



Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Collaboration and Momentum in Pamlico County

By CED Program Interns & Students

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It's 7:30 a.m. on a hot Thursday morning in Arapahoe, North Carolina, and the room is full of familiar teasing, hearty good-mornings, and a few apologies for being late (stuck behind the school bus on the one-lane highway). This is the Business and Entrepreneurship sub-committee of the Pamlico County STEP Leadership Team, and they are a competent and energetic bunch. They hold their bi-weekly meetings early, so that all the (volunteer) members can get to their full-time day jobs on time. The people in this room believe in the economic potential of their county, and they believe in the STEP process.

The STEP (Small Town Economic Prosperity) program is an economic development initiative from the NC Rural Center. Along with funding for project development and initial implementation, the program provides small towns with a year's worth of comprehensive guidance and training. Looking around the table here, it's clear that this group has taken that training seriously. They've done the goal-setting, the asset-mapping, the brain-storming, the S.W.O.T. analyses. They've identified economic development strategies that are appropriately suited to Pamlico County's particular character. They've come up with action plans, cost estimates, implementation strategies. And now it's time for all that planning to turn into action.

At the board of commissioners' meeting Tuesday night in the town of Bayboro, the board approved the STEP team's strategic plan and released funds to begin several of the projects. The town of Bayboro is the official steward of the STEP grant money, although the effort is undeniably a regional collaboration—representing STEP at the Tuesday night meeting were leaders from several towns, the county, the community college, the county school system, and the county chamber of commerce. The release of the funds marked an exciting moment in what has been a long and comprehensive process: it's time to move on from the planning stage, and begin implementation of several projects.

The STEP team's strategic plan for Pamlico County focuses on spurring entrepreneurship and on attracting tourists, retirees, and commuter families. Among the projects that are "shovel-ready" are:

- Incorporating the NC REAL (Rural Entrepreneurship through Action Learning) curriculum into the county school board's curricula
- Creating peer-to-peer mentoring and other support networks for local entrepreneurs
- Beautifying Highway 55 (the main highway through town) to attract commuter residents
- Developing and expanding a waterfront park in Bayboro
- Conducting a hotel feasibility study to attract hospitality developers to the area
- Building an open-air multi-purpose pavilion which will house a farmers' market, live music performances, and other community events

These projects haven't come out of thin air. Their development is the result of almost two years of planning, working, connecting, and collaborating. The plan the STEP team is launching reflects a carefully-developed vision of the assets and potential of the county, and that vision is starting to gain real momentum as it turns into tangible results.



In the post-meeting excitement Tuesday night, the team gathers in clusters in the hallway to congratulate one another and discuss what's next. In conversation after conversation, the buzzwords are *collaboration*, *working together*, *commitment*, *momentum*. Progress on ambitious projects like these can only happen with sustained collaboration, and these people know it. But they don't spend too long celebrating. After all, there's more work to do. Tomorrow morning. 7:30 a.m.