



Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: NC Commerce Kicks Off the Downtown Strong Initiative

By CED Program Interns & Students

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The North Carolina Department of Commerce announced

Tuesday that twenty-four communities located in small and/or rural counties throughout the state (see Table, below) have been selected to participate in the new Downtown Strong Initiative of the N.C. Main Street & Rural Planning Center.

The initiative was first unveiled in January 2019, when the N.C. Department of Commerce announced that it was investing \$260,000 in the Downtown Strong Initiative, a spinoff of Governor Roy Cooper's Hometown Strong Initiative for rural North Carolina. Hometown Strong Initiative, launched in February 2018, supports economic and community development efforts in rural counties across the state. The Initiative creates partnerships between state agencies and local leaders in rural communities to leverage existing resources in order to serve community needs, boost rural economies, and improve infrastructure. The Downtown Strong Initiative echoes the goals of the Hometown Strong Initiative by providing state support and expertise to local communities in rural parts of North Carolina.

The communities chosen to participate in Downtown Strong were selected based on site visits conducted in 2018 and early 2019 by the Hometown Strong Initiative team as part of the state's process for understanding the challenges faced by rural communities in reinvigorating their local economies. The priorities of the Downtown Strong Initiative — namely leadership development and education, building local government capacity, and downtown revitalization — were determined based on insights gleaned from conversations with leadership of the localities that work on an ongoing basis with N.C. Commerce.

In order to achieve these goals, the Downtown Strong Initiative will assist local governments by providing economic development planning and downtown revitalization support. The program will operate out of the Department of Commerce's Main Street and Rural Planning Center, which offers technical assistance services to communities that are revitalizing or preserving their downtown commercial corridors. The Downtown Strong Initiative, in effect, functions as an outreach arm to the Center — assisting communities that are not yet part of the formal Main Street program, or that have needs outside of the traditional scope of the program.

Structurally, the program will work collaboratively with the N.C. Commerce Regional Prosperity Zone planners to provide a downtown assessment and implementation plan to each community involved. The program will provide towns with training, education and opportunities to network, and will pair downtown revitalization experts with communities for implementation support. The program will either prepare communities for future inclusion in the N.C. Main Street and Rural Planning Center's Downtown Associate Community program, which provides communities with downtown services, or to simply prepare localities for independent efforts to improve economic vibrancy through recruitment of new businesses, creation of new jobs and other investments.

The services provided to the selected communities will use the framework of the Main Street America program, which



champions downtown economic development strategies implemented through four key areas of focus – economic vitality, design, promotion and organization actions. This suggests that we can expect services delivered to these communities to include: special economic and financial tools to assist new and existing businesses and/or entrepreneurs, and tools to catalyze property development; strategies to enhance the physical assets within the community to create a sense of place and position the downtown as the community's center of economic activity; and organizational and capacity development through cultivation of partnerships and community engagement.

The Downtown Strong Initiative appears to function as an additional component of Governor Roy Cooper's layered approach to bridging the urban-rural divide in North Carolina and assisting rural communities with small teams of experts and administrative support. Early signs of success suggest that the Hometown Strong Initiative has been impactful for partner communities. Future evaluation will be needed to determine the long-term impact and sustainability of the Initiative and its partner efforts including the Downtown Strong Initiative.

Downtown Strong Selected Communities

Town	County
Chadbourn	Columbus
Pembroke	Robeson
St. Pauls	Robeson
Parkton	Robeson
Maysville	Jones
Pollocksville	Jones
Littleton	Halifax
Weldon	Halifax
Halifax	Halifax
Princeville	Edgecombe
Nashville	Nash
Bailey	Nash
Louisburg	Franklin
Youngsville	Franklin
Raeford	Hoke
Thomasville	Davidson
Wadesboro	Anson
Yanceyville	Caswell
Lansing	Ashe
Bryson City	Swain
Spindale	Rutherford
Robbinsville	Graham
Pilot Mountain	Surry
Marshall	Madison

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