



Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Strong Cities, Strong Communities: Rocky Mount, NC

By CED Program Interns & Students

Article: <https://ced.sog.unc.edu/strong-cities-strong-communities-white-house-initiative-in-rocky-mount-nc/>

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The *White House Council on Strong Cities, Strong Communities (SC2)* initiative is

a new approach to economic development support at the federal level that combines funding and hands-on technical assistance services for distressed communities across the country. Rocky Mount, NC was recently named as a participating community for this innovative federal program that local officials hope will strengthen the City's struggling local economy.

The initial SC2 annual report is full of good information on the program's purpose, objectives, and positive outcomes that have been realized in participating communities. The SC2 initiative was first launched in July 2011 with six participating pilot communities across the country and it has since been expanded to include additional communities, including Rocky Mount. SC2 is a multi-faceted program that sends teams of federal experts to participating communities to work alongside local government leaders and other community stakeholders. The teams work collectively to develop and implement plans that efficiently use existing resources and take advantage of federal programs that align with community goals. SC2 allows federal teams to work side-by-side with community leaders and provide them with the technical assistance they need to execute their community development strategies. These strategies take inventory of the city's assets, identify their competitive advantage, and develop the community capacity necessary to strengthen their economies.

In the small town of Chester, Pennsylvania SC2 program assistance helped pave the way for a \$4.5 million investment in a much needed local grocery store, the City's first new grocery store in over a decade. In Fresno, California the SC2 team helped facilitate a partnership between multiple federal agencies that resulted in the City receiving a grant from the Economic Development Administration (EDA) to support the agribusiness sector in the San Joaquin Valley region. The grant will help strengthen the regional economy by expanding Fresno's value-added food sector into a regional food processing cluster that generates higher paying jobs for area residents.

Rocky Mount is a town of just over 57,000 people located on the Nash and Edgecombe County line that shares some of the challenges to economic development that are present in many eastern North Carolina communities. The decline of the textiles and traditional manufacturing industries in eastern North Carolina has put communities like Rocky Mount at a disadvantage when it comes to sustaining long-term economic growth. From 1990 – 2012, the Rocky Mount Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) lost 53 manufacturing establishments and over 10,000 workers in that sector of the economy. Sixteen textile mills closed their doors in the same time period, resulting in 3,459 jobs lost¹. Rocky Mount has an unemployment rate of 10.3%, which is above the state's 6.4% unemployment rate², and 23.2% of Rocky Mount residents live below the poverty line³. These structural barriers to economic development present many challenges to community leaders seeking to reverse these negative trends and perceptions of Rocky Mount.

Rocky Mount will work with SC2 to provide assistance to implement aspects of the action goals from the *Twin Counties Visioning and Strategic Planning Process*. The City of Rocky Mount is serving as the lead agency for this comprehensive community action plan that will implement a shared vision for community development on behalf of the citizens of Nash



and Edgecombe Counties. Rocky Mount's top community development priority areas include: harnessing the region's potential for agribusiness and sustainable farming opportunities, bolstering regional economic development efforts with a focus on talent development, and targeting improvements in the quality of life for residents in disadvantaged neighborhoods.

With the assistance of the federally-funded Strong Cities, Strong Communities program, Rocky Mount is poised for a comeback. The SC2 team will provide Rocky Mount officials with the technical assistance and community capacity building that have never before been at their disposal. Rocky Mount is representative of many North Carolina communities that are working to adapt to the new realities of the 21st century global economy. The Strong Cities, Strong Communities program is a unique federal initiative that values hands-on community engagement from federal policy experts. This federal initiative has the potential to transform Rocky Mount alongside other redevelopment efforts, and hopefully other North Carolina communities will have an opportunity to reap similar benefits through a partnership with the Strong Cities, Strong Communities initiative.

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1. Data obtained from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages. Figures for "Manufacturing" (NAICS Code: 31) and "Textile Mills" (NAICS Code: 313) are for privately-owned establishments only. Retrieved from <http://esesc23.esc.state.nc.us/d4/QCEWSelection.aspx>
2. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Non-seasonally adjusted unemployment rate for Rocky Mount (Jan 2014) and North Carolina (Feb 2014).
3. U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2008-2012 5-year estimate.