



Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Breweries and economic development: A case of home brew

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Article: <https://ced.sog.unc.edu/breweries-and-economic-development-a-case-of-home-brew/>

This entry was posted on April 05, 2013 and is filed under Built Assets & Housing, Community Development, Community-Campus Partnership, Downtown & Main Street, Economic Development, Lenoir County, Social & Civic Assets



Something is brewing in small towns throughout North Carolina. Far outside the city

limits of Beer City U.S.A. (also known to North Carolinians as Asheville), craft breweries are opening up in and around distressed downtowns throughout the state. Part industrial facility, part retail space, part bar/restaurant, and part real estate pioneer, craft breweries are emerging as innovative harbingers of neighborhood revitalization. Its leaders tend to break the traditional entrepreneurial mold, measuring their success not only according to profit margins but by the improvements in quality of life and neighborhood vitality that tend to follow in their wake.

The case of Mother Earth Brewing in Kinston, a small town (population 21,667) in rural eastern North Carolina, exemplifies this pattern. At one time a thriving community with a prosperous economy based on tobacco and textile manufacturing, Kinston's downtown had seen better days as it entered the twenty-first century. The tobacco and manufacturing heyday had come and gone and the once lively downtown storefronts were mostly vacant. Those looking for some semblance of a night life had better head out of town. Fast forward to 2013 and Kinston's downtown now shows some burgeoning signs of life –lunch spots are packed by noon, folks head in and out of the shops on Heritage Street, and public art in the form of benches and bicycle racks dot the wide sidewalks. And once five o'clock hits, patrons from all over Kinston (and elsewhere) pour into Mother Earth, for locally crafted beer, fellowship, and on some nights, live music.

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<https://ced.sog.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/brewery-300x225.jpg>

Mother Earth Brewery
Mother Earth Brewery

Mother Earth isn't the only reason for this recent downtown revival, but it can certainly take some of the credit. The brewery's co-founders (and in-laws) Stephen Hill and Trent Mooring were both Kinston natives and successful local entrepreneurs who shared a home brewing hobby. They also kept an eye on Kinston real estate and were longtime admirers of a deteriorating yet beautiful downtown building that had once housed a pharmacy and a grocery store. Hill eventually decided it was time to "formalize" his pastime and go into business with his son-in-law. Thus, Mother Earth Brewing, the only Gold LEED certified brewery in the state, was born in 2008. In addition to satisfying certain criterion to serve as a manufacturing facility (size, functionality, access to quality utilities), Hill envisioned that the repurposed historic building would also be a vanguard of Kinston's downtown revitalization strategy, helping to spur private investment and renewed interest in the promising, yet struggling city center. As a "native son of Kinston", Hill was willing to take on the financial risk because of his commitment to his hometown's future. And the gamble has appeared to pay off so far – Mother Earth, which is now distributed in three states, is set to meet its production capacity in 2013 and the brewery recently obtained its distillery license. As for Kinston's downtown, several new downtown shops and restaurants have



opened nearby, with several more set to open by the year's end.

Mother Earth's success doesn't appear to be an anomaly – other breweries across the state, like Fullsteam in Durham, Aviator Brewing in Fuquay-Varina, and Dry County Brewing Company in Spruce Pine, have each played a similar role in providing some positive momentum to areas suffering from disinvestment. There's much to be learned from their stories for local economic developers who are interested in attracting breweries to their towns in order to reap the "spillover effects" of these community-minded, innovative businesses. Because of their hybrid industrial/retail use, craft breweries require a unique blend of supportive zoning, an appropriate facility, adequate infrastructure, and local government assistance. The multiple needs of craft breweries require a delicate balance, but with planning and the right mix of ingredients, local economic developers can position their towns to develop their own "home brew".

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