Local Government Collaboration in Georgia

A Report to Survey Participants

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University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Georgia Southern University · 2026

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Introduction

About This Report

Georgia’s local governments operate in an increasingly complex administrative environment. Expanding federal grant programs, growing public expectations, and heightened regulatory demands place real pressure on governments, especially smaller ones, that must accomplish more with constrained staff and resources.

This report presents results from a survey conducted between August 2023 and August 2024 with local government professionals across Georgia’s 159 counties and 531 non-consolidated municipalities. The survey focused on four core areas:

- Grant-seeking capacity and funding access
- Interorganizational collaboration and networking
- Administrative workload and open records demands
- Strategic planning and staffing infrastructure

Respondents were the primary decision-making contact for each jurisdiction. This survey was supported by a dissertation research grant from the School of Public and International Affairs (SPIA) at the University of Georgia at Athens.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY INCLUDE:

1. Grant-seeking is active but uneven. Most governments submit first-time applications, but fewer than 1 in 5 have dedicated grant staff to pursue funding consistently.
2. Collaboration is a defining feature. Nearly all respondents (94%) maintain active organizational networks, anchored by the Georgia Municipal Association and regional commissions.
3. Capacity constraints are widespread. 76% report significant strain from open records demands, one in three lacks a current strategic plan, and only 21% have dedicated grant staff with constraints falling most heavily on smaller and rural jurisdictions.

Key Findings

What We Learned from 218 Georgia Local Governments

1

Grant Funding Varies by Capacity

Over one-third of respondents received funding from a new source during the past fiscal year and nearly 3 in 4 submitted a first-time application. However, only 21% have dedicated grant staff and 36% send staff to training — limiting consistent access to resources.

2

Collaboration Is Widespread

94% of respondents maintain at least one organizational connection, most commonly with regional commissions and state agencies. The Georgia Municipal Association is the most frequently named partner across the state.

3

Capacity Constraints Are Widespread

76% report that large open records requests place moderate to severe demands on staff time. One in three governments lacks a current strategic plan, and only 21% employ dedicated grant-seeking staff. These capacity gaps, not just need or intent, shape which jurisdictions can effectively pursue resources and serve their communities.

About the Survey

Between August 2023 and August 2024, Colt Jensen surveyed local government professionals involved in operations, management, and decision-making within municipal and county governments across Georgia.

The survey focused on four core areas:

- Strategic management and planning
- Collaborative information sharing and networking
- Staffing structures and grant-seeking capacity
- Open records and administrative workload

Surveys were distributed to all 159 Georgia counties and all 531 non-consolidated municipalities. Respondents were identified as the primary decision-making contact for each jurisdiction.

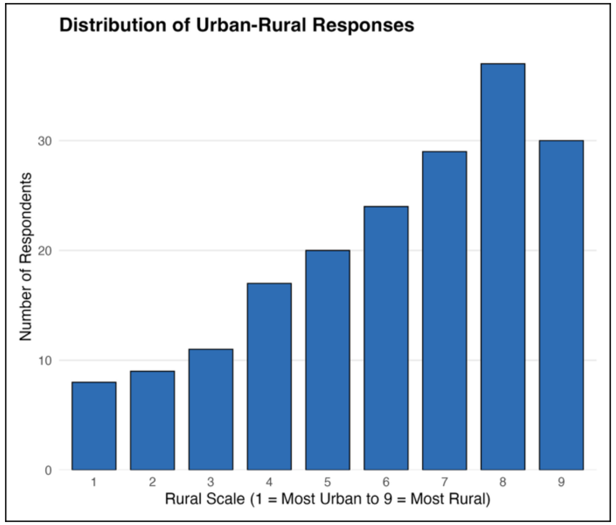
Note: Survey data were collected while the lead researcher was at the University of Georgia. Colt Jensen is now at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, School of Government.

218
Total Respondents

34.6%
County Response Rate
(55 of 159 counties)

30.7%
Municipal Response Rate
(163 of 531 municipalities)

8.1 yrs
Average Years in
Current Position



Who Responded?

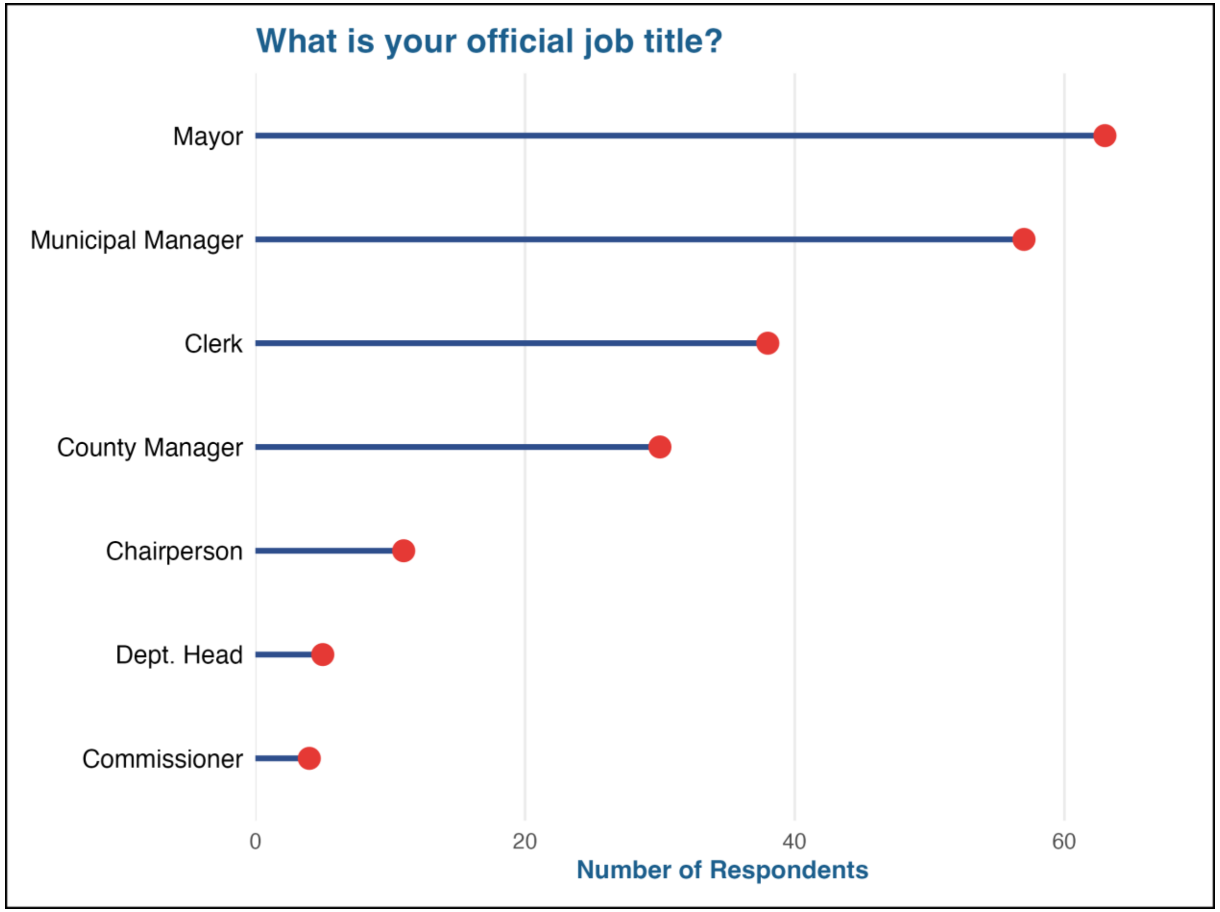
Survey Respondent Profile | N = 218

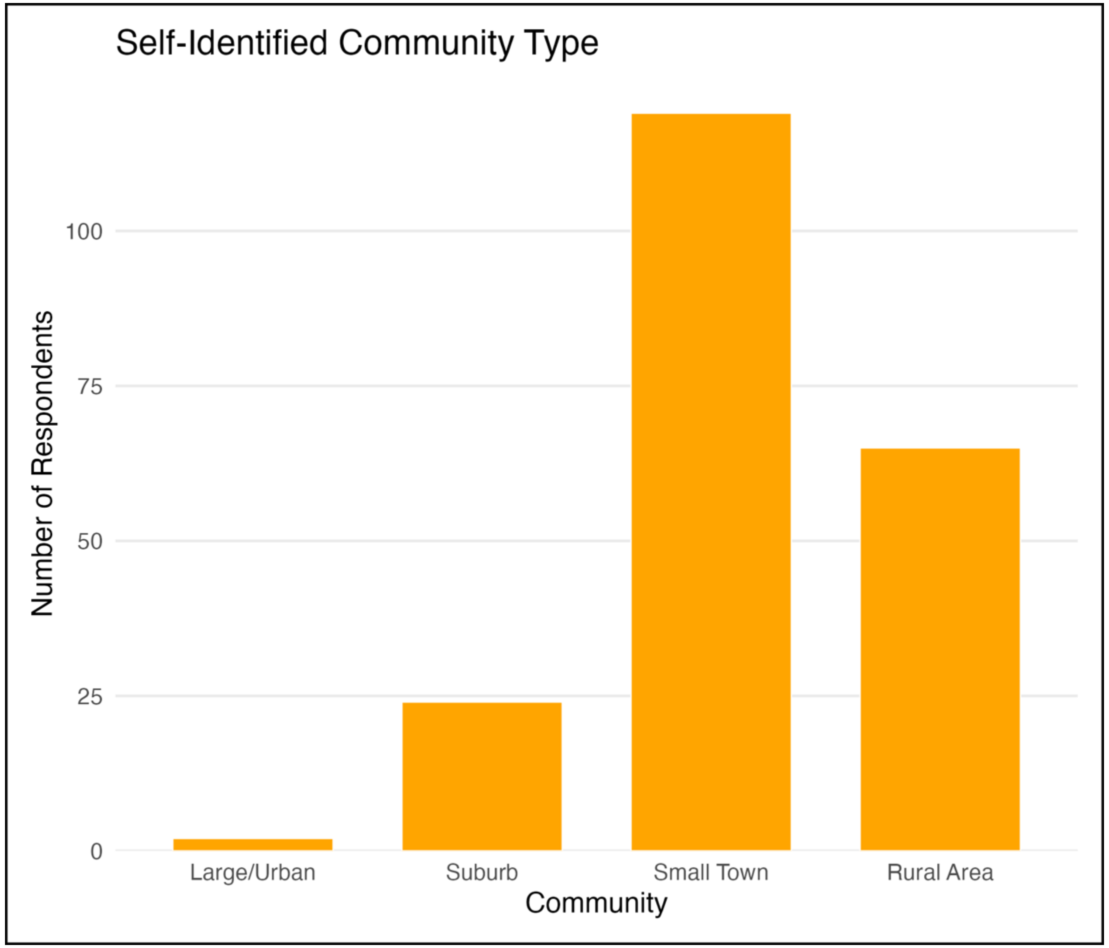
44.2%
serve as managers or directors

8.1 yrs
average time in current position

56.7%
Represent self-reported small towns

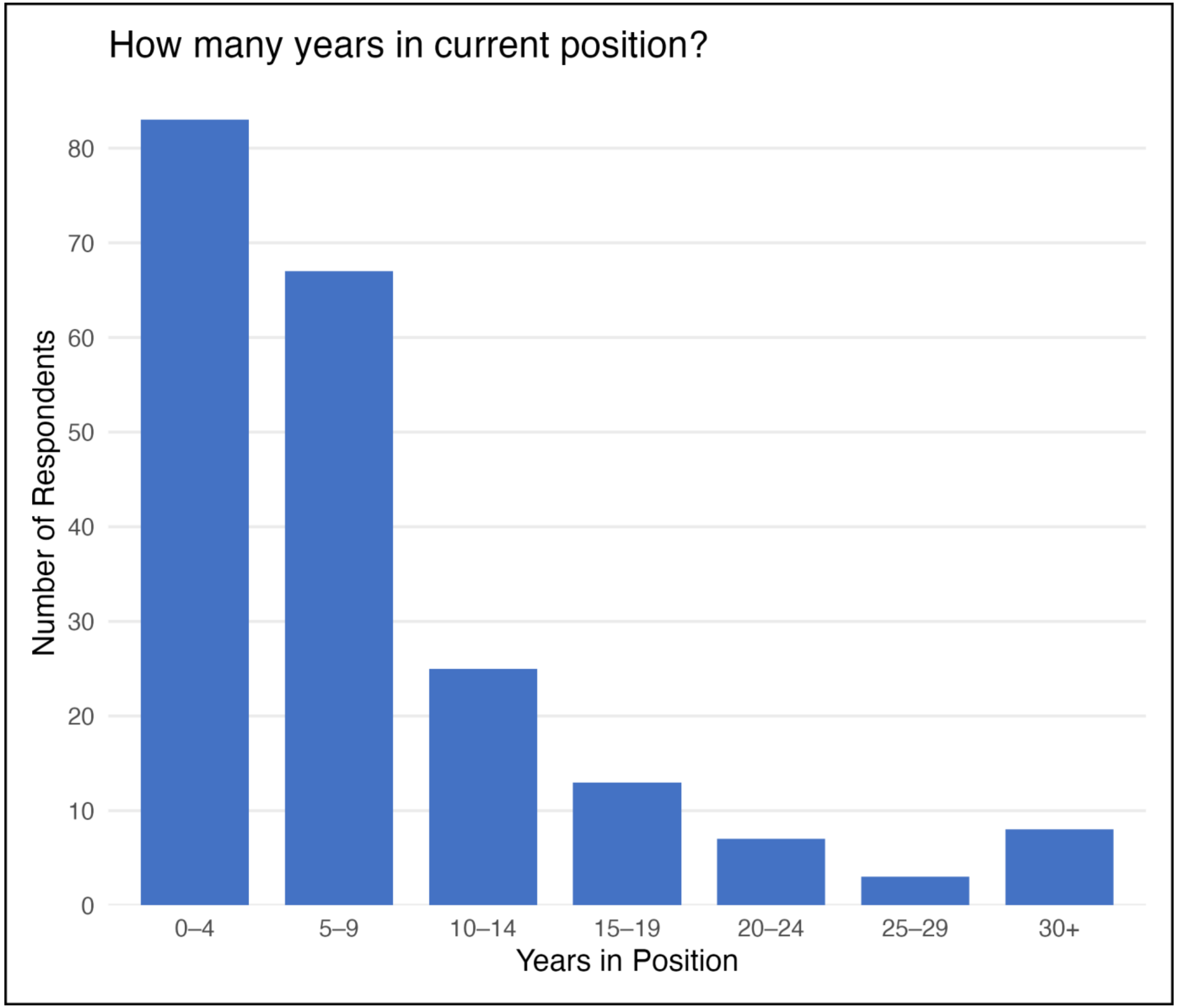
31.0%
represent self-reported rural areas





Respondent Experience

Years in Current Position | N = 206



Respondents bring substantial experience to their roles:

- Mean: 8.1 years in current position
- Median: 6 years
- Range: 0 to 44 years

The distribution leans towards respondents who have lower levels of experience, with most respondents reporting fewer than 10 years in their current role, while a meaningful share bring 15 or more years of institutional knowledge.

This experience profile suggests respondents are well-positioned to assess their governments' operational practices, staffing capacity, and collaborative relationships.

Grant Funding:
Sources and Practices

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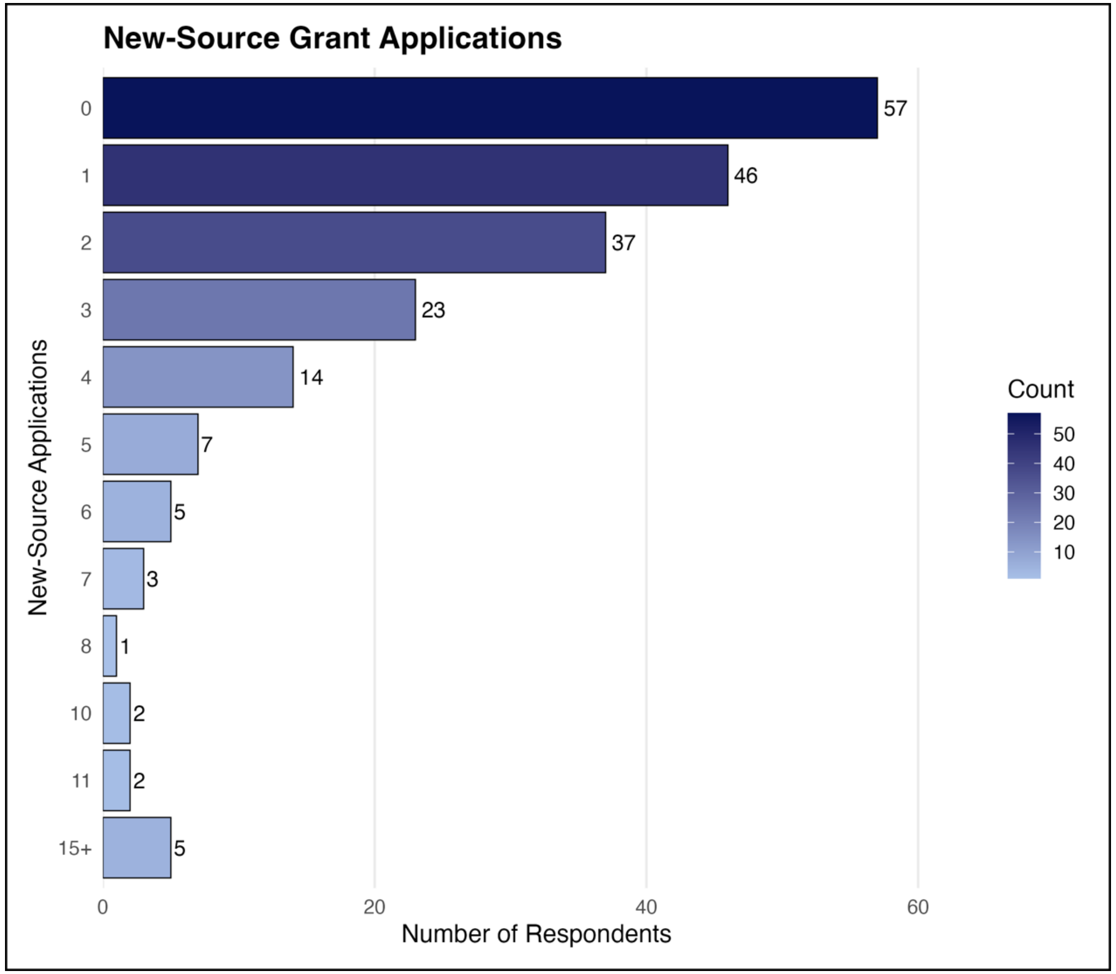
Grant Funding: Overview

56.4%
had received funding from a new source within the last 3 years

71.8%
submitted at least one new-source grant application

33.5%
received at least one new-source grant approval

1.49
mean new grant approvals per government



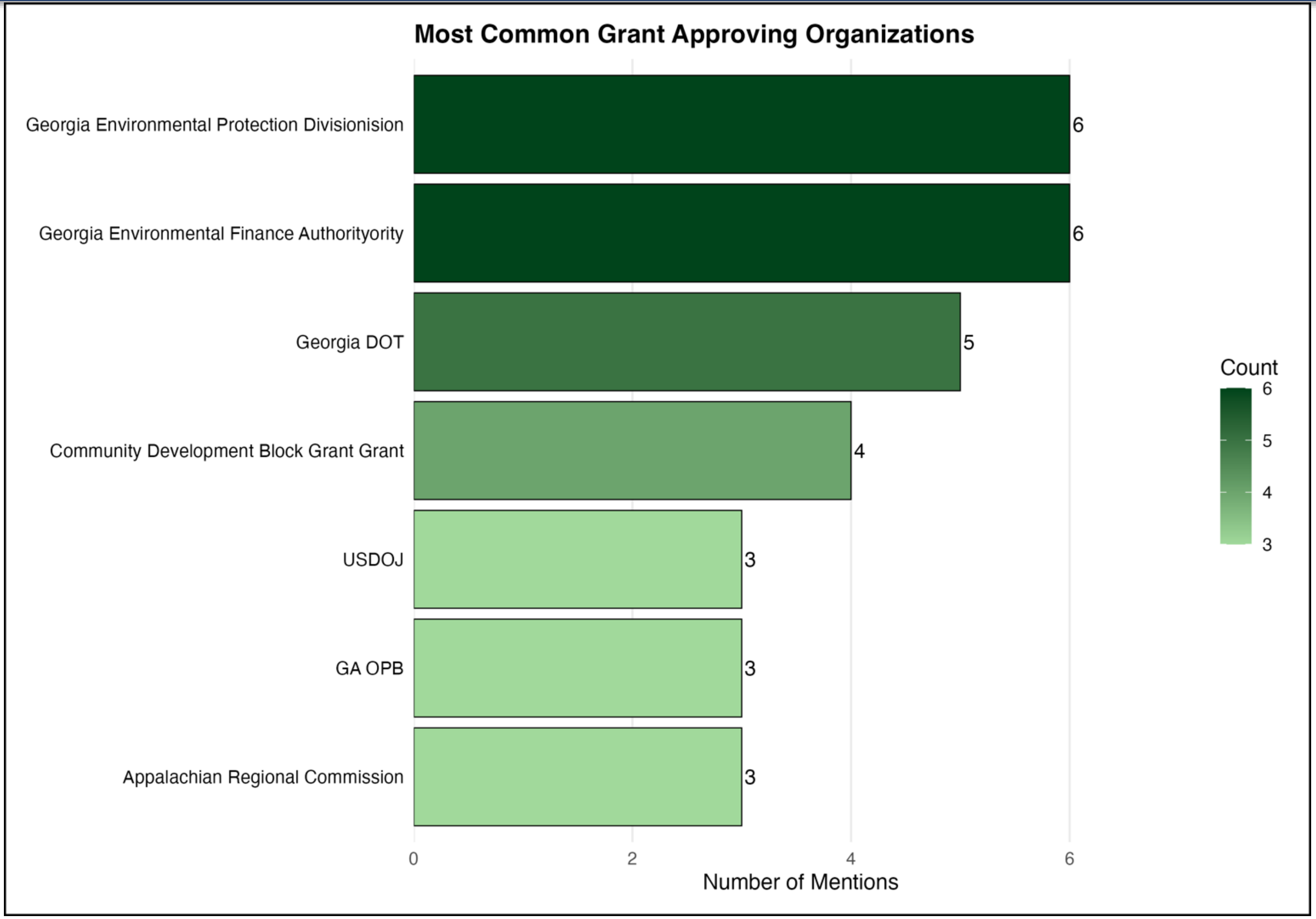
Over 200 governments provided information about a new revenue source, or first time, grant application, submitted during the previous fiscal year.

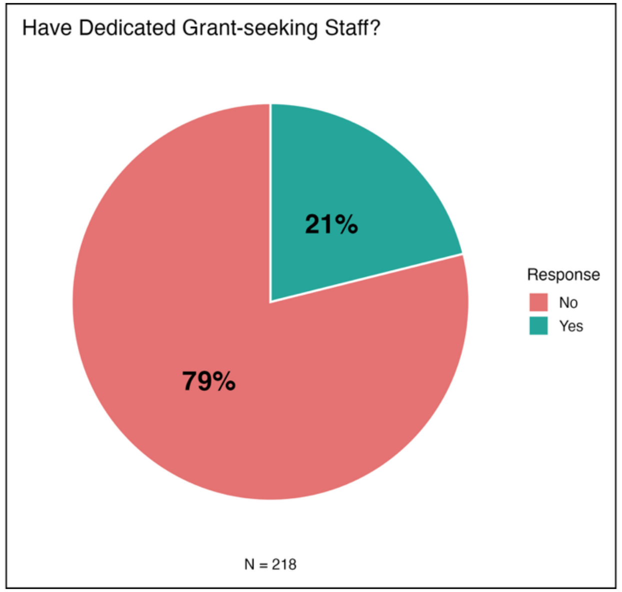
Nearly three-quarters (71.8%) submitted at least one application. State and federal agencies remain the dominant source of approvals, averaging 1.49 per government. Private and regional approvals averaged 0.41 per government.

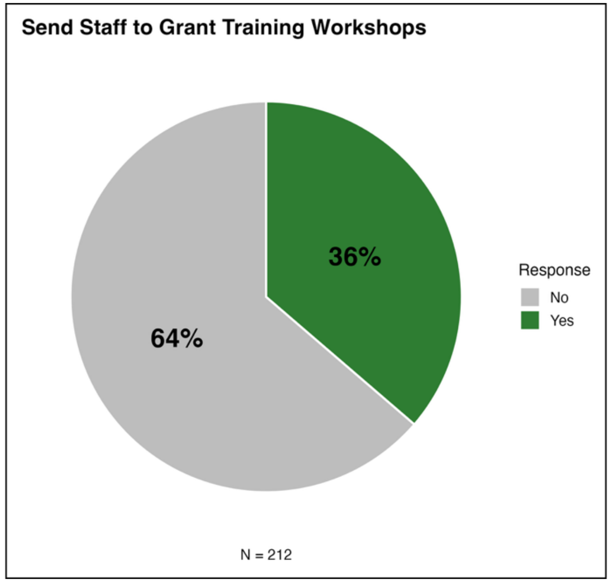
The distribution is skewed toward fewer new-source grant applications: most governments submitted 1–3 first-time funding applications during the previous fiscal year, while a small number submitted 10 or more.

Overall, 33.5% of governments received at least one grant approval from any source during the previous fiscal year.

Grant Funding: Approving Organizations and Staff Capacity







Georgia's EPD and GEFA are the most commonly cited approving organizations (6 each), followed by Georgia DOT (5) and CDBG (4). Most approvals flow through state/federal channels (avg. 1.49 per government). However, 79% lack dedicated grant staff and 64% do not send staff to trainings, structural gaps that likely help to determine which jurisdictions access resources consistently.

Local Government Networking and Collaboration

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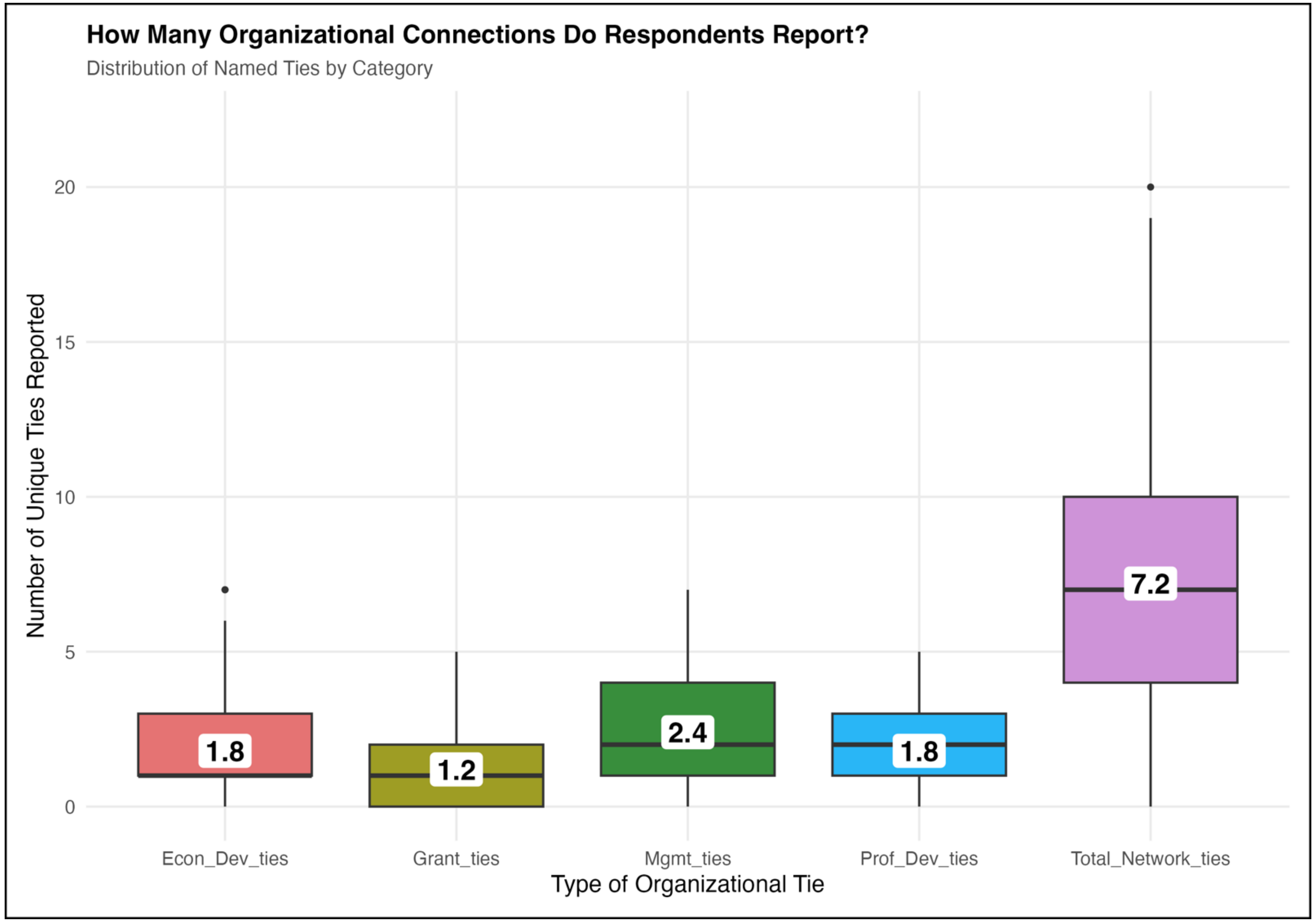
Local Government Networking and Collaboration

93.6%
have at least one external connection

88.1%
report 3 or more total external ties

65.1%
maintain ties focused on grant funding



Local governments report ties across four areas:

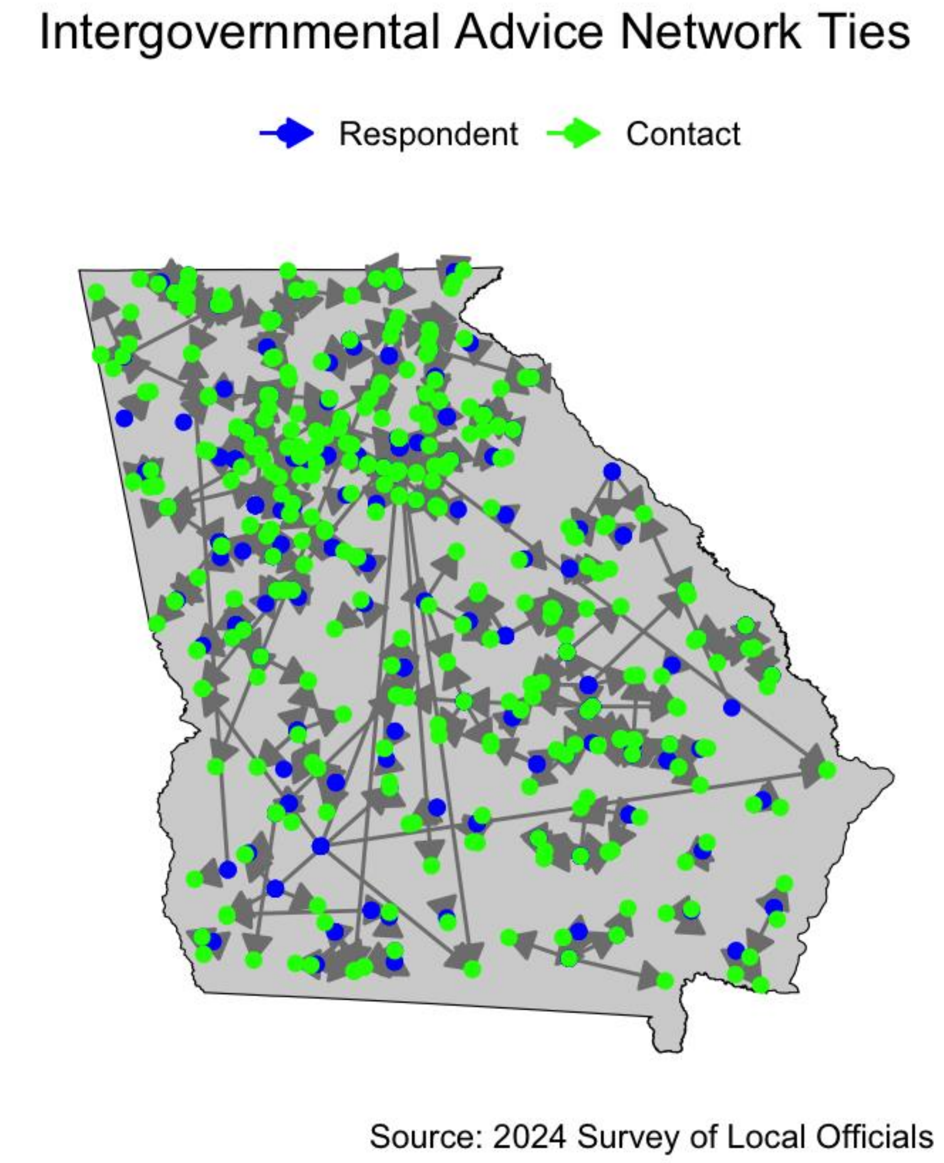
- Economic Development (avg. 1.79 ties)
- Grant Funding (avg. 1.22 ties)
- Internal Management (avg. 2.39 ties)
- Professional Development (avg. 1.78 ties)

The Georgia Municipal Association is the most frequently named partner, followed by Regional Commissions and the Georgia Department of Community Affairs.

Mean values shown in each boxplot reflect the average number of named partner organizations per respondent.

Local Government Networking and Collaboration

Geographic Reach of Intergovernmental Advice Networks | N = 218



The map shows survey respondents (blue) and their named network partners (green). Arrows represent advice-seeking relationships between organizations.

- Respondents span the full state, with denser coverage across the metro Atlanta corridor and mid-Georgia.
- Network ties extend well beyond local boundaries, reflecting statewide connections rather than purely local relationships.
- Rural respondents maintain meaningful interorganizational ties, confirming that collaboration is not limited to urban centers.

The breadth of these ties, spanning economic development, grant funding, internal management, and professional development, suggests Georgia local governments are embedded in a rich collaborative infrastructure, even where staffing and formal resources are constrained.

Organizational Capacity Across Georgia

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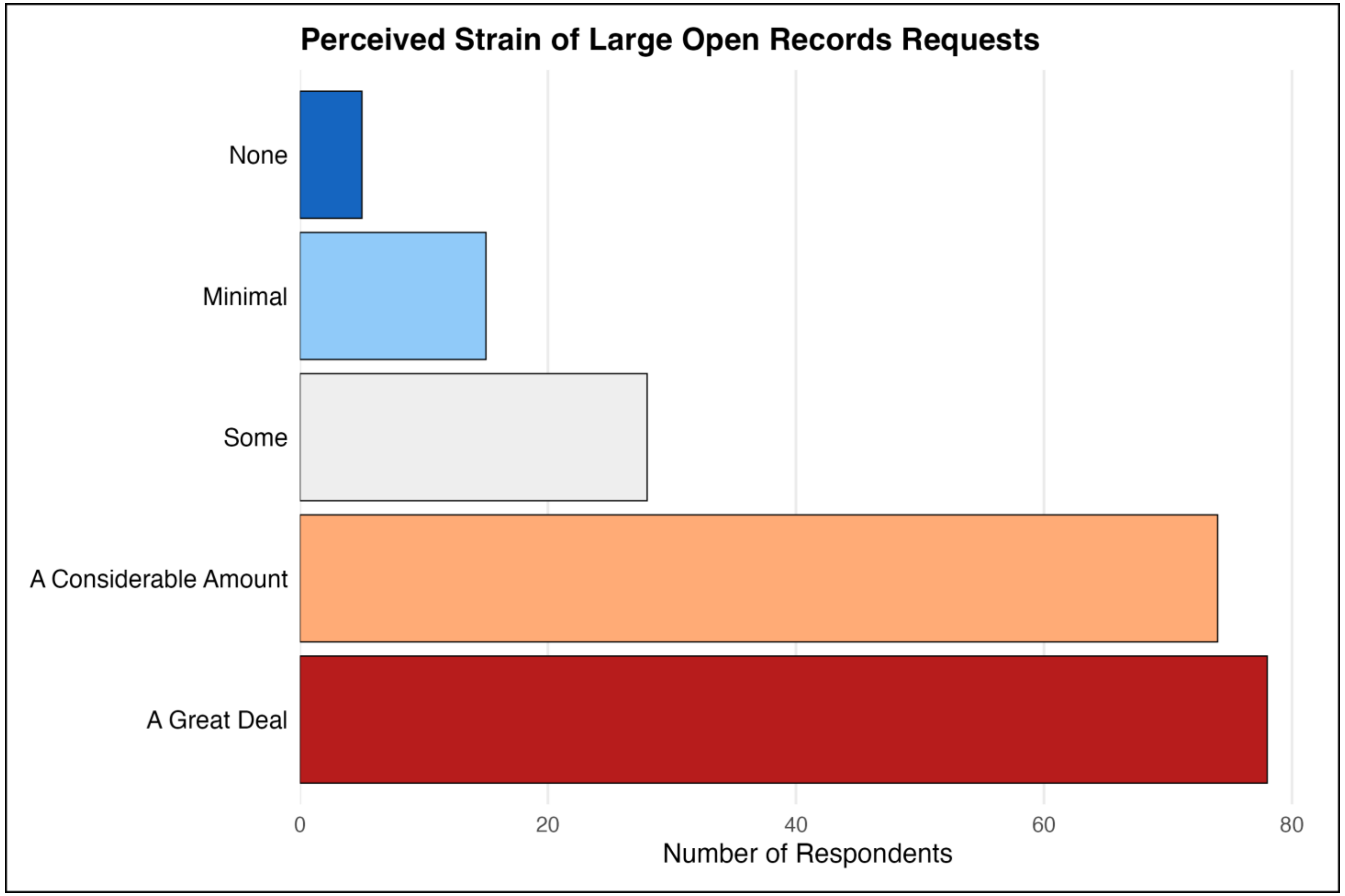
Organizational Capacity: Open Records Demands

Perceived Strain of Large Open Records Requests | N = 200

76%
report moderate to severe demands on staff time



Large open records requests (i.e., 30+ hours of labor required) place significant time and resource demands on local government staff.

Only 10% of respondents report none or minimal strain, while 39% describe demands as 'a great deal' — the highest category available.

This administrative burden may displace capacity for grant applications, strategic planning, and intergovernmental collaboration, particularly in smaller jurisdictions with limited staff.

Addressing workload pressure will require investment in staffing, technology, and procedural streamlining.

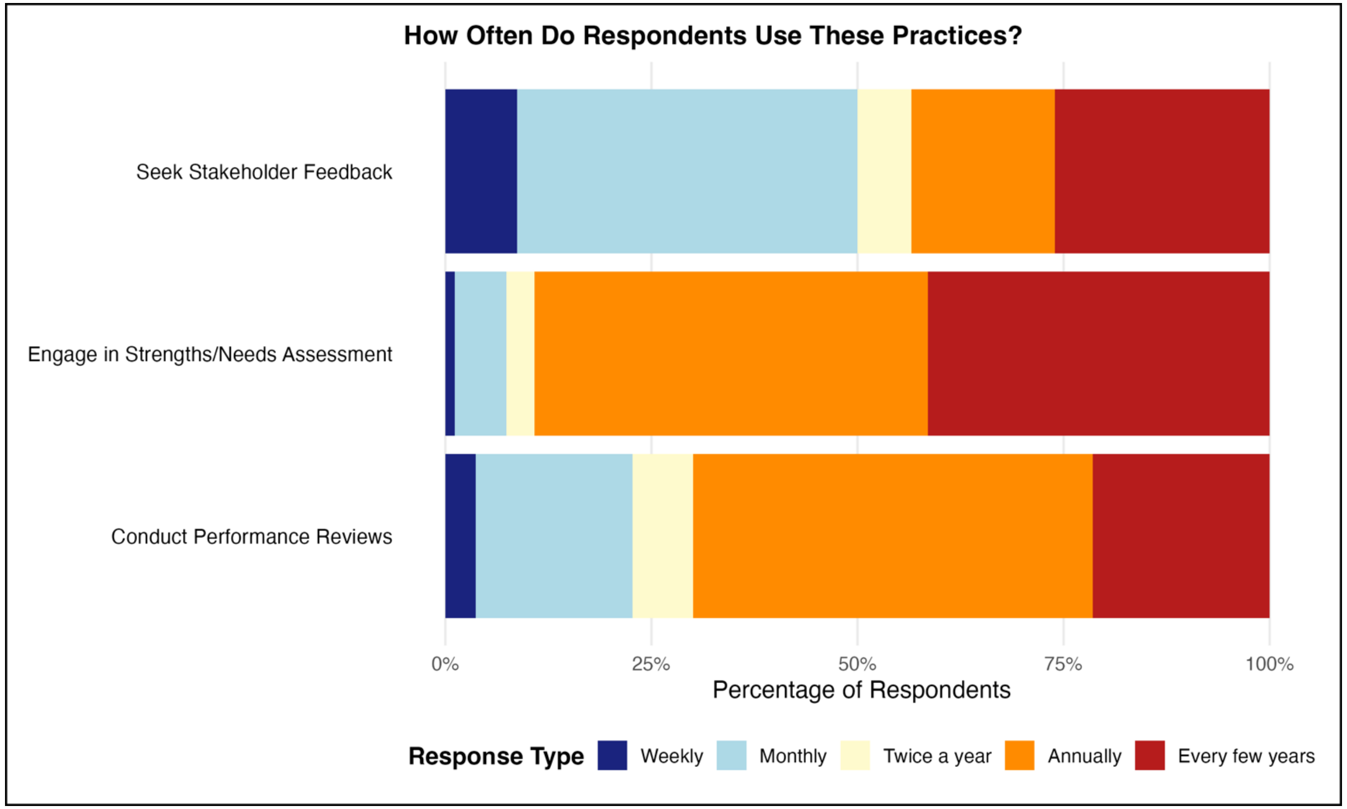
Organizational Capacity: Management Practices

How Often Do Respondents Engage in These Practices?

58.4%
engage in Strengths/Needs Assessment at least annually

73.9%
seek Stakeholder Feedback at least monthly or annually

78.6%
conduct Performance Reviews at least annually



Most Georgia local governments conduct performance reviews (79%) and seek stakeholder feedback (74%) at least annually. This indicates broad adoption of core public management practices. Strengths and needs assessments are conducted annually by 58% of respondents. Together these patterns reflect active organizational self-assessment, though capacity for more intensive cycles varies across jurisdictions.

Strategic Planning and Staffing

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Strategic Planning and Staffing: Presence

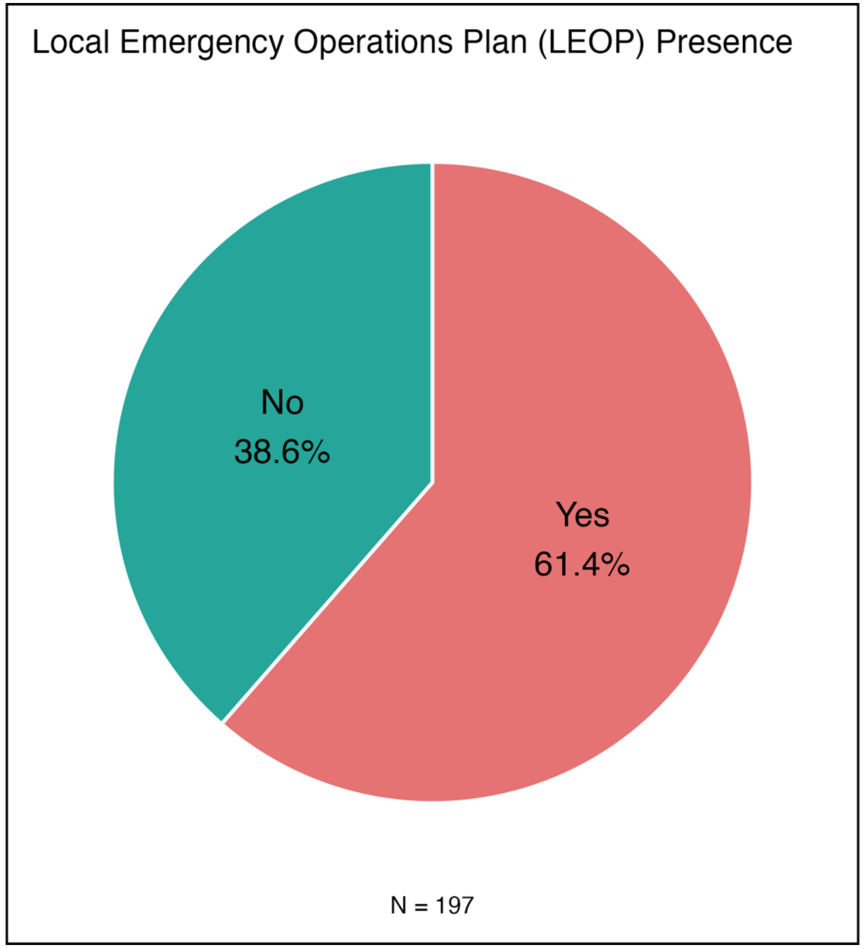
Formal Plans and Dedicated Professional Staff

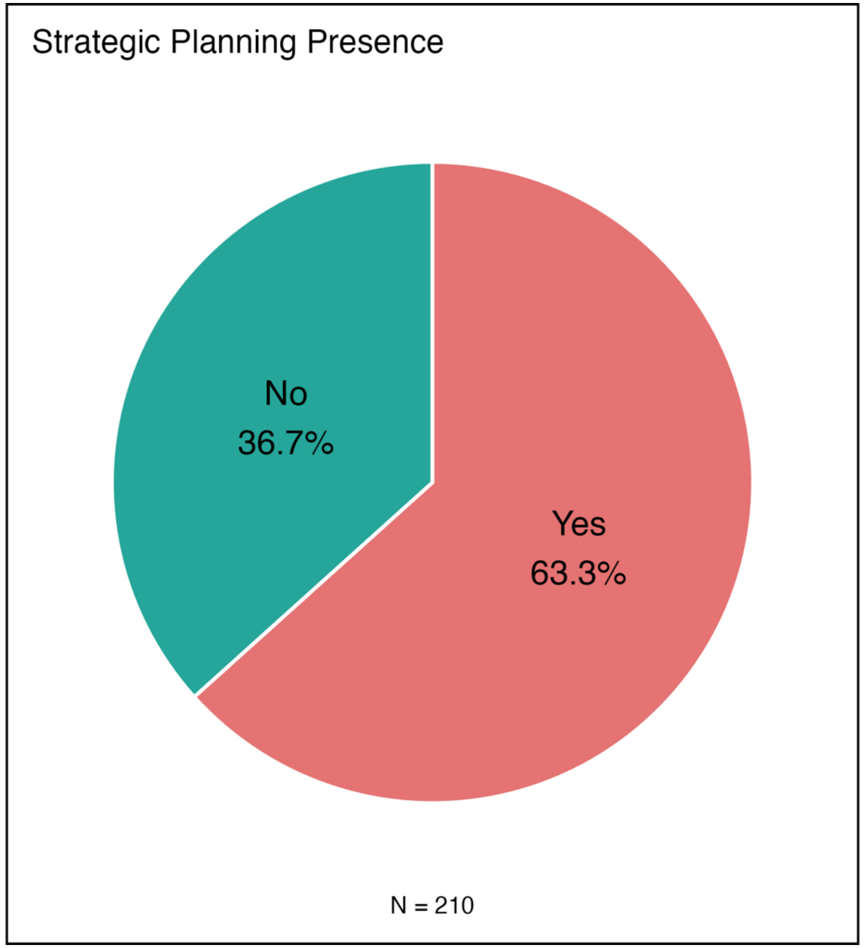
63.3%
have a current Strategic Plan

61.4%
have a Local Emergency Operations Plan

33.8%
employ dedicated IT staff

21.1%
employ dedicated grant-seeking staff



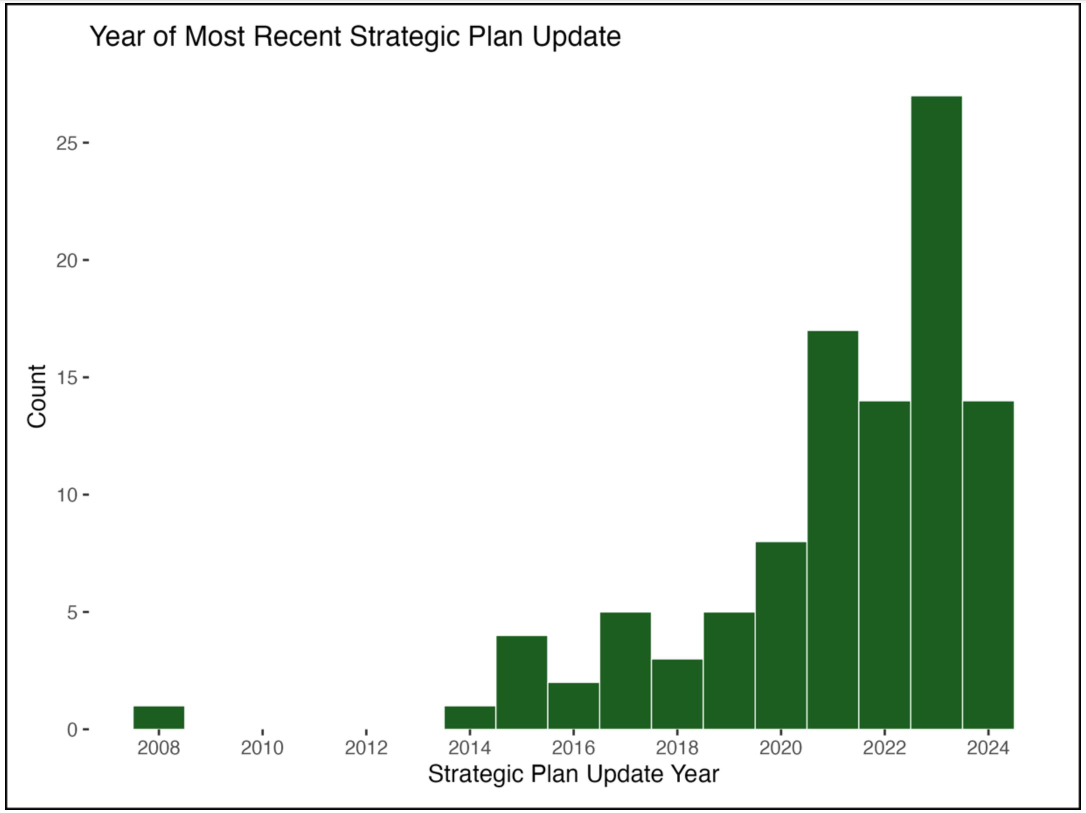


Strategic Planning and Staffing: Recency

When Were Plans Last Updated?

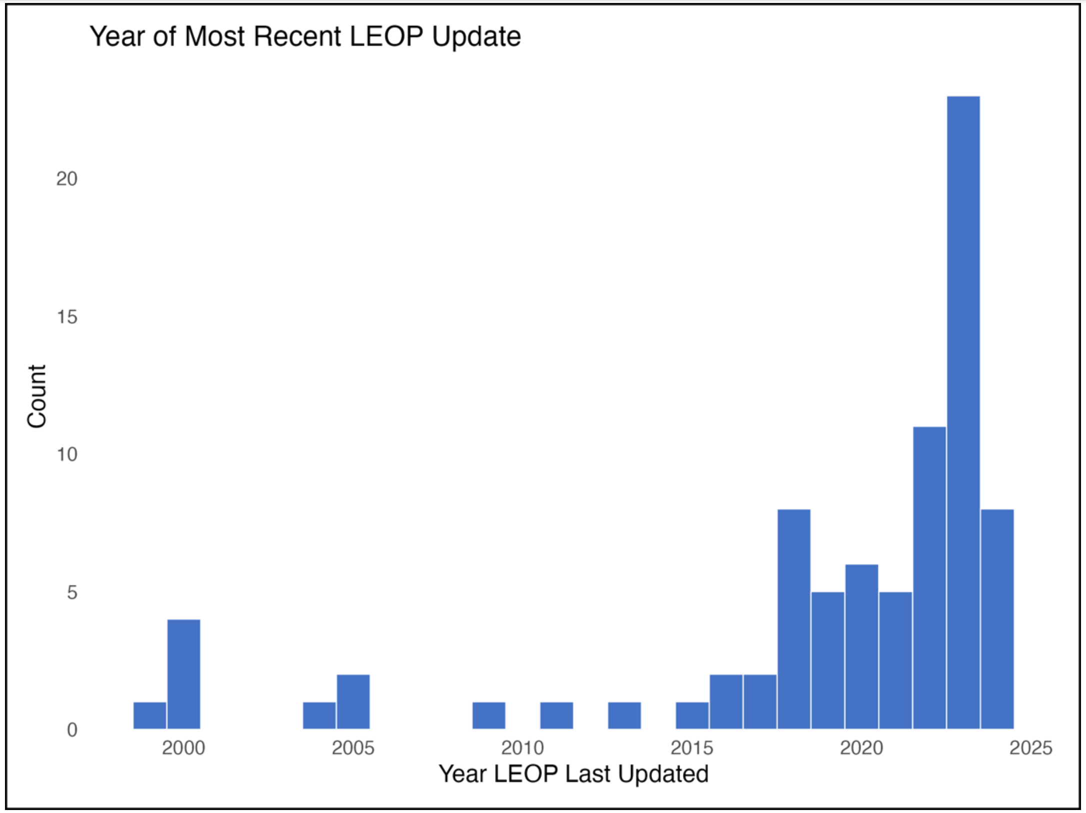
2021 / 2022

mean / median Strategic Plan update year (N = 101)



2019 / 2022

mean / median LEOP update year (N = 82)



Strategic plan updates cluster after 2020, with 2023 as the peak year. Most governments with plans are actively maintaining them. LEOP updates show more variation: while many are recent, several date to the early 2000s. The gap in emergency planning recency may warrant attention given increasing severe weather service demands.

Conclusion

Georgia's local governments are navigating an increasingly complex administrative landscape while simultaneously pursuing new funding, building interorganizational networks, and managing growing workload demands with limited staff and resources.

Grant-seeking from new funding sources is widespread but uneven. Over one-third of responding governments received funding from a new source during the previous year, and nearly three-quarters submitted at least one new-source grant application. Yet only 21% employ dedicated grant-seeking staff and 36% provide training. These gaps likely shape which jurisdictions can consistently secure resources, particularly as federal and state funding programs grow more competitive.

Collaboration is a defining feature of local governance in Georgia. Nearly all respondents (94%) maintain at least one organizational connection, and most report multiple ties spanning economic development, grant funding, internal management, and professional development. Regional commissions and the Georgia Municipal Association (GMA) serve as central hubs in this network, providing the connective tissue that allows smaller jurisdictions to access expertise and resources beyond their immediate capacity.

Despite these connections, capacity constraints remain real. Seventy-six percent of respondents report that large open records requests place moderate to severe demands on staff time, a burden that may crowd out energy for planning, partnership, and grant-seeking. Combined with findings that one-third of governments lack a strategic plan and fewer than one in four employ dedicated grant or IT staff, these data reveal meaningful differences in organizational infrastructure across Georgia's communities.

> ***"Overall, results from this survey suggest that Georgia's local governments will continue to adapt to growing administrative and financial demands. For those with stronger staffing, institutional structures, and interorganizational ties, this adaptation may be manageable. For others, particularly smaller rural governments managing significant workloads with limited personnel, the path forward will require targeted investments in staffing, technology, and collaborative infrastructure."***
>
> — Jensen & Ayittah (2026)

What This Means for Georgia's Local Governments

Implications for Practice and Policy

01 Grant capacity is a staffing problem, not a motivation problem.

72% of governments are submitting applications, but only 21% have dedicated staff. Jurisdictions that pool grant-writing resources, through regional commissions, shared services, or cooperative agreements, may be better positioned to compete as federal and state funding programs grow more complex and competitive.

02 Open records demands could crowd out strategic work.

When 76% of governments report moderate-to-severe strain from large open records requests (meaning those that require 30+ hours to fulfill), that time comes from somewhere, often planning, grant-seeking, and collaboration. This finding supports investment in records management technology and procedural streamlining.

03 Collaboration infrastructure exists. The question is how to leverage it.

94% of governments maintain organizational networks, and regional commissions and GMA are already serving as hubs. The foundation for shared capacity is in place; the opportunity is to build on it more intentionally, especially for joint grant-seeking, knowledge-sharing, and administrative services.

04 Smaller and rural jurisdictions face compounding disadvantages.

The gaps in grant staff, IT staff, and strategic planning don't exist in isolation, they reinforce each other. A jurisdiction without IT staff is less likely to manage records efficiently; one without grant staff is less likely to fund strategic priorities. Targeted state investment in rural administrative capacity could have outsized returns.

About the Research

Thank you to the local government professionals across Georgia who generously gave their time to participate in this survey. Your contributions make this research possible and directly inform efforts to strengthen public administration practice and policy across the state.

Related Publications

Jensen, C. (2025). Beyond Census Metrics: Toward a More Inclusive Understanding of Rurality and Its Effects on Organizational Capacity in Georgia. The American Review of Public Administration. doi.org/10.1177/02750740251355241 [open access]

Jensen, C. (2026). 40 Years of Rural Research in Public Administration: Definitions, Evidence, and Future Avenues for Research. Public Administration Review. doi.org/10.1111/puar.70084

For questions about this report, please contact the lead researcher Colt Jensen (cjensen@sog.unc.edu) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, School of Government.