

STRATEGIC PLAN 2020-2025

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The **mission** of the Historical Society is to tell the inspiring stories of Coastal Georgia through the collections and historic structures entrusted to its care.



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Our **purpose** is to preserve and share these cultural resources, which illuminate our past and give meaning and value to the present and future.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Coastal Georgia Historical Society closed the last decade with an array of outstanding accomplishments – a restored, historic lighthouse; a rejuvenated Keeper's Dwelling and Lighthouse Museum; a new, nationally-recognized World War II Home Front Museum; expanded collections and artifacts; successful capital campaigns; new educational offerings; and treasured programs and services. After these tremendous achievements, the Board of Directors and staff of the Society knew it was important to thoughtfully consider the next steps for this venerable organization - as it plans for its 60th Anniversary.

To do so, the Board of Directors embarked on a six-month strategic planning process in September 2019 which has resulted in this plan to guide the Board's efforts beginning 2020 until 2025. Through this process, the Board sought input from visitors and the broader membership of the Society. Ideas and examples were gleaned from aspirational peer organizations. And, staff and Board Members shared perspectives through a confidential survey instrument gauging organizational characteristics and Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Challenges (SWOC).

Over the past ten years, the Society has expanded its scope and reach with the addition and enhancement of new sites and programs across the community. The outstanding quality of these assets is acknowledged through national accreditation and peer recognition. The staff has grown, in skills, competencies and numbers. The Coastal Georgia Historical Society now is recognized as one of the premier historical institutions in the state -a lofty post requiring vigilance, innovation, and investment to maintain.

Forward looking, the Society now seeks to solidify this stature and grow the impact of existing sites, services, and programs. Whereas the organization has been growing horizontally, the future focus is vertical – adding more diversity, depth, and texture to the current museums, programs, partnerships, and outreach and education services. Stewardship and sustainability are at the core of the Society's key goals — to ensure the long-term preservation and utilization of the historic

structures in its care while further developing, securing, sharing, and interpreting its preeminent collection of Coastal Georgia's historical resources.

The Society has set forth six overarching goals, organized into three focal areas. Within the key goals are layered the Board's primary objectives or strategic imperatives. During the next five years, the Society will focus its work on:

- the future of this dynamic Coastal region.
- community and the country.
- and resource management.

The pages which follow recognize the Board and staff who steered this process, briefly chronicle the history of the Society, share the strategic planning journey and learnings, and detail the fiveyear goals for the organization. Following the adoption of this plan, the staff begins their work in earnest to set forth timelines, resource expectations, and benchmark performance. The Board of Directors is prepared to fully embrace its governance and fiduciary roles and responsibilities – to steer, support, assess, and advertise the impressive work of the Society in successfully achieving its ambitious future goals

 Enriching Collections. Expanding Capacity. Expanding, securing, maintaining, and presenting the collections, artifacts and stories that interpret the past and frame

• Educating Friends and Neighbors. Engaging Communities. Sharing broadly and deeply the region's stories and the Society's collections and programs across the

 Ensuring Sustainability. Embracing Excellence – Always. Maintaining unparalleled standards of excellence — in personnel, preservation, presentation, programming,

# BOARD MEMBERS & EXECUTIVE STAFF

Kevin Lokey, President Lewis Glenn, Immediate Past President Duane Harris, Vice President Mike Martin, Finance Committee Chair Janis Rodriguez, Collections and Education Committee Chair Mary Schellhorn, Development Committee Chair

Keith Calhoun Kay Cantrell Myrna Crook Jim DeLong David Furnish Lucy Glasebrook Sally Hawie Tom Heagy Jeanne Kaufmann Reg Murphy Jan Payne Janis Rehlaender Bill Stembler Brenda Thompson

Sherri Jones, *Executive Director* Mimi Rogers, *Curator* Leigh Ann Stroud, *Public Relations Director* Valerie A. Hepburn, Ph.D., *Strategic Planning Consultant* 



In 1965, a small group of residents formed the Coastal Georgia Historical Society with an ambitious vision: to lead in the preservation of the artifacts and buildings that are the treasures of this region's coastal heritage. Their goal was to match the best historical societies in existence. The momentum and enthusiasm generated in the Society's first year has never abated.

Today, as owner of the St. Simons Lighthouse, the A.W. Jones Heritage Center, and custodian of the Lighthouse Keeper's Dwelling and the Historic Coast Guard Station at East Beach, the Society has become the guardian of Coastal Georgia history and a driver of heritage tourism. These sites are essential pieces of collective history. They are also alive with

"Wonderful history and views!! Climb to the top (129 steps, but not terribly strenuous). Phenomenal views!! We also enjoyed the lighthouse keeper's house and the museum's informational film." *Visitor, TripAdvisor, October 2019*  vibrant interpretation of cultural resources, telling the stories of the Coastal region through tours, lectures, exhibits, and other educational programs.

The A. W. Jones Heritage Center opened in 2008, following a successful major capital campaign. The Center houses the Society's research library and archives, event and conference space, a Museum Store, and administrative offices. The restoration and reopening of the Lighthouse occurred two years later, ensuring that the historic facility would continue to welcome visitors and residents as the "gem of the coast." In 2012, the Society was reaccredited for fifteen years by the American Alliance of Museums, a prestigious recognition bestowed only on organizations fulfilling significant roles in public trust, collections stewardship and education. Following another successful capital campaign, the redesigned St. Simons Lighthouse Museum, housed in the Keeper's Dwelling, opened to the public in 2014. The Museum has been recognized with an Excellence in Restoration award from the Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation. In 2015, the Society celebrated its 50th Anniversary, and commenced to implement an ambitious strategic plan designed to expand its collections, educational services, and programming for the community.

In late 2018, the Society realized a grand vision to repurpose the Historic Coast Guard Station from a Maritime Museum to the World War II Home Front Museum. Society members, staff, and supporters invested considerable time, resources, and creativity to secure both the collections and capital necessary to establish a museum of unparalleled quality and technology. Through immersive galleries and interactive exhibits, the Museum tells the amazing stories of Coastal Georgia's contributions and experiences during World War II.

During these times of exciting growth and development, the Society continued to expand its educational program offerings for youth and the adult community. The Chautauqua Lecture Series and the Little Light Music Concert Series, along with field trips and regular history series, remain treasured and highly subscribed activities for members and visitors alike.

"I learned so much! This museum just opened in December 2018. It is located in the Coast Guard station on St. Simons Island. The interactive exhibits were great and the stories, as told by the participants themselves, were fascinating. The exhibit on navy airships was my favorite. This museum shows how our country came together and worked as one body for America. We can learn lessons from that today." *Visitor, TripAdvisor, October 2019*  "CGHS is an extremely valuable asset to the community and surrounding area due to the very high quality of the museums, the commitment and creativity of the staff, and the Society's commitment to providing programs for the benefit and enjoyment of the community."

Survey Response, Board Member

After a decade of incredibly dynamic and productive accomplishments, the Society wanted to ensure a planful and equally ambitious transition to its next five years of work. In the Spring of 2019, the Board President and the Executive Director secured a strategic planning consultant and together they mapped out a pathway for information gathering, environmental scanning, and Board and member engagement with the goal of adopting a new strategic plan by the end of the calendar year.

Society President Kevin Lokey appointed a Strategic Planning Committee consisting of Vice President Duane Harris, Immediate Past President Lewis Glenn, Development Committee Chair Mary Schellhorn, and himself. Executive Director Sherri Jones, Curator Mimi Rogers and Public Relations Director Leigh Ann Stroud facilitated staffing and data collection for the committee. Dr. Valerie Hepburn

served as the Board's strategic planning consultant.

Substantive data collection commenced in the summer, with surveys conducted with 131 visitors on-site at the Lighthouse Museum during July 2019. During this same time period, the consultant distributed a survey instrument to all current and several recent governing board members designed to collect anonymously their perspectives on the Society's unique attributes as well as its Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Challenges (SWOC) to address in the coming years. The staff of the Society also completed a similar survey instrument. During August, surveys were distributed to Society members via email and in

person at the Chautauqua Lecture Series. Nearly 300 survey responses were received from members.

The Strategic Planning Committee reviewed the strategic plans and websites of historical societies recommended by the Curator and which might be considered aspirational peers. The information and comparative perspectives from these reviews helped the Committee consider emerging trends and shared challenges for historical societies and history museums across the country.

Armed with considerable quantitative and qualitative data and an assessment of its recent accomplishments and ongoing challenges, the Board of Directors convened for a full-day Strategic Planning Retreat in September 2019. The day resulted in a set of prioritized goals and desired objectives. The consultant and executive staff developed an initial document draft, which was refined in consultation with the Strategic Planning Committee. The proposed draft of key goals and strategic imperatives was presented for review and discussion at the October meeting of the full Board.

At its December 2019 meeting, the Board of Directors provided final editorial suggestions and formally acted to adopt its Strategic Plan, 2020-2025. The pages which follow highlight key findings which have informed the plan's development and detail the bold goals embraced by the Board for the organization as it charts its journey into the 2020s. "Create a bold vision!"

Survey Response, Society Member

#### FROM VISITORS

During July 2019, more than 3800 people visited the St. Simons Lighthouse and Museum. Staff were able to survey 131 people who represented households totaling 271 visitors. The vast majority were families from Georgia, Florida, and other states in the Southeast. Visitors under the age of 18 and over the age of 40 were the dominant age demographics. Most visitors came to climb the lighthouse (55.7%), learn about local history (17.6%), or to enjoy a family-friendly activity (15.3%). Some 94% indicated they usually visited historical/cultural sites when they traveled.

"89% of respondents agreed that CGHS is one of the premier historic institutions in Georgia." Society Member Survey

Visitors were asked to rate the museum exhibits, the Lighthouse climb, interactions with staff, value of the visit, and likelihood to recommend on a scale from 1 to 10, with 10 being the best. All questions netted scores of 10 from almost 70% on the respondents, and scores of eight or higher from 93% or more of the respondents. Though still favorable overall, survey participants were less enthusiastic about the exhibits in the Lighthouse Museum. While few participants provided additional comments, those who did encouraged a more interactive approach to exhibits (e.g., more videos about Keepers, more magnetic stuff for kids, and more handson activities for kids).

#### **FROM MEMBERS**

The Society has approximately 900 members, from whom 291 surveys were received during August 2019. Surveys were administered online and in person at the Chautauqua Lecture Series, so some duplicate responses could have been received. Most respondents indicated membership at the Individual or Family levels, providing good perspective from core

supporters and users of Society programming. Respondents were more recent members, with 57% indicating they had been a member for less than five years and only 21% being members for 10 or more years. Ninety-seven percent (97%) said they were certain or likely to renew their membership.

Members express satisfaction with their benefits, but particularly enjoy the Society's programming, museums, newsletters, and special events. Strong support for the organization's mission of preservation and education ranked high across all questions and respondents. When asked to provide input to the Board for its strategic planning process, members offered the following dominant suggestions:

- More and relevant programs
- Grow and diversify membership and audiences
- Education for youth/school programs
- Increase visibility, community outreach

#### FROM PEER ORGANIZATIONS

The Strategic Planning Committee reviewed public materials and recent strategic plans from seven history museums and historical societies with approaches and characteristics the Coastal Georgia Historical Society might seek to emulate.

These peers were:

- The Atlanta (Georgia) History Center
- The Columbus (Georgia) Museum
- The Cumberland County (Pennsylvania) Historical Society

"67 % of respondents said their primary reason for becoming a Society member was to support the organization's mission." Society Member Survey

## SUMMARY SURVEY DATA & FINDINGS

- The Mark Twain House and Museum (Hartford, Connecticut)
- The Maryland Historical Society (Baltimore)
- The Vermont Historical Society (Montpelier and Barre)
- The Virginia Museum of History and Culture (Richmond)

Each of the organizations recognizes the importance of diversity and relevance to a broader range of ages and interests. Finding ways to engage the community and serve as an educational resource are top priorities for many, along with growing partnerships and collaborative ventures. These peers all herald the importance of the member and visitor experience, and all have the desire to have stronger brand recognition and greater social media presence. Overarching themes among the organizations are financial sustainability and growing endowments as a necessary means to protect and share their vast collections while preserving the historic structures with which they are entrusted.

#### FROM STAFF

Coastal Georgia Historical Society staff, full-time and part-time, were asked to participate in a SWOC (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Challenges) survey. The SWOC helps an organization focus on promoting strengths, addressing weaknesses, seizing opportunities, and confronting challenges.

## STAFF RESPONSES

#### **STRENGTHS**

- Quality and diversity of programs
- Preservation of history
- Home Front Museum has been a significant positive impact on the organization and has enthusiastically received by Brunswick and t schools
- Support from development-minded board members
- Staff is friendly, stable, highly effective, experienced, professional, and works well together
- Beautiful facilities and historic structures
- Diverse revenue streams
- Management provides a pleasant, positive, collaborative working environment and offers fair compensation in order to maintain loyalty and job satisfaction

### **OPPORTUNITIES**

- Growing interest from Glynn County schools
- Growth/development of downtown Brunswick provides new opportunities for partnerships
- Cultivating more diverse audience
- Partnerships with museums across the state and heritage tourism
- Making collection more accessible through online database, programs, and exhibits
- Local marketing and advertising for the event space and museum store
- Growing social media presence
- Sponsorships in the community
- Continued interest in the Lighthouse and growing interest in the Home Front Museum

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## WEAKNESSES

- Insufficient endowments for sustainability especially during financial downturns
- Flat membership growth
- Insufficient programming for the entire community
- Lack of plan for identifying and strategically acquiring collections documenting coastal history
- Facilities at capacity including event hall, office space, and archives
- No exhibit hall
- Weak brand identity outside St. Simons Island and our membership
- Need to bring collections database up to standard required for online accessibility
- Maintaining and managing facilities is expensive and time consuming
- Lack of collaboration with other community organizations

## **CHALLENGES**

- Interpreting history in an increasingly diverse world
- Helping the community at large connect with organization/mission
- Membership growth and attracting diverse membership
- Reaching a younger audience
- Seasonal fluctuations of visitation
- Funding maintenance endowments
- Developing a strong brand identity
- Competition with other event venues and stores
- Climate change and weather affecting visitation, historic structures, and collections

#### FROM THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Seventy-three percent (73%) of Board Members responded to a survey designed to gather necessary input to frame the strategic planning effort. The Board Members' responses aligned closely with those of staff, visitors and Society members. Moreover, many of the areas which the Board Members felt needed uplifting or attention mirrored the thinking of the various peer organizations.

In addition to their SWOC exercise, Board Members were asked to share their thoughts on what makes the Society unique and special. These attributes are embraced for protection and promotion in the Society's next decade.



Gleaning insight and ideas from the various surveys, environmental scans and their experiences over the past years of work together, the Board of Directors set about fashioning a set of goals and strategic imperatives to guide them in governing the Coastal Georgia Historical Society for the coming five years. The next sections set forth those goals and a set of broad objectives to guide and measure progress.

## **BOARD RESPONSES**

#### **STRENGTHS**

- Incredible/ Outstanding Facilities
- Quality Programs
- Lecturers and Speakers
- Educational Programming for School
- Strong Leadership/Excellent Staff
- Good Reputation and Little Competition
- Successful Fundraising for Major Pro
- Location (history rich, resort communication)
- Talented/Committed/ Diverse Board
- Accreditation
- Superior Museums/Exhibits

### **OPPORTUNITIES**

- New and reliable revenue streams (e corporate sponsors, more and new options)
- Tourism and growing population, to younger members and educational (youth, college, internships)
- More members and partnerships wit mainland, and the Coastal Region
- New programming such as academi series, outreach education (in schoo community, etc.), more Chautauqua and African-American History
- Capitalize on reputation and limited

|                 | WEAKNESSES  |
|-----------------|---|
|                 | Financial strength and need for full endowments   |
|                 | <ul> <li>Need larger membership base</li> </ul>   |
|                 | <ul> <li>Need younger members and participants</li> </ul>   |
| ols/Youth       | <ul> <li>Potential staff retirements and succession<br/>planning</li> </ul>                       |
| ition<br>ojects | <ul> <li>Clarity about board governance and<br/>engagement</li> </ul>                             |
| unity)          | Size limitations of the Jones Center  |
| d of Directors  | <ul> <li>Archives are not digitized</li> </ul>  |
|                 | • Expand, train and manage the volunteer base   |
|                 | <ul> <li>Need for greater community awareness</li> </ul>  |
|                 | Staff and facility costs  |
|                 | • Diversity in Speakers and Topics  |
|                 |   |
|                 |   |
| e.g.,           | CHALLENGES  |
| member          | <ul> <li>Maintenance of Facilities and the Need for<br/>Endowments</li> </ul>                     |
| include         | <ul> <li>Need for a larger facility to accommodate</li> </ul>                                     |
| programs        | member, exhibits and events   |
|                 | <ul> <li>Staff recruitment and retention</li> </ul>   |
| th Brunswick,   | <ul> <li>Sustainability of capital and operational</li> </ul>                                     |
| c history       | fundraising (demographics, competition, donor   |
| 5               | fatigue)  |
| ols,            | Succession planning – board and staff   |
| -like events,   | <ul> <li>Expanding beyond St. Simons/Sea Island, to<br/>incorporate the Coastal Region</li> </ul> |
| competition     | <ul> <li>Homefront Museum Parking and Partnerships</li> </ul>                                     |
|                 | 45  |

#### ENRICHING COLLECTIONS. EXPANDING CAPACITY

At the core of its mission and purpose, the Coastal Georgia Historical Society is responsible for securing, maintaining and presenting the collections, artifacts and stories that interpret the past and frame the future of this dynamic region of the country - and to do so in myriad styles which engage and educate a wide range of audiences and learning styles.

"The Society has renovated, developed and maintains excellent properties, albeit of very different natures. The Lighthouse and Keeper's Dwelling might be considered more like iconic "tourist attractions", while the Home Front Museum is more of a true history museum. The sustaining of these different types of properties will likely require different operating methods and objectives. On the one hand, the Lighthouse will primarily require keen maintenance, while the Home Front Museum will require maintenance and regular renewal of exhibits for it to maintain relevance."

Survey Response, Board Member

Key to the Society's continued successes are the growth, variation and dissemination of its collections and catalog. Moreover, the Board must ensure that adequate and appropriate physical space is available to support the organization's essential functions as a museum, visitors' attraction and preeminent programming venue.

#### **ENRICHING COLLECTIONS**

- Establish a schedule and funding plan for exhibit refreshing and updating across all sites and collections, starting with the Keeper's Dwelling, with the goal of continuing to drive new and repeat visitors to both museums.
- Promote outreach and opportunity to secure vital documents and artifacts which reflect the history and diverse cultures of Coastal Georgia.
- Implement a collections development plan and provide annual financial support for collections maintenance, restoration, and acquisition.
- Digitize the collection, to include the artifacts in the archaeology lab, and securely disseminate for research and public use.

#### EXPANDING CAPACITY

## EDUCATING FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS. ENGAGING COMMUNITIES

As Coastal Georgia's sole accredited history museum, the Society has the significant responsibility to share stories and cultural artifacts representing the entire community through programming and research. Education and interpretation are central to the organization's mission and work. Additionally, the Board seeks to expand the organization's reach and impact through outreach, engagement, and new community partnerships.

### EDUCATING FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS

- Build on prior successes to create educational modules and curriculum which bring students from across Coastal Georgia to our museums and which bring Coastal Georgia Historical Society educators and programs to their classrooms.
- Develop resource-efficient approaches to expand and diversify educational offerings and programming with the goal of bringing new audiences into the Society family and staying relevant.
- service-learning, internships, curriculum, research, and publishing.

• Conduct a feasibility study and develop a 5-year Master Plan for the main campus of the Historical Society, which considers the optimal and future uses of all facilities and grounds. Establish additional secure, remote storage for collections and inventory.

"Continue outreach with the schools, so they can see, hear and learn our history"

Survey Response, **Board Member** 

• Partner with colleges and research institutions to develop new opportunities for

## **KEY GOALS & STRATEGIC PRIORITIES**

#### ENGAGING COMMUNITIES

- Clarify the organization's role, relevance, and geographic footprint.
- Identify innovative, feasible ways to offer programming beyond the Society's facilities and St Simons Island.
- Collaborate with other museums and tourism officials throughout Georgia and the Southeast to develop new alliances and promotions which increase visibility and visits.

"The Society is known for excellence. The Lighthouse/ Keeper's Dwelling and Home Front Museum are local treasures that must be physically maintained, and their exhibitions continually upgraded and refreshed."

Survey Response, Board Member

#### **ENSURING SUSTAINABILITY, EMBRACING EXCELLENCE** — ALWAYS.

The overarching goals for the Board are to ensure that the Coastal Georgia Historical Society, and the historic structures and collections for which it is responsible, survive and continue to thrive well into the future. Financial and organizational sustainability are paramount. Further, the Society must continue to be recognized for unparalleled standards of excellence - in personnel, preservation, presentation, and programming.

### **ENSURING SUSTAINABILITY**

- Recognize the significant role that visitors and customers have on annual operations. Develop methods to protect and grow admissions and to continue enhancing the overall visitor/customer experience.
- Undertake an integrated marketing and membership initiative to increase community awareness and to retain and expand the mission-driven membership base.

- for the Lighthouse/Keeper's Dwelling and Home Front Museum.
- warranted, consider budgeting annually to sustain that fund.
- from donors and families.
- board membership reflects the region the Society serves.

### EMBRACING EXCELLENCE – ALWAYS

- Work with the Executive Director to maintain the current level of exceptional professional staffing and to mitigate risk in succession planning.
- Continue standards of excellence in staffing and collections management necessary to retain and renew accreditation with the American Alliance of Museums.
- Instill in the Board and promote across the organization the values of exploration, innovation, ongoing evaluation, rigorous quality improvement, and exemplary standards of production and achievement.

• Establish fully funded preservation accounts to support ongoing repairs and maintenance

• Determine the optimal, ongoing funding level for the restricted contingency fund and, as

• Design and launch a comprehensive planned giving initiative to secure long-term support

• Acknowledge the important partnership the Society has with the government of Glynn County, as property owner and facilities' neighbor. Advocate for infrastructure and property management which protect Society assets and investments.

• Develop a planning and review process to strengthen board governance and to ensure that

• Proof-test all current and new programs and activities to ensure congruence with mission, resources and the strategic plan. Link all work and board activities to one or more goals and strategic priorities - and measure progress and impact with exacting standards.

"What makes the Coastal **Georgia Historical Society** unique and special? The staff's dedication and commitment to excellence and providing a first-class experience for members and visitors"

Survey Response, **Board Member** 

The Board of Directors has set aggressive, but achievable, goals for the coming five years. The staff are energized and prepared to translate these goals and strategic imperatives into an operational roadmap which will guide the journey. Board Members will support and nurture that work, yet they recognize the need to empower the Executive Director and her staff to attach details and resources to each objective. As such, the Board and the Executive Director have agreed:

#### IMPLEMENTATION AND KPIS

- Following adoption of the Strategic Plan, the Executive Director is charged with working with staff to develop a five-year implementation plan to include Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and a regular reporting and benchmarking process with the Board.
- To ensure that the Strategic Plan drives the Board's work for the coming five years, meeting agendas and work items should be linked, wherever possible, directly to one or more goals and strategic objectives.

Additionally, as a logical extension of this Strategic Planning initiative, the Board understands the merits of exploring its branding and marketing approach. Once known simply as the keeper of the Lighthouse, the Coastal Georgia Historical Society is so now much more in scope and services. The Society name is recognized and respected. The goal in any future branding review is to retain all that positive recognition while better educating members, visitors, and supporters about the broader reach and responsibilities of the organization. Additional follow-on work should:

#### **BRANDING AND IDENTITY**

- purpose statements and to align visual identity and brand fidelity.
- digital programming.

The Board of Directors proudly shares this 2020-2025 Strategic Plan, with the hope of engagement, advisement, ongoing support, and investment from its many stakeholders. The Coastal Georgia Historical Society entered this planning process with an exceptional record of accomplishments and in a position of strength - both financially and operationally. Staff are capable, talented, and deeply committed to their work. The goals and strategic objectives set forth herein are designed to build on the Society's firm foundation, continuing to strengthen and expand the organization's missions in education and preservation well into the future. The Board is committed to ensuring that through the Society and its exceptional staff, programs, services, museums, and facilities, the history of Coastal Georgia is indeed celebrated daily.

Undertake a review and refresh process to ensure accuracy and reach of mission, vision, and

• Develop a multi-year approach to organizational marketing, expansion of online presence, and



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