

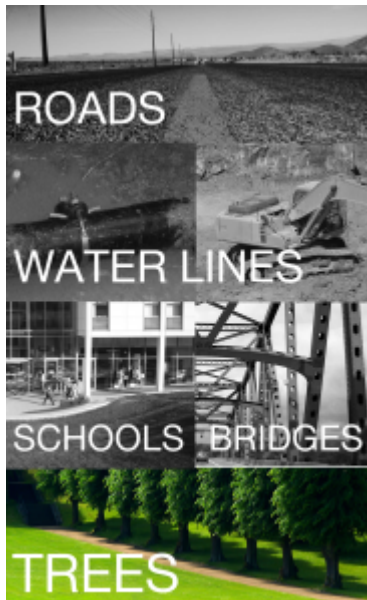


Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Measuring quality of life or “livability” within a community

By CED Guest Author

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What draws and retains residents to a specific community? Are there characteristics

that make a local jurisdiction a particularly livable place, and can this concept be measured? As many local jurisdictions seek strategies to encourage economic development, some are giving equal attention to the concept of livability to ensure the benefits of their communities are preserved or flourish as a result of such efforts. While there are limitations and challenges to measuring livability or quality of life, jurisdictions in the United States and abroad have embarked on efforts to capture and measure it through comprehensive indices. Such a comprehensive index attempts to measure the tangible and intangible variables of quality of life through a collection of indicators organized around topical areas (e.g., health, education, transportation), possibly producing a composite score.

Historically, measuring society's position and progress has focused on economic indicators. In fact, The Consumer Price Index and Dow Jones Industrial Average are two such examples of commonly-used indices. However, such economic measures provide a very narrow view of well-being, neglecting to evaluate other important aspects of life. Additionally, while national indexes are useful, they may not translate to the local level. As such, interest in developing and applying indices for the local level have grown as community leaders look for measures that reflect the daily experiences of its residents, as well as approaches to guide projects and policy decisions.

Comprehensive indices generally fall into two major categories, both of which speak to their broad purposes. An index can be either learning-oriented or outcome-oriented. A learning-oriented index collects, organizes, and presents data by category without a connection to specific goals or outcomes. This type of index allows community leaders to monitor conditions and trends for more informed decision-making. On the other hand, an outcome-oriented index assesses progress toward goals or a vision that has been established by a jurisdiction. [1]

Implementing a comprehensive index at the local level faces challenges that government officials and staff must take into account before embarking on the effort. Some of these challenges include lack of data, high demands on resources (time,



funding, and staff skill sets), gaining and sustaining stakeholders' support, limited ability of a local authority to influence results, and difficulties translating results into action plans.[2] [3] At the same time, there are benefits to implementing a comprehensive index. This tool has the potential to increase the availability of knowledge, show the interrelationships between issues, encourage collaboration between sectors, prompt action, and serve as a communication tool.

Some examples of comprehensive indices include:

The Boston Indicators Project: <http://www.bostonindicators.org/>

The Indianapolis Social Assets and Vulnerabilities Indicators: <http://www.savi.org/savi/>

Minnesota Milestones: <http://www.mnplan.state.mn.us/mm/>

Oregon Shines Benchmarking Project: <http://benchmarks.oregon.gov>

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[1] GAO, *Informing our Nation: Improving How to Assess the Position and Progress of the United States*, GAO-05-1 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 10, 2004).

[2] Wilson, J.; Grant, J. "Calculating ecological footprints at the municipal level: What is a reasonable approach for Canada?" *Local Environ.* Vol. 2009, 14, 963–979.

[3] GAO, *Informing our Nation: Improving How to Assess the Position and Progress of the United States*, GAO-05-1 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 10, 2004).