

Resiliency  
 Rural Partnerships  
 Technical Community  
 Nonprofit  
 Strategic Resources  
 Recovery  
 Economic Prosperity  
 Planning  
 Outdoor Recreation  
 Local Government  
 Leverage  
 Stronger Assistance  
 Implementation  
 North Carolina  
 Education

2023 ANNUAL REPORT: JANUARY-DECEMBER 2023 ACTIVITY

# THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF *Rural Planning* IN NORTH CAROLINA

Resiliency  
 Rural Partnerships  
 Planning  
 Economic Prosperity  
 Technical Community  
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 Strategic Resources  
 Recovery

**N.C. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE | NC MAIN STREET & RURAL PLANNING CENTER**

The NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center works in regions, counties, cities, towns, downtown districts, and designated North Carolina Main Street communities to inspire placemaking through building asset-based economic development strategies that achieve measurable results such as investment, business growth, and jobs.



## NC Rural Planning Program



Part of the NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center, the Rural Planning program provides municipalities, county governments, and other organizations in rural areas with strategic economic development planning, technical assistance, and training. Rural Planning program staff serve each of North Carolina's eight Prosperity Zone regions from offices in the West (Waynesville), Northwest (Morganton), Piedmont-Triad (Mount Airy), Southwest (Lincolnton), North Central (Clayton), Sandhills (Fayetteville), Northeast (Greenville), and Southeast (Leland). Additional program staff are based in Asheville.

### ON THE COVER (from the top)

Flamingos Mural by Napoleon Hill  
Scotland Neck, NC

Outdoor Gear Retailer  
Sylva, NC

Rural Landscape  
Ashe County, NC

"Commercial Row" Storefronts  
Milton, NC

Jones Lake State Park  
Elizabethtown, NC

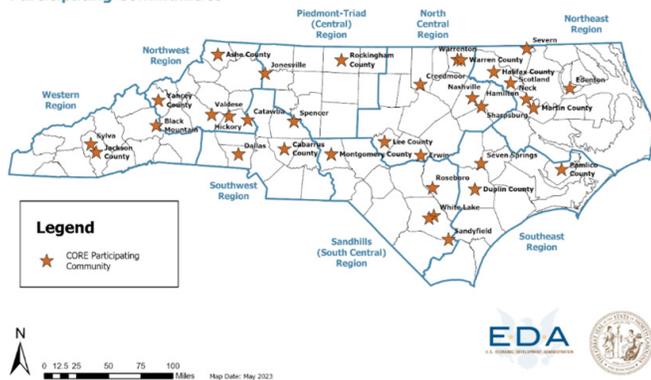
## Strategic Economic Development Planning

The Rural Planning program works with communities to develop asset-based, strategic economic development plans to help them identify, prepare for, and respond to growth opportunities. In 2023, the program completed community economic development assessments and economic development strategic plans for local governments across North Carolina. In addition, the program began to implement an initiative, funded by the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA), to provide outdoor recreation economy strategic planning and asset development services to rural communities.

### Creating Outdoor Recreation Economies (CORE) Program

In early 2023, the N.C. Department of Commerce announced that 34 local governments would participate in its new Creating Outdoor Recreation Economies (CORE) program. Funded by a U.S. EDA State Tourism Grant, CORE provides strategic planning and technical assistance to help communities leverage the state's abundant outdoor recreation assets to support local economic growth.

Creating Outdoor Recreation Economies (CORE)  
Participating Communities



View from Mount Jefferson in Mount Jefferson State Natural Area, Ashe County, NC.

The Rural Planning program facilitates planning processes with CORE communities to identify outdoor recreation assets that present economic growth opportunities and to create strategies to develop them. Strategies focus on actions and projects communities can undertake to increase tourism, encourage small business development, enhance quality of life for residents, plan for asset and infrastructure development, and/or position themselves to grow and attract outdoor gear manufacturers. The CORE program will also provide technical assistance and training to help participating communities implement their strategies. At the end of 2023, 7 local governments had adopted CORE strategic plans and 13 had plans in progress.

Our team in Spencer greatly benefited from the assistance provided by the Rural Planning program staff and other colleagues at the NC Department of Commerce as we went through the CORE program in 2023. Commerce staff not only put together a great process but made sure we had an outcome that would serve the community's interests. We appreciate their commitment to following through during and after the process, including introducing us to other contacts and opportunities that could help us implement the goals outlined in our CORE Strategic Plan. We look forward to continuing our relationship with the entire NC Commerce Rural Planning team.

PETER FRANZESE  
Town Manager, Spencer, NC





Rural Planning program project development training with 2023 RC2 communities.

## Training & Education

The Rural Planning program provides training opportunities to communities and shares information on a variety of economic development topics, trends, and best practices.

### 2023 NC Main Street Conference

The Rural Planning program is part of the NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center team that plans, organizes, manages, and implements the Center's largest, annual training event, the North Carolina Main Street Conference. The 2023 conference, *Trek on Down to Main Street*, took place in downtown Statesville and drew 750 attendees. Rural Planning program staff presented during three sessions and moderated many more.

### Southwest Prosperity Zone Team Tour

Rural Planning program staff and other Southwest Prosperity Zone partners, including staff from the Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina, N.C. Department of Commerce Workforce Solutions, the N.C. Departments of Transportation and Environmental Quality, and the NC Community College System, finished a series of county-by-county meetings they had started before the COVID-19 pandemic. The partners invited local government, economic development, and education representatives as well as industry leaders from each county to attend and learn about the partners' programs and services. In 2023, the partners held meetings in 5 counties that drew 116 attendees representing 19 communities and 56 businesses and other organizations.

## Technical Assistance

The Rural Planning program provides technical assistance to local governments to support economic development planning and decision-making. Services range from GIS mapping and the compilation of demographic and other data reports to researching project examples and best practices from other communities and sharing information on potential funding and resources for projects.

### Rural Community Capacity (RC2) Program Assistance

The Rural Community Capacity (RC2) program, part of the N.C. Department of Commerce, Rural Economic Development Division, Rural Transformation Grant Fund (RTGF), provides local governments with educational programming, technical assistance, and other support to help them plan and implement economic development programs and projects. The Division partnered with the Walker College of Business at Appalachian State University (ASU) to offer the RC2 program. Rural Planning program staff provided the 12 local governments engaged in the 2023 RC2 cohort with training, information, and guidance on project development during a session at ASU. They helped participants to refine their project ideas and prepare to apply for RTGF Community Implementation grants. At the end of the session, each community pitched its proposed project to the other participants.

Resources have been bleak for Milton, a municipality of about 150, where residents and business owners have tried to deal with issues without town planning and proper, consistent consideration of its historical resources. A team of volunteers had been focused on seeking resources and paths for improvement when one happened upon the Rural Planning program. We hoped they could recommend a useful direction in which we might go and bid us well. To our grateful surprise, the staff visited our little town, talked with residents, and held a community visioning event to assist us with drafting a plan of action for economic improvement. Essentially, they have dug their heels into the mire of needs along with us to offer help, and with the help, hope.

ANGELA DANIEL-UPCHURCH  
Mayor, Town of Milton

## NC Rural Planning Program on Social Media

In 2023, the Rural Planning program developed a plan to use social media as a communication and education tool to build awareness of the program and its services; to highlight rural communities' opportunities and assets, projects, and success stories; and to share information and resources with local governments, economic development organizations, and other partners. The program took its first step into the social media arena in November 2023 with the launch of the NC Commerce Rural Planning Program Facebook page, [www.facebook.com/ncruralplanning/](https://www.facebook.com/ncruralplanning/).



# STRENGTHENING RURAL COMMUNITIES FOR OVER 60 YEARS

## 143 North Carolina Communities Directly Served

### NC Rural Planning Program Services Delivered 2023 Calendar Year



### NC MAIN STREET & RURAL PLANNING CENTER TEAM

The NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center team is comprised of Main Street and downtown revitalization specialists, rural and community economic development planners, a grants administrator, and a Geographic Information System (GIS) analyst.

Elizabeth (Liz) Parham, CMSM  
Director

Sherry Adams, CMSM  
Program Manager, Main Street Program

Karen Smith, AICP  
Program Manager, Rural Planning Program

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Susan Kellum  
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GIS Analyst

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Bruce Naegelen  
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Naomi Riley  
Coordinator, Downtown Services

Lisa Rueh  
Main Street Grants Administrator

Amy Suggs  
Main Street Program Specialist

To learn more about the NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center and the Rural Planning program, visit:  
[www.commerce.nc.gov/about-us/divisions-programs/rural-economic-development-division/nc-main-street-rural-planning-center](http://www.commerce.nc.gov/about-us/divisions-programs/rural-economic-development-division/nc-main-street-rural-planning-center)

