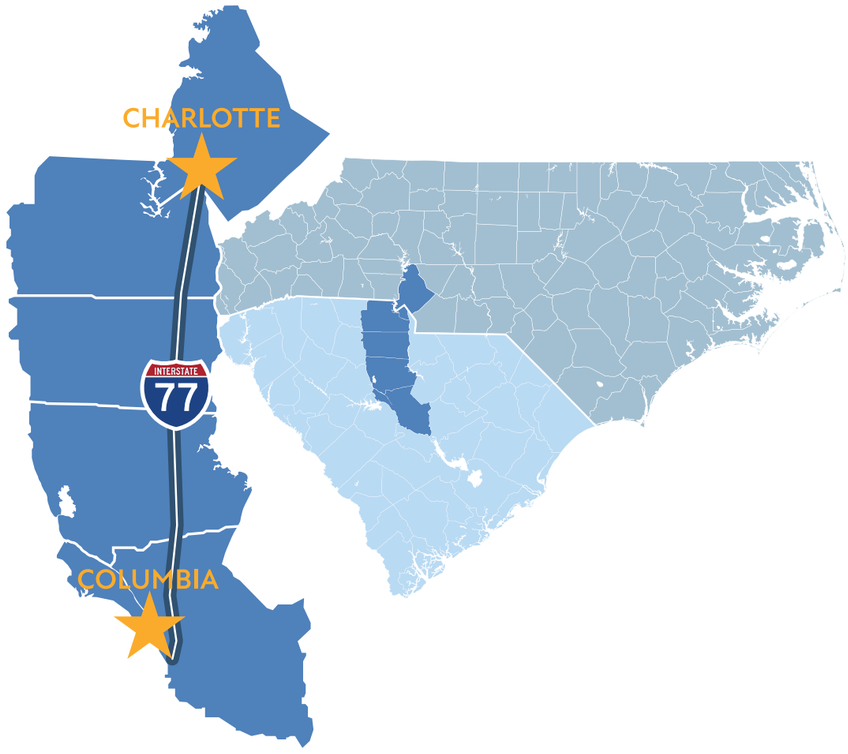
Member: Dr. Pamela Wilks, President, Clinton College

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

UNLOCKING GROWTH:

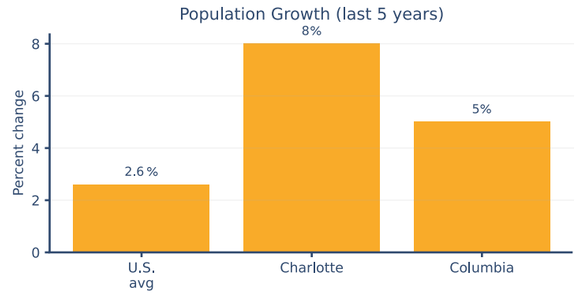
The Charlotte-Columbia I-77 Corridor is the South Carolina Strategic Engine for Economic Development

The I-77 corridor anchored between Charlotte, North Carolina, and Columbia, South Carolina is a critical connection for economic development in the Southeastern United States. With a unique blend of infrastructure, workforce, industry momentum, and cost advantages, the Palmetto Research Region is rapidly becoming a hub for advanced manufacturing, life sciences, research, and innovation. This white paper outlines the strategic assets that position the Charlotte-Columbia I-77 corridor as the compelling choice for future business growth and investment.

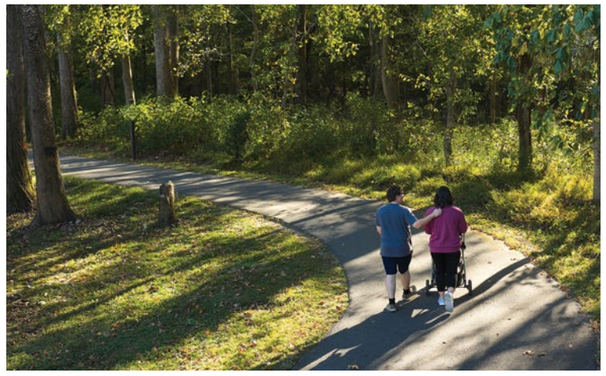


POPULATION BOOM:

The Charlotte-Columbia I-77 Corridor is uniquely positioned, connecting two fast growing states in the Southeast, North and South Carolina. Over the last five years, the United States has averaged a population growth of 2.6%. In the same time frame, Charlotte has grown over 8% and Columbia has grown almost 5%.[3] The population boom in the region is due to several factors including most notably a lower cost of living and high quality of life assets. Governments, businesses, and non-governmental entities in this region are at a unique moment to seize the opportunities that growth provides to enhance the economic prosperity of local communities.



A lower cost of living is often cited as the most important factor for the migration of people.[4] Although specific cities in the Palmetto Research Region have varied cost of living indexes, most are lower than the national average including Columbia (14% below national average), Rock Hill (8% below the national average), and Fort Mill (8% below the national average).[5] Whether in the context of commercial or residential costs, savings in common expenses like transportation, shelter, etc. are beneficial along this corridor.



Riverwalk, Rock Hill

Although more anecdotal, quality of life in the region has benefited from the post-COVID economy. Located along I-77 which provides a direct north-south route, there are convenient connections to I-20, I-26, I-40, and I-95 allowing for easy and direct access to metropolitan hubs, beaches, and mountains. Publicly owned assets throughout the corridor provide heightened outdoor amenities with access to seven significant lakes and a number of rivers including Lake Wylie, Lake Wateree, and the Broad River; greenways and trails including Great Falls Whitewater Park, Anne Springs Close Greenway, and Riverwalk; cultural hubs including the Center for the Arts, Catawba Indian Nation, Columbia Museum of Art, and Blumenthal Performing Arts Center. With lower commute times and a plethora of activities including the Charlotte Convention Center, National Whitewater Center, Colonial Life Arena, and the Spectrum Center, there is something for everyone. The Palmetto Research Region is regularly commended with awards including US News and World Report's Best Place to Live in the US (Charlotte – 2025), Fortune Magazine's 50 Best Places for Families (Rock Hill - 2024), Money Magazine's Most Affordable Places to Live in the US (Columbia – 2023).

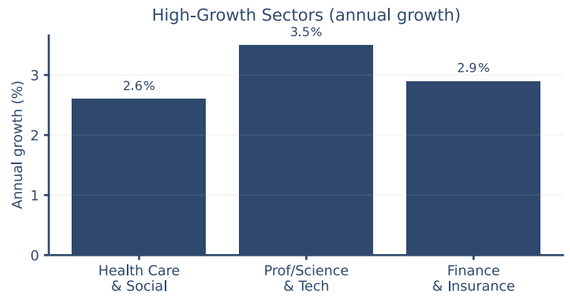
[3] (CoStar, 2025)
[4] https://www.kiplinger.com/retirement/happy-retirement/the-places-people-are-leaving-in-droves
[5] https://www.erieri.com/cost-of-living/united-states/south-carolina/rock-hill

MANUFACTURING RESURGENCE:

The Palmetto Research Region's growing population is greatly served by strategic transportation and logistics infrastructure. In addition to the vast interstate access, the corridor is bookended by two airports – Columbia Metropolitan Airport (CAE) and Charlotte Douglas International Airport (CLT), the sixth busiest airport in the world with almost 59 million travelers annually to 188 non-stop destinations worldwide. Norfolk Southern and CSX railroads crisscross the entire corridor, enabling multimodal transport throughout the southeast. For international freight needs, the Port of Charleston is the nation's fourth-busiest container terminal - a mere two hours from the corridor.

Not only is the Palmetto Research Region consistently growing in population counts, the labor pool is one of the most vast and skilled. Within the corridor, there are almost 2 million people with a labor force participation rate of 69%.[6] Almost 47% of the population in the Palmetto Research Region have a bachelor's or postgraduate degree. Much of this success is due to the robust higher education system in both North and South Carolina. This trajectory is projected to continue with over 5,000 annual graduates from Carnegie R1 institutions including the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and the University of South Carolina. There are dozens of other institutions of higher education, both public and private, that stand ready to support research and innovation. Further, a robust community college presence in the corridor including Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte, York Technical College in Rock Hill, and Midlands Technical College in Columbia. Offering a variety of apprenticeships, certificate, and associate degree programs, as well as customized workforce needs are available to employers at no-cost through partnerships with readySC. The Palmetto Research Region's focus on education is not just at the highest levels, but also with K-12 providers. In the heart of the corridor is Fort Mill School District, the top-rated public-school system in the state of SC.

The private sector has taken note of the strengths of the corridor due to its strategic location and robust talent. 83,887 jobs have been added in the Palmetto Research Region in the last five years with specific high growth areas in Health Care and Social Assistance (2.6% annual growth), Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services (3.5% annual growth), and Finance and Insurance (2.9% annual growth).[7] This is bolstered by additional announcements including Scout Motors ($2 billion EV manufacturing facility in Richland County, creating 4,000 jobs), E. & J. Gallo ($1 billion beverage manufacturer in Chester County, creating 1,000 jobs), and Siemens Energy in Mecklenburg County ($150 million investment to produce large transformers, creating 475 jobs). In addition to core manufacturing growth, the Palmetto Research Region is becoming a hub for life science and healthcare. This future-focused corridor is bookended by two large scale educational institutions - Wake Forest's new medical school, the Pearl, in Uptown Charlotte, and USC's School of Medicine on Bull Street.



[6] JobsEQ®, Chmura Economics & Analytics (2025) *Economic Overview I-77 Corridor*
[7] JobsEQ®, *Economic Overview I-77 Corridor*

BURGEONING DEVELOPMENT:

The Palmetto Research Region is well-positioned and welcomes continued growth and development in this crucial corridor. With collaborative, regional planning, it is poised to continue growing with a variety of specific sites to meet industry needs. This includes industrial megasites like the 1,500 acre site north of Columbia, smaller sites, like the 245-acre Palmetto Research Park, and a variety of for sale/lease options in business parks throughout the corridor. With an intentional focus on proactive planning, utility providers in the corridor have invested billions in ensuring the water, sewer, electric, and gas capacities are prepared to welcome industry. This includes $455 million in capital improvements related to Charlotte Water, Rock Hill's wastewater treatment plant upgrade from 20 to 30 million gallons a day and Columbia, SC's McBaine Water Treatment Plant Upgrade from 24 to 32 million gallons a day.



Conceptual rendering of Palmetto Research Park, Rock Hill



With the perfect alignment of sites, infrastructure, talent, and growth, the Palmetto Research Region is primed to build a shared legacy of prosperity with industry partners. In order to create this shared legacy, there must be an intentional focus alongside high-value, long-term industry partners.

The Palmetto Research Region, centered along the I-77 corridor between Charlotte, NC and Columbia, SC offers a rare convergence of logistical strength, industrial readiness, skilled labor, and coordinated regional planning. For companies seeking a high-performance location for advanced manufacturing, research/development or innovation-driven industries, this corridor provides a clear pathway for growth.

THE PALMETTO RESEARCH REGION CABINET



Derick Close
CEO, Springs Creative

Derick Close serves as the Chairman of Springs Digital and Springs Creative, Springsteen Capital, Springsteen Properties, and serves on the board of the Springs Companies, Workhorse Holdings, and the Carolina Creative Products Group. Close serves on the Executive Committee of the Charlotte Regional Business Alliance (CRBA), the Palmetto Business Forum, the SC Chamber of Commerce, the Charlotte YMCA, The Kappa Alpha Order, and the South Carolina Manufacturers & Commerce, (SCMC). He is member of the NC Executive Leadership Group and the Charlotte Sports Foundation. Close currently serves on the Board of Trustees for NC State University, and served on the UNC System Board of Governors. Close is a member of YPO Gold and CEO. He was a former partner in the Carolina Panthers and of the Winston-Salem Dash. He was formerly the Chairman of the Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority (CRVA). Close earned his BS in Textile Management from NC State University and his MBA from the UNC's Kenan Flagler Business School and recently graduated from Harvard's CEO Executive Management Program.



Gary Simrill
Former SC House
Majority Leader

Gary Simrill, a Rock Hill native and Winthrop University graduate, devoted three decades to public service in the South Carolina House of Representatives, ultimately serving as Chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee and previously as Majority Leader. His leadership shaped major fiscal and infrastructure policy, including tuition mitigation efforts and significant capital investments for South Carolina's public colleges and universities, and his contributions have been recognized with honorary doctorates from Winthrop University, the College of Charleston, The Citadel, and the Medical University of South Carolina. Simrill authored the landmark 2017 Infrastructure and Economic Development Reform Act, which has generated more than $1 billion in statewide improvements, and his service has earned some of the state's highest honors, including the Order of the Palmetto and the South Carolina Chamber's Public Servant of the Year award. He continues to support civic and economic development through board service with South State Bank, the South Carolina Infrastructure Bank, Pathways, the John C. West Forum, and the Small Business Development Center Advisory Council.



John Gettys
Mayor, City of Rock Hill

Mayor John Gettys is a 1991 graduate of Erskine College and earned both a master's degree in public administration and a juris doctorate from the University of South Carolina in 1995. He began his legal career in private practice, working with Harrelson, Hayes & Guyton from 1996 to 2001, where he became a partner, and later co-founded the Morton & Gettys Law Firm in 2001. Gettys was elected to represent Ward 4 on Rock Hill City Council in 2002 and re-elected in 2005. He later became Mayor in 2018, and his leadership helped Rock Hill earn the All-America City designation in 2019. Gettys is a 2009 graduate of the prestigious Liberty Fellowship. His service has been recognized with numerous honors, including Lawyer of the Year by South Carolina Lawyers Weekly and Local Elected Official of the Year by the Transportation Association of South Carolina. Throughout his career, Gettys has remained deeply involved in community and nonprofit organizations, serving in leadership roles with the Early Learning Partnership, Rock Hill Rotary Club, Rock Hill No Room for Racism Board, Rock Hill Sports Commission, and on advisory boards and commissions related to education, banking, and economic development.



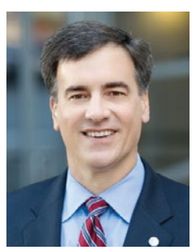
Dr. James Chappell
President & CEO, SCbio

James Chappell, Ph.D., serves as the President and Chief Executive Officer of SCbio, South Carolina's life sciences economic development and industry association, where he leads initiatives to grow one of the state's most dynamic and fastest-expanding sectors. Since taking the helm in November 2021, he has focused on expanding South Carolina's life sciences ecosystem through strategic partnerships, talent development and increased investment in innovation. Prior to joining SCbio, Chappell spent nearly a decade at Louisiana Economic Development, where he rose to become Executive Director of Competitiveness and Entrepreneurship. There, he led the creation and execution of Louisiana's $100 million venture capital and small business funds, helped recruit globally recognized companies to the state and served on the Louisiana MediFund board, where he helped steer biosciences and healthcare development. Chappell holds a Bachelor of Science and Master of Science from Clemson University, a doctorate from Louisiana State University and a postdoctoral fellowship in stem cell biology focused on cancer and diabetes at Harvard Medical School.



Tracy Dodson
COO, Charlotte Regional
Business Alliance

Tracy Dodson joined the Charlotte Regional Business Alliance as Chief Operating Officer and Head of Economic Development in February 2025. In this role, she oversees economic development, research, marketing, communications, business development and investor relations, helping shape the region's long-term growth strategy. With more than 20 years of experience in economic development and real estate across North and South Carolina, she previously served as assistant city manager and economic development director for the City of Charlotte, where she advanced economic growth, workforce development and upward mobility initiatives. During her tenure with the City, Dodson helped lead major projects including the relocation of Honeywell's headquarters to Charlotte and expansions by LendingTree, AvidXchange and Lowe's, bringing thousands of jobs to the region. Her ability to build strong partnerships at the local, county, regional and state levels has been instrumental in driving economic success. Her career also includes leadership roles with Lincoln-Harris and Charlotte Center City Partners. She holds a bachelor's degree from UNC Charlotte and a master's degree in real estate and urban development from Harvard University.



Ken D. Haynes
Enterprise EVP & President
Greater Charlotte Region
Atrium Health

Ken D. Haynes, MSHA, MBA, FACHE, is Enterprise Executive Vice President and President of the Greater Charlotte Region for Atrium Health, one of the nation's largest nonprofit academic health systems. A member of the executive leadership team, he oversees hospitals, ambulatory surgery centers and freestanding emergency departments across the region, along with major service lines including the Levine Cancer Institute, Sanger Heart & Vascular Institute, Musculoskeletal Institute, Neuroscience Institute and Levine Children's. He also leads enterprise shared services such as Nursing, Pharmacy, Laboratory, Imaging, Facilities, Construction and Mobile Medicine. With more than 30 years of health care leadership experience, Haynes joined Atrium Health in 2017 after serving as president and CEO of CHRISTUS Health's Santa Rosa Hospital System in San Antonio. His career also includes executive leadership roles in Kentucky, Arkansas and Tennessee. Haynes serves on several regional and statewide boards and community organizations. He holds a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Alabama and both a Master of Health Administration and an MBA from the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

THE PALMETTO RESEARCH REGION CABINET



Sara Hazzard
President & CEO,
SC Manufacturers
& Commerce

Sara Hazzard is President and Chief Executive Officer of the South Carolina Manufacturers and Commerce (SCMC), serving as a leading advocate for the state's 6,000 manufacturers and more than 300,000 employees. She was appointed to the role after more than a decade leading SCMC's government relations efforts, where she developed and advanced legislative initiatives that expanded opportunity for manufacturers across South Carolina. In her role as CEO, she works closely with business and policy leaders to strengthen the state's competitive business climate and support continued industry growth. Hazzard serves on the Presbyterian College Board of Trustees and has held leadership roles with several statewide organizations. She was appointed by Governor Henry McMaster to the state's COVID-19 response taskforce and has been recognized by Columbia Business Monthly as one of its 50 Most Influential and as a Women of Influence honoree by the Columbia Regional Business Report. A Rock Hill, SC native, she earned a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from Presbyterian College, with minors in Business Administration and History.



Dr. Stacey Moore
President,
York Technical College

Stacey Moore, Ph.D., serves as President of York Technical College. A passionate advocate for community and technical colleges, she is deeply committed to expanding educational access, equity and affordability while strengthening workforce and economic development partnerships across the region. She works closely with community and industry leaders and serves on several local and regional boards focused on workforce development and community advancement. Since assuming the presidency, she has continued to champion student success and innovative solutions that align education with the needs of employers and the community. Dr. Moore joined York Tech in 2016 and previously served as Executive Vice President for Academic and Student Affairs. A graduate of Leadership SC and a multiple-time Administrator of the Year at York Tech, she also received the Education Advisory Board's Visionary Leader of the Year award. She holds a Ph.D. and master's degree in counseling psychology from The University of Akron and a bachelor's degree in psychology from Eckerd College. She and her family live in Rock Hill, where she remains actively engaged in the community she proudly serves.



Thomas Rhodes III
Partner,
Rhodes Companies

Thomas Rhodes III is a fourth-generation South Carolina business owner and Partner at Rhodes Companies, a diversified holding company operating nationwide. A Clemson University graduate in Management and Entrepreneurship, he has focused on building sustainable businesses aligned with his passion for education policy, economic development, and leadership. Rhodes serves as Chairman of the South Carolina Chamber of Commerce and appointed by Governor Henry McMaster as an at-large Commissioner on the SCDOT Commission. His board service includes the Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention, and Advancement, the Midlands Business Leadership Group, Rexanna's Foundation for Curing Lung Cancer, the Prisma Health Children's Hospital Board, the South Carolina Department of Education Innovation Grants Committee, the Clemson University Board of Visitors, and the Salvation Army of the Midlands, where he previously served as Chairman. He is a graduate of the South Carolina Education Policy Fellowship Program, a member of the Society for International Business Fellows, and a former Deacon and member at Eastminster Presbyterian Church.



Tim Scott
United States Senator
South Carolina

Tim Scott has served South Carolina in the United States Senate since 2013. A graduate of Charleston Southern University and alumnus of the Palmetto Boys State program, he is a member of Seacoast Church in Charleston and previously built a successful small business before entering public service. He first held elected office on Charleston County Council before serving in the South Carolina House and the U.S. House of Representatives. In the Senate, Scott serves on the Finance, Foreign Relations, Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs, Small Business and Entrepreneurship, and Aging committees, where he works on tax policy, economic growth, retirement security and international engagement. He has championed legislation to expand access to capital for small businesses, promote workforce development and job training, support school choice, and revitalize economically distressed communities through investment incentives. A consistent advocate for fiscal responsibility, he also supports balanced budget efforts and policies aimed at reducing the national debt while expanding opportunity for working families.



Dr. Edward Serna
President,
Winthrop University

Edward A. Serna, a 2002 graduate of Winthrop University, became the university's 12th president on July 1, 2022, and is the first alumnus in its nearly 140-year history to serve in the role. During his tenure, Winthrop has achieved its highest U.S. News ranking, earned a new research classification from the American Council on Education, launched the strategic plan Winthrop: United in Excellence, expanded academic offerings, secured significant external funding, and invested more than $35 million in campus facilities. He has also emphasized student success, community engagement and strengthening the university's long-term financial sustainability, while fostering a culture of innovation and excellence across campus. Prior to returning to Winthrop, Serna served as President of the University of Maine at Farmington and as Interim Chancellor of the University of Arkansas–Fort Smith. He holds a doctorate in higher education from the University of Alabama, master's degrees from Auburn University and Clemson University, and a bachelor's degree from Winthrop, and is active in several regional civic and economic development organizations.



Dr. Pamela Wilks
President,
Clinton College

Dr. Pamela Richardson Wilks serves as President of Clinton College, bringing more than 25 years of progressive leadership experience across public and private higher education. She is widely respected for advancing academic excellence, institutional growth, and student-centered innovation. Dr. Wilks holds degrees from North Carolina A&T State University and a Ph.D. in English, Literature and Criticism from Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Wilks began her career as a secondary English educator before transitioning into higher education, teaching African American Studies at UNC Greensboro, Winston-Salem State University, and North Carolina A&T State University, and later serving as Assistant Professor of Languages and Literature at Johnson C. Smith University. Her senior leadership roles span Wilberforce University, Shaw University, Edward Waters University, Coppin State University, and Paine College, where she led major initiatives in accreditation, strategic planning, enrollment management, fundraising, and institutional effectiveness. Her honors include recognition as a W.E.B. Du Bois Scholar, induction into Phi Kappa Phi and Sigma Tau Delta, and designation as a 2023 Distinguished Alumni Honoree by North Carolina A&T State University.

TIM SCOTT
SOUTH CAROLINA



UNITED STATES SENATE

December 15, 2025

To Whom It May Concern:

I write today in strong support of the Palmetto Research Region and the broader call to action to shape the future of the Charlotte to Columbia Corridor along I-77. This initiative arrives at a pivotal moment—one that will define the economic trajectory of this region for decades.

Alongside industry, education, and governmental leaders, I am pleased to be part of this initiative that represents the very best of our region's talent and vision. The mission is not to replace economic development organizations, but to elevate the conversation—guiding decision-makers toward value-driven, future-focused development that strengthens families, communities, and the long-term health of the economy along this vital corridor. I support the goals of this group, which are largely focused on:

- Guiding strategic, value-based planning efforts to ensure long-term success for the entirety of the corridor;
- Attracting and prioritizing high-value, high-wage industries in advanced manufacturing, life sciences, healthcare, corporate services, and innovation industries;
- Supporting high-value initiatives between communities from Charlotte, NC to Columbia, SC, that support strengthened workforce and talent pipelines

The corridor's rapid population growth, exceptional connectivity, skilled workforce, and rising concentration of advanced industries have created a rare window of opportunity. But without intentional action, we risk defaulting to lower-wage development patterns that strain public resources and reduce economic mobility.

I commend the founders of this initiative and the distinguished members of this regional effort for stepping forward at such a consequential time.

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TIM SCOTT
SOUTH CAROLINA



UNITED STATES SENATE

Our collaborative work will shape the economic destiny of the region between Charlotte and Columbia—and by extension, strengthen South Carolina's competitiveness on the national and global stage.

Sincerely,

Tim Scott
United States Senator

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PALMETTO
RESEARCH
REGION