Okefenokee Swamp, GA (June 6, 2023) – A team from Charlton, Clinch, and Ware Counties successfully completed a workshop focused on gateway communities and their unique opportunities and challenges around generating lasting economic opportunity from natural, cultural, and recreational assets. The six-person team (Josh Howard, CTAE Director, Charlton County High School; Michael Lusk, Manager, Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge; Laura Nipper, Manager, Homerville Main Street; Hampton Raulerson, Administrator, Charlton County; Jason Rubenbauer, President/CEO, Waycross, and Ware County Development Authority; and Kim Bednarek, Executive Director, Okefenokee Swamp Park) worked together to identify the foundational assets in and around the Okefenokee that draw travelers and make the area a wonderful place to call home. National and regional experts on destination stewardship, outdoor recreation, natural and cultural resources, and trail towns presented at the three-day workshop, helping team members identify opportunities within their home community.

From Georgia to Alaska, Kentucky to Utah, and Tennessee to Oklahoma, participating teams attended from across the country. The Conservation Fund, a national non-profit with a dual charter of practicing conservation to achieve environmental and economic outcomes, has offered this workshop for more than 25 years, continuously evolving it to meet the current challenges and opportunities in communities that are a gateway to a public land or water asset. The Balancing Nature and Commerce program is focused on catalyzing collaborative action, cultivating local leadership, and advancing solutions for gateway communities.

"The collaboration between Charlton, Clinch, and Ware counties will foster a new focus on the entire swamp leading to increased tourism and economic opportunities throughout our region," said Jason Rubenbauer, CEO & President, of Waycross/Ware County Development Authority.

Each of the six participating communities were selected through an open-call, national application process, and were required to form a team that included community leaders and public land representatives, with additional team members coming from business, tourism, arts and culture, and natural resource interests, as well as engaged community members.

"The Balancing Nature and Commerce event has brought together a talented team from the Okefenokee communities and provided us with the tools to unlock the region’s potential," said Hampton Raulerson, Administrator, of Charlton County.

“The Okefenokee team was a perfect addition to this year’s program, which included diverse gateway communities with a common thread of wanting to provide a quality visitor experience while ensuring that the community is strengthened, rather than diminished, by visitation,” said Susan Elks, AICP, The Conservation Fund’s Balancing Nature & Commerce Program Manager. “It was exciting to listen to the ideas from each community, and I look forward to hearing how they build on the opportunities created by the rich confluence of resources in these gateways.”
“It was an honor for me to be a part of the Balancing Nature and Commerce workshop to learn how Clinch, Ware, and Charlton Counties can work together to celebrate our beautiful landscape and unique heritage. Sharing a unified message will be key moving forward to see the Okefenokee and its communities thrive,” said Laura Nipper, Mainstreet, of Homerville, Clinch County.

“I am excited about the partnership that is being formed to help unify our brand and our common goal of increasing the economic development of the Okefenokee region. Our region has no greater asset than the Okefenokee Swamp, and I believe that this journey will help us capitalize on the economic and cultural potential of the swamp, while still retaining an authentic swamp experience for visitors and locals alike.” said Josh Howard, CTAE Director, of Charlton County High School.

The Conservation Fund has delivered this course and other services to over 1,000 communities in the U.S. and Canada as part of its strategic initiatives that boost community prosperity and help build vibrant communities. In addition to the national course, geographic-specific programs are provided, and place-based programs are developed on request.

About The Conservation Fund
At The Conservation Fund, we make conservation work for America. By creating solutions that make environmental and economic sense, we are redefining conservation to demonstrate its essential role in our future prosperity. Top-ranked for efficiency and effectiveness, we have worked in all 50 states since 1985 to protect more than 8.8 million acres. conservationfund.org

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