

*COVID-19 has impacted different Athens communities and sectors in different ways, and a network of support from the ACC government, community members, businesses and other organizations has offered assistance.*

**W**ith the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, the Athens hospitality and service industries, as well as historically underserved communities, have struggled to make ends meet due to lost revenue and decreased engagement in the economy.

On March 19, 2020, the Athens-Clarke County government passed a mandated shelter-in-place ordinance that prohibited residents from leaving their homes except for essential needs and placed limits on most operations in the city. In the year since, the functions of everyday life have adapted and reopened in most capacities, but the community has not been able to return to pre-pandemic levels of economic strength. Downtown Athens, once a vibrant, bustling area with a diverse range of businesses, saw a steep decline in activity.

"Prior to March 13, 2020, the economy of Athens was thriving in a lot of different ways (through) a lot of different means, goods and services," Athens Area Chamber of Commerce President David Bradley said. "Because Athens is such a rich cultural entertainment and food environment, we attract a ton of visitors for seminars, workshops, whatever, perhaps at the Classic Center. Our economy was thriving (until) on March 14, the hospitality component of our economy died."

On April 2, 2020, Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp passed a statewide shelter-in-place order that closed all nonessential businesses, leaving only infrastructure such as grocery stores, banks and hospitals open. Restaurants could only operate at a limited capacity with takeout, curbside pick-up and delivery options.

"All those businesses that maybe would normally have a hundred patrons on a Thursday night have many fewer, so that means that their income is diminished and (so is) everybody who they would help support by buying flour and sugar, or accessing one of those sort of laundering services or by buying cases of wine," Athens-Clarke County Mayor Kelly Girtz said. "All of those links in the chain are impacted."

The University of Georgia sent students home in March 2020 due to the coronavirus, and they did not return until August. Located in the center of Athens, UGA is an essential part of the Athens economy, providing a large customer base in its student body. It also brings in a significant amount of money

.....  
**Featured:** BIRD'S EYE VIEW: People and cars populate East Clayton Street in Downtown Athens on March 21. Many Downtown Athens businesses have struggled to maintain a customer base and keep their doors open. "For the first time, due to the pandemic, we're starting to see some shuttered businesses, some vacancies, and that's been hard," Athens Downtown Development Authority Planning Director David Lynn said. Photo by Audrey Enghauser





A street scene in a city, likely Nashville, Tennessee, featuring a mix of historic and modern architecture. The street is lined with buildings, including a prominent grey building with many windows and a brick building with a sign for "Heery's Clothes Closet". Several cars are parked along the street, and a few are driving. A large text overlay in the foreground reads "NG THE" and "MMUNITY".

# NG THE MMUNITY





## KELLY GIRTZ

Athens-Clarke County  
Mayor



## DAVID BRADLEY

Athens Area Chamber of  
Commerce President



## DAVID LYNN

Athens Downtown Development  
Authority Planning Director

through football games in particular, which attract thousands of attendees. The 2020 UGA football season was reduced to only four of the usual eight home games and a 20 to 25% stadium capacity. According to Bradley, this caused the loss of at least 100 million dollars for small businesses.

"When you have (37,600) students right across the street, your economy may not (always) be booming, but it's never going to bust because there's always a customer base to buy goods and services to help the economy," Athens Downtown Development Authority Planning Director of Planning and Outreach David Lynn said.

According to Peter Dale, owner of The National and co-owner of Seabear, Condor Chocolates and Maepole, revenue at The National and at Seabear is down 50% compared to previous years.

"Immediately (when the pandemic hit) in March of last year, it was just to-go (service). Seabear was closed for a couple of months and (opened back up) later in the spring. The National never really closed, just reduced their hours. At those restaurants, they didn't do a lot of to-go previously, and so there wasn't an online ordering platform," Dale said.

For Mimi Maumus, owner of the Athens restaurant home.made, keeping up curbside pickup was causing the business to lose more money than it would if

"(At this point in the pandemic), Athens is not struggling as much as a whole, but we have pockets of our community that are -- our business community, hospitality industry and a lot of the service industry."

**-- DAVID BRADLEY,**

Athens Area Chamber of Commerce President



**Above: UNIVERSITY IN THE HEART OF ATHENS:** The University of Georgia arch is shown. Due to the pandemic, UGA students were sent home in March 2020 and did not return until August, which negatively affected businesses that relied heavily on student patronage. "It's been a very hard year for Athens, and that's converse to the regular mentality in almost every other economic down cycle," Athens Chamber of Commerce President David Bradley said. "College communities fare much better than other communities our size, because you typically have (37,600) students across the street who are captive consumers." Photo by Luna Reichert



## BLAINE WILLIAMS

Athens-Clarke County  
Manager



## ILKA MCCONNELL

Athens-Clarke County Director of  
Economic Development



## MARIAH PARKER

Athens-Clarke County  
District 2 Commissioner

all sales were paused, so she closed the restaurant from May to November 2020.

“(We were) looking down the barrel of, ‘When is this thing going to be over with? What is the landscape going to be like? Are people coming back to restaurants? When are they coming back to restaurants?’” Maumus said. “It was just like, ‘How do I stop this bleeding?’ Doing the curbside (service), even though we weren’t using a lot of money, the sales (just) weren’t supporting that.”

Like many other employers, home-made

temporarily laid off over 20 workers -- the majority of their staff -- during the pandemic.

“Going to a curbside restaurant, we just didn’t need all of the employees that we had had previously,” Maumus said. “I did pay staff for as long as I could, because that’s not fair to them, but then there reached a point where I (couldn’t) afford it anymore, so I paid them a reduced rate, sort of like a retainer.”

As fewer people support businesses, less money flows through the economy, and there is less money

for individuals, according to ACC Manager Blaine Williams.

“In terms of recession, we are projecting a growth in the tax digest and sales tax next year. From a recessionary standpoint, we still have growth -- people are spending money,” Williams said. “The decline that we’re seeing has to do with charges for services like downtown parking or Leisure Services fees. People aren’t moving about, getting tickets, things like that.”

According to Girtz, the uneven impact of COVID-19 across the community has made the issue comparatively worse for certain individuals.

“It’s not as uniform a recession as we had back in 2009. It’s hit some individuals really hard and other individuals are doing just fine, so it’s somewhat unique in terms of American economic cycles,” Girtz said. “Usually everybody feels the drag, (but) in this economic recession, not everybody feels the drag and some people don’t feel that at all.”

According to a U.S. Department of Labor report, 39% of people with a household income less than \$40,000 were laid off or furloughed in April 2020. In addition, at the beginning of 2021, national Black unemployment rates were 10%, Hispanic unemployment rates were 8.8%, up from 6.6% and 5.4% respectively, compared to 5.9% and 3.6% for White workers.

“(The economic fallout) is particularly focused on a

# TYPES OF COVID-19 ECONOMIC AID

## ATHENS-CLARKE COUNTY GOVERNMENT

### Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security Act

According to congress.gov, the CARES Act provided funding to local governments, which the ACC government used to supplement their COVID-19 support with more community and business aid.

### Resiliency Package

According to ACC Manager Blaine Williams, the ACC government allocated \$5 million from the government fund balance to the Athens community. The money was used for indigent support, public utility rate reduction and business aid.

## ATHENS COMMUNITY

### Northeast Georgia Business Alliance

According to Williams, the NEGA Business Alliance partnered with the ACC government to provide grants to minority-owned local businesses.

### Athens Downtown Development Authority Grants

According to The Red and Black, the ADDA gave a restriction-free emergency grant of \$1,000 to certain local businesses in March 2020.

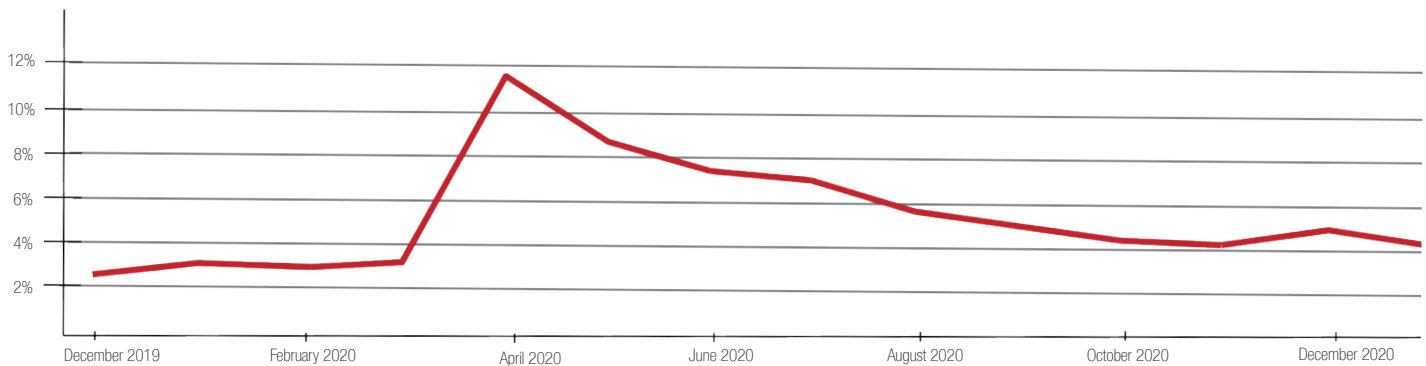
### Athens Land Trust COVID-19 Assistance Program

According to the Athens Land Trust website, the Athens Land Trust COVID-19 Assistance Program provides relief for residents losing income due to the pandemic.

**Above: ECONOMIC AID:** An infographic shows the different types of economic aid provided by the Athens-Clarke County government and the Athens community. Economic aid was necessary due to high unemployment and risk of recession caused by COVID-19. Infographic by Gretchen Hinger



# UNEMPLOYMENT RATES IN ATHENS-CLARKE COUNTY FROM DECEMBER 2019 TO DECEMBER 2020



**Above:** UNEMPLOYMENT DATA: An infographic shows the unemployment rate in Athens-Clarke County over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the U.S. Department of Labor Statistics. Due to the pandemic, many workers lost their jobs, especially in the service and retail sectors. "We were at near double digit unemployment back in May and June of 2020," Athens-Clarke County Mayor Kelly Girtz said. "We've recovered somewhat from where we were, but we're not back to the normal 3% range we were in in December of 2019." Infographic by Natalie Schliekelman

handful of sectors, and those sectors tend to be ones that employ a lot of modest or low wage workers. It means that people then have challenges in paying their rent, paying for their power bill, buying groceries for their kids," Girtz said. "People who are poor were heavily hit by COVID. Black and brown communities tend to be more heavily hit by COVID."

According to Athens-Clarke County District 2 Commissioner Mariah Parker, minority communities in Athens have faced greater health risks throughout the pandemic.

"I did pay staff for as long as I could, because that's not fair to them, but then there reached a point where I (couldn't) afford it anymore, so I paid them a reduced rate, sort of like a retainer."

**-- MIMI MAUMUS,**  
home.made owner

"People of color are overrepresented in service and so-called 'essential' industries -- I say 'so called' because though we applauded these brave workers at the pandemic's outset, we failed to back up that praise with material supports like higher wages, paid sick leave, and the like -- and because we disproportionately occupy these high-public-contact jobs, many more of us have gotten sick than the general population," Parker said.

With help from the federal government's 2021 COVID-19 Stimulus Package, Parker sees an opportunity for Athens to address the systemic issues these groups face.

"I do hope that we use the opportunity granted by the American Rescue Plan to transform some of the underlying conditions that made this crisis so acute for low-income communities so that we heal faster, but also have a different society on the other

end of this than the one that set us up for such suffering," Parker said.

According to ACC Director of Economic Development Ilka McConnell, many low-income workers have several part-time jobs that they are using to make ends meet -- the jobs that have been most impacted by COVID.

"It's a very difficult situation for a lot of our neighbors to have work that they need in order to be able to support themselves and their families, but in the terrible event that they might get sick, they might also not have health insurance to be

able to help them get the care that they need," McConnell said.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Athens unemployment rate peaked in April 2020 at 11.2%. By January it went back down to 4.2%, and in March it hit 3.4%, approaching the 2 to 3% levels from before the pandemic.

"In April or May we hit (an 11% unemployment rate), which is awful," Bradley said. "(Athens) had been in a short-term recession, but now we're probably not struggling (as much as a whole), but we have pockets of our community that are. Our business community, our hospitality industry and a lot of the service industry is still struggling (with unemployment)."

Despite the severity of the economic decline in some sectors, Athens as a whole has stayed afloat due to its diverse economy, dependence on UGA

and its role as a larger town in the area.

"We're the regional urban center, and a lot of people come to work here. So we're faring pretty well compared to others because we're a regional center and a university town," Williams said. "We are more than just one type of industry, so we did okay, but it really hit certain industries very hard, particularly our service industry, (and) cut down on tourism and visitors to town."

Condor Chocolates, which already had an online ordering platform before COVID-19, expanded it and added a local pickup portal where customers could order online and come grab something from a shelf outside their Five Points location. The business has since inhabited a niche that has flourished during the pandemic.

"Condor has been up for the year, 'cause I think people are spending money in different ways. They're not going to restaurants so much, but they are buying chocolate apparently," Dale said. "December is our biggest month by far, and we had a huge Christmas, much bigger than previous years."

Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ACC government has supported individuals and businesses through avenues like providing monetary assistance, keeping water and sewer rates steady, deferring payments for occupational licenses and suspending public transportation fares.

"There was a number of things (the ACC commission) did to try and make (withstanding the pandemic) as easy as they could, things that were within their power," Williams said. "I would (compare) the efforts they did against any local government in Georgia, for going beyond what would be normally expected. But at the end of the day, you can only do so much."

In April 2020, the ACC government allocated financial aid to areas including business aid, indigent support aimed at homeless residents and public utility rate reduction.



"We provided some funds for individual rent relief and utility needs and food, and a lot of those were local dollars that we generated through our local tax base, (which) we termed the Resiliency Package," Girtz said. "We also benefited from some federal money that came in, but the Resiliency Package was a local effort to say we generated these dollars right here at home in Athens, Georgia and we want to support the local population with that money."

Another form of aid was the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), a federal government program that allows businesses to apply for low-interest private loans to cover payroll, rent, interest or utilities.

"The biggest (aid for my businesses) was the Paycheck Protection Program. There's been two rounds of that and it was a significant amount of money that really helped out, and then we were able to keep paying employees who may not be working full time," Dale said. "There were also some grants from the city of Athens that not all the businesses qualified for, but (Condor's Chocolates) did, which was really helpful, as well."

The ACC government started the Parklet Pilot Program and the Outdoor Retail Area Pilot Project that encourage Athens residents to patronize local businesses. These projects closed off parking areas in Downtown Athens so that businesses could offer outdoor seating and shopping.

"Though we applauded these brave workers at the pandemic's outset, we failed to back up that praise with material supports like higher wages, paid sick leave, and the like."

**-- MARIAH PARKER,**  
ACC District 2 Commissioner

"The parking spaces weren't being used because nobody was coming downtown, so we've allowed (restaurants) to be permitted to bring tables there," Williams said. "Just trying to get people to come down and be safe without creating a total party atmosphere that would jeopardize folks."

According to Parker, support from the Athens community in certain sectors such as healthcare and housing have been instrumental in helping individuals throughout the pandemic.

"I'm really proud of the way the community has stepped up to support struggling families

throughout the last 15 months," Parker said. "Organizations like Mutual Aid Athens took to the streets to provide for our lowest income and unsheltered neighbors, meanwhile the ACC government approved millions of dollars in emergency food aid, healthcare support, housing assistance and other indigent services to be administered through local nonprofits like the East Athens Development Corporation and The Ark."

The National regular and community member Gary Bertsch has contributed to his community's efforts to overcome the pandemic by donating to The National to help cover their costs of business, which includes keeping staff employed.

"Athens has made us all proud. Although there's a lot of hardship and a lot of people are suffering in this community by and large, Athens has handled it and, and done much better than most (communities) both in Georgia, in this country, and around the world," Bertsch said. "I think that reflects the quality of the people in the community. We have a lot of young people, we have a lot of thoughtful people in this community and people that have wanted to help out in all kinds of ways. I think that's made a real difference." 🍷

**Below:** BUSINESS ADAPTATIONS: The National in Downtown Athens is shown on May 16. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, businesses have been forced to adjust their methods of customer retention in order to stay open and afloat during the pandemic. "We always felt like there was a community aspect to our restaurants and being in the space and interacting with our staff. And so that certainly changed, because during COVID we felt like we needed to be the opposite," Peter Dale, owner of The National and co-owner of Sea Bear, Condor Chocolates and Maepole said. "We needed to not interact with people. It was such a 180 to the way we operate and think and do things." Photo by Audrey Enghauser

