

North Carolina Tomorrow: Building Communities for Tomorrow's Jobs

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The North Carolina Tomorrow initiative develops the North Carolina Strategy for Economic Development based on economic development planning best practices, which can serve as a blueprint for creating an economically sustainable economy. It is made possible through government agency and private sector collaboration. Thought leaders from all sectors, including health care, are involved at the regional level.

The North Carolina Association of Regional Councils is a nonprofit organization made up of the 16 regional councils of government that serve the state of North Carolina. The association's mission is "to provide 'creative regional solutions' to relevant and emerging issues in North Carolina while providing a standard of excellence in the delivery of federal, state, and regional services" for its member communities [1].

Regional councils were organized by state legislation [2] that was prompted by Congressional passage of the Intergovernmental Cooperation Act in 1968 [3], which called for closer cooperation between federal programs and state and local governments. The councils aid, assist, and improve the capabilities of their local government members with regard to community and economic planning and development, administration, fiscal management, and grant writing. They also serve as a convener for regional issue management. All regional councils administer and distribute state funds for community and economic development and for workforce preparedness. In addition, they serve as area agencies on aging, and are affiliates of the North Carolina State Data Center. The regional councils are the designated Economic Development Districts for the US Economic Development Administration. It should also be noted that the councils retain the institutional knowledge needed to serve as the repository and provider for these services. This is an extremely important role of the councils in many small towns and rural counties since continuity could be lost as local officials come and go from election to election.

The regional councils have always been committed to environmental protection of North Carolina's natural resources and have worked closely in this topic area with their member governments, as well as with the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources statewide. At the request of their local governments, the

councils have led many initiatives for land preservation and conservation, water resource management, and local planning for land use and resource protection.

The Association of Regional Councils launched a new statewide initiative in 2010 called North Carolina Tomorrow—Building Communities for Tomorrow's Jobs, which will produce a statewide strategy for comprehensive economic development. This strategy will be based on best practices in economic development and will incorporate the 6 livability principles for sustainable and resilient communities established at the federal level by the Partnership for Sustainable Communities. These principles are to provide more transportation choices; to promote equitable, affordable housing; to enhance economic competitiveness; to support existing communities; to coordinate policies and leverage investment; and to value communities and neighborhoods [2]. The partnership is made up of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the US Environmental Protection Agency, and the US Department of Transportation.

The movement for sustainable communities, meaning communities that are built to last and to withstand global threats (eg, massive job loss in the manufacturing sector, lack of non-renewable energy sources), began to spread across the country in 2009 and 2010. North Carolina has garnered 5 of the federal grants awarded by HUD on behalf of the Federal Partnership for Sustainable Communities over the past 2 years. Asheville, Charlotte, the Triad, the Triangle, and the Wilmington areas are currently carrying out the planning process for that federal program and incorporating it into North Carolina Tomorrow.

The first initiative of North Carolina Tomorrow is to facilitate the planning for regional comprehensive economic development strategies (CEDS) across North Carolina and then use these plans as the foundation for creating a state comprehensive economic development strategy, which will serve as a blueprint for creating an economically sustainable economy for North Carolina. The 16 regional councils

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across North Carolina, using the expertise of their professional staffs, are conducting regional strategy sessions with community leaders, professional economic developers and planners, and private industry. They are also synthesizing analytical data and incorporating best practices in the planning process. Thought leaders from all sectors of the economy, including health care, are involved in the process at the regional level.

The sixth livability principle—to value communities and neighborhoods—is elaborated on as follows: “Enhance the unique characteristics of all communities by investing in healthy, safe, and walkable neighborhoods in rural, urban, and suburban areas” [4]. This principle is particularly important to a successful economic recovery for North Carolina, because tomorrow’s jobs will require innovative, talented, and healthy people, and those people will want to live in innovative, healthy communities. Therefore, the discussion of economic development in communities across North Carolina now includes such health issues as clean air and water, access to fresh foods, access to outdoor activities, and affordable health care. Attributes such as these that affect health are becoming more and more important to the workers of tomorrow. For example, local foods have become more important as research has continued to reveal that processed foods are creating health problems across America [5]. However, some areas in North Carolina have little access to fresh vegetables. The planning process must address this by looking at systems that can move locally grown food products from rural to urban areas more efficiently. Another concern mentioned above is lack of access to green space in urban areas and lack of walking trails or greenways in rural areas are barriers to a healthy lifestyle, and are thus community issues that must be addressed. Towns and cities will need to analyze just how “walkable” their communities really are if they want to flourish in the new economy.

Funding for the North Carolina Tomorrow initiative comes from the US Economic Development Administration and the North Carolina Department of Commerce’s Division of Community Investment through the North Carolina Catalyst Program of the Community Development Block Grant funds program. Other partners have also come on board, including the North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center, the North Carolina Department of Transportation, the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources, the North Carolina Division of Public Health, the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Resources, Duke Energy, and the SAS Institute.

The SAS Institute is developing software specifically for the initiative. Called the North Carolina Regional Economic Prosperity Solution (REPS), the software will be used by planning and economic development professionals, elected officials, and private industry developers for data collection and analysis and will help measure success at economic development and sustainability. REPS will be hosted at SAS Institute headquarters in Cary in the SAS Analytics Lab for

State and Local Government (a cloud computing center established in 2010) and will be available for communities to use statewide.

Land-of-Sky Case Study

The Land-of-Sky Regional Council serves Buncombe, Henderson, Madison, and Transylvania counties in western North Carolina. Communities in that part of the state are already reaping the benefits of years of regional sustainable planning. In recent months, 2 major national breweries have announced that they are locating their East Coast headquarters in western North Carolina, bringing more than 350 new jobs to the area. Sierra Nevada Brewing Company and New Belgium Brewing Company have chosen rural Mills River and downtown Asheville, respectively, as headquarters for their East Coast operations. Company officials from both breweries point to sustainable development principles, including community health, as the primary reason for selecting western North Carolina over other areas in the eastern United States.

Sierra Nevada went through a 3-year process and considered more than 200 different sites in painstaking detail before ultimately deciding on the Mills River community south of Asheville. In an interview with *The Revivalist: Word from the Appalachian South* blog, marketing manager Erika Bruhn noted that quality of life, shared values, and access to the outdoors were key factors in the decision-making process:

The intricacies and particulars of the brewing process relating to water quality, coupled with the infrastructure needs Ken [Grossman, CEO] wanted around sustainability (close proximity to rail transport), made the requirements of a location challenging. Add to that, finding a community with shared values around the outdoor lifestyle . . . and you begin to understand more about our . . . approach: it’s about making great beer of course, but also quality in everything we do: family, community and finding our sense of place were all unequivocally part of our decision [6].

Kim Jordan, cofounder and CEO of New Belgium Brewing Company, is part of a new breed of international business leaders who believe that their company’s “bottom line” is more than just how much profit can be generated. Quality of life for employees and environmental stewardship mean as much to Jordan as traditional profit margin. At the recent announcement of the company’s selection of Asheville as New Belgium’s East Coast distribution center, Jordan spoke more about reuse of brownfield property, bike paths, and affordable housing within walking distance of downtown and its new plant than she did about financial incentives and traditional infrastructure.

These recent job announcements in western North Carolina come at a time when 5 counties in the region around Asheville (the 4 Land-of-Sky counties plus Haywood County) have come together to work on planning for the region’s future and preserving the qualities that make the

area so attractive to 21st-century businesses. GroWNC is a 3-year project that will, in conjunction with the North Carolina Tomorrow initiative, develop regional and local strategies for competitiveness and job creation. A consortium of local governments, nonprofit organizations, and businesses is guiding the project, seeking significant input from residents of the region, gathering existing and historical data, and synthesizing it to create a vision of the future. Together, members of the consortium will draw on existing plans and strategies to develop a plan to foster economic prosperity through a regional vision that identifies implementable projects and actions. The project will include significant public outreach and involvement.

GroWNC will allow local governments, businesses, nonprofit organizations, citizens, and others to realize unprecedented regional coordination on jobs, energy, housing, transportation, resources, and other interconnected issues. This will foster more prosperous, livable communities in our region through new high-quality jobs, new investment, diverse economic development strategies, quality housing options, efficient transportation systems, healthier people and communities, and better use of natural and cultural resources.

The GroWNC Consortium will gather public input and combine existing plans and strategies across the topic areas in the local livability framework depicted in Figure 1. Workgroups for each topic area listed (jobs/economic development, energy, housing, health, transportation, natural and cultural resources, and land use) are convening to identify challenges and opportunities, review existing plans and strategies, examine future scenarios and develop alternatives, and integrate public input into their findings.

GroWNC is funded by a grant from HUD through the Sustainable Communities Initiative. GroWNC is not about starting from scratch. It will draw on significant work that has already been accomplished in the region, weaving

together existing plans with public involvement. GroWNC is not a central authority over the region's local governments; rather, it is a way for the region to identify common goals and objectives that can be attained by working together.

The health workgroup contributing to policy recommendations for the GroWNC consortium will explore current and future health challenges in the region. The group has established four primary goals: to advocate for a built environment that supports health promotion in the planning, assessment, and intervention processes; to increase individual and community resilience through the integration of community, holistic and medical resources; to maintain a unified focus on investment in prevention that improves quality of life and reduces health care expenses; and to advocate for improved access to health care options for all regardless of ethnicity, age, state of disease, or financial resources.

Using available data, this group will examine public health indicators, and guided by the methodology employed for Community Health Assessments (CHAs) and Health Impact Assessments (HIAs), will evaluate the region to determine what policies, plans, programs, and projects are needed to improve the health of the population and workforce for a better future. Strategies will be developed and include the use of HIAs and CHAs, as well as other evaluation tools, for analyzing the potential health effects of various activities and the development of partnerships that can ensure health impacts are taken into consideration when decisions are being made about transportation, housing, and employment.

In conclusion, planning for more sustainable and resilient communities is taking place all across North Carolina. Community, regional, state, and federal leaders both from government and from the private sector, working together, can make a difference in how North Carolina moves forward in a new economy while building communities that make a real difference in the lives of their residents. NCMJ

FIGURE 1.
Local Livability Framework.



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