



Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: The BEST STEP

By CED Program Interns & Students

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During my three weeks working with the Cape Fear COG I have been working with the BEST STEP cluster and getting up to speed on their projects and how I can provide assistance for the group to reach their goals. The organization has been foundational in improving the economic prospects of the area.

The BEST STEP is the Rural Center's Small Town Economic Prosperity Demonstration Program in the towns of Bolton, East Arcadia, and Sandyfield. The NC STEP Program has three primary goals: to support economic recovery and revitalization in small towns adversely affected by structural changes in the economy or recent natural disasters; to test a comprehensive model of technical assistance and grantmaking to aid in revitalization efforts; and to provide information vital to the development of public policies that support long-term investment in the economic vitality of North Carolina's small towns.

Bolton, East Arcadia, and Sandyfield originally received \$20,000 from the Rural Center as a test to see if it was possible for three towns to work together effectively. The BEST cluster used the grant money to conduct a series of public meetings to gather a list of community priorities and to create a plan to spend additional money to meet the goals of the STEP Program. The Rural Center awarded the group an additional \$200,000 to implement their plan.

Through the process the group has used the money to create the BEST Economic Development Corporation a 501(c)(3), it has handed out façade grants to improve commercial buildings, it has helped local entrepreneurs to create business plans and given small business grants as well. Additionally the BEST STEP has started work on a 1-mile trail through the Sandyfield Preserve in order to promote eco-tourism.

The two-year grant program is beginning to wrap up now, the work is now centering on shepherding the new local businesses through the final steps, we are beginning to evaluate the success of the programs, and we are looking for new funding opportunities to continue the work that was started here.

The Rural Center's investment in the BEST STEP has, and will continue to have, an exponential effect on economic development in the cluster of towns. For example, on Monday night the BEST Business Committee met to vote on awarding grant money to a couple of applicants, and at that meeting and through those conversations that group shared information back and forth with one another, and those applicants left with a small grant and the knowledge of other grants that would apply to their goals, and multiple connections were made in the areas social and professional network. This group is building the region's social and human capital.

It will be part of my duties to find funding sources to replenish the spent fund, and seeing the cooperation and excitement in that room has encouraged me that my work this summer and next year will not be in vain. I am confident the BEST Economic Development Corporation will continue.