



Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: A New Report: Eastern North Carolina through a “Metropolitan Lens”

By CED Guest Author

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Ferrel Guillory is the Director of the Program on Public Life,

School of Journalism and Mass Communication at UNC Chapel Hill.

The UNC Program on Public Life has just issued a report, “North Carolina’s Eastern Region: Through a Metropolitan Lens” (full text available: [E NC Metro Lens](#)). The paper grapples with two principal questions: What could be learned by looking at economic development opportunities in Eastern North Carolina through a “metropolitan” lens as distinct from the standard models of “rural” development? What steps should the region take to attract and retain young professionals?

The paper is meant to be read not as a formal economic-development plan, but rather as a basis for conversation and policy thinking at the state and local levels. Data were gathered through interviews with 70 young professionals, ranging from 25 to 45 years old, living in the East, as well 15 who had left to live elsewhere in North Carolina, and a telephone survey of adult residents – an attitude poll that had more than 1,800 respondents.

Themes from the research include apparent disconnects between baby-boomers and people in Generations X and Y, between the sons and daughters of long-established families and newly arrived men and women, and between whites and blacks. There is widespread pessimism about the economy and the direction of Eastern North Carolina; and yet, many expressions of hope and of strong family and community ties.

The principal findings are as follows:

1. The Eastern Region needs the voice of young professionals. This analysis focused on the attitudes and aspirations of young professionals because they will inevitably form much of the muscle of the region’s business, civic and political leadership in the years ahead. Encouraging efforts to attract and keep young professionals in the East is not intended to elevate a new elite at the expense of working people and farmers, the elderly and poor, residents of communities in distress. Rather, regional neighbors would likely benefit from a strategy of developing amenity-type enterprises that would attract young professionals. What’s more, just as the region can no longer count on tobacco and small-shop manufacturing as economic mainstays, so Eastern North Carolina can no longer count on its current crop of long-time leaders of the baby-boom generation, many of whom will surely age out of their leadership roles after many years of service. Thus, local and regional governments, businesses, nonprofits and schools should create mechanisms to engage young adults in informed conversations on the future of the region.
2. As a state, North Carolina is in the process of a dramatic “metropolitanization.” Of the four larger metro areas in the Eastern Region, Greenville has emerged as the strongest “hub” for a regional approach to advancement of both rural and city economies. Now the state’s 10th most populous city, Greenville grew by 40 percent since 2000, and has accumulated key elements that position it to strengthen its own appeal to creative professionals and to serve



as economic driver, offering the prospect of job opportunities, for a wide circle of rural communities. In particular, the presence of East Carolina University in downtown Greenville, along with the Brody Medical School on the outskirts of the city, solidifies Greenville's posture. The challenge now is to develop a purposeful "hub" strategy.

3. Barriers, anchored in history, continue to inhibit economic vitality and progress. Barriers include lingering racial attitudes, educational deficits, and intra-community rivalries. Clearly, the time is at hand for regional collaboration, for the Eastern Region to band together to build upon its aggregation of assets. A strategy of regional action, with a focus on retaining and attracting young professionals, appears to offer the prospect of stimulating the creation of businesses, an expansion of jobs and the connecting of people and places in distress to centers of economic activity.