Small Towns, Big Progress: Successful Practices in the NC STEP Process

By

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Executive Summary

The Small Town Economic Prosperity (STEP) program works with rural municipalities to stimulate economic growth in areas with low to moderate income and communities with limited resources. In order to affect the greatest change, the towns are led through a strategic visioning process to identify economic strategies for their future. This research looks at five towns that have been through the NC STEP program and, through interviews, builds case studies identifying strategies that may have led to success.
Acknowledgments

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All members of the Maysville, Plymouth, Ramseur, Siler City, and Valdese STEP teams who took their time to speak with me about their experiences.

and

My capstone committee members, Greg Allison, William Lambe, and Maureen Berner for their patience and assistance in guiding me through the Capstone process and sharing their expertise with me.
I. Introduction & Background

*NC Rural Center*

For a large part of the 20th Century North Carolina’s small towns thrived. Manufacturing had a tremendous presence in the rural areas of the state and sometimes single-handedly bolstered a town’s economy. Manufacturing in textiles, furniture, and agricultural products created wealth in these small communities and a high quality of life.

Towards the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, all of this changed. North Carolina, along with the rest of the southern United States saw a great exodus of manufacturing firms to foreign competitors.1 As a result of increased technology in communication and transportation, as well as the spread of free trade agreements, many companies moved production to countries with much lower wage costs to decrease costs of production.2

This development drastically changed life in rural and small town North Carolina, often devastating entire communities. Along with structural unemployment and increased poverty came a growing divide between rural and urban areas in North Carolina. Small towns, which were once glorified for their quality of life, began to deteriorate and wither.

The North Carolina Commission on Jobs and Economic Growth identified the growing economic divide between rural and urban counties as one of the major economic challenges to the state. As a result of these findings the North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center was established in January 1987 as the first non-profit organization to be “devoted exclusively to state rural advancement”.3

*NC STEP Program*

As a direct response to the struggles small towns have gone through in searching for a new future the NC Rural Center created a Small Towns Initiative. The NC Small Town Economic Prosperity Program (NC STEP) was initiated in Spring 2006 as the centerpiece of this initiative. The program established three primary goals:

- Support economic development in small towns adversely affected by structural changes in the economy or recent natural disasters;
- Implement a comprehensive model of technical assistance and grantmaking to aid in revitalization efforts; and,
- Provide information vital to the development of public policies that support long-term investment in the economic vitality of North Carolina’s small towns.

To accomplish these goals the Rural Center developed a four-step process to guide each town toward an overarching vision for its future. The steps are coaching, training, planning, and grants. (For more details on the STEP process see Appendix B.)

*Purpose of Study*

The purpose of this research is to observe five different towns that were selected and have gone through the NC STEP process. The communities were observed from the decision to submit an application until the delivery of grants, which for the purpose of this paper is defined as success.

After observing the process, best practices are identified that contributed to the success of the community’s ability to effectively complete the program. These practices are described to assist the NC Rural Center team and future communities in implementing the NC STEP process.

II. Methodology

1 North Carolina Department of Commerce and Division of Employment Security.
Five towns that have been through the NC STEP process were chosen, in congruence with the NC Rural Center, as model towns to be studied for best practices. These communities were chosen to represent a variety of the experiences in the NC STEP process. The five towns chosen represented different NC STEP years, geographical locations, and populations.

Materials collected from each town included notes from meetings, executive summaries of their NC STEP plans, and a full report detailing the towns NC STEP process and economic development strategies. Additional documents were available for select towns including databases of existing businesses and detailed one-page descriptions for each project developed under their strategies.

Additionally, interviews were conducted with members of each STEP leadership team. The number of interviews per town differed depending on the size of the team and municipality. An effort was made in each municipality to interview town staff and elected officials as well as citizen members of the team. All interviews were conducted in face-to-face meetings and a majority took place in one-on-one settings. All interviews took place in the town being studied and were followed by a walking tour. A total of 21 interviews were conducted for the five towns. Base questions were prepared in advanced, and follow up questions were asked as they pertained to the interview (Appendix C provides a list of the base questions).

After reviewing both collected materials and interview responses, the information was combined into a case study of the town’s experience (Appendix D includes full case studies for each town). From these five case studies, best practices were identified and summarized in the text of this report.

III. Town Profiles (Plymouth, Valdese, Maysville, Ramseur, Siler City)

All five of the towns studied have been affected in some way by the loss of manufacturing industry. Additional challenges have led to economic deterioration. The following chart gives a brief description of each town for background purposes. The years of each towns STEP involvement are listed beside the town. For full community profiles see the complete case studies in Appendix D.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Town</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Assets</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maysville</td>
<td>1,005</td>
<td>• Located close to Jacksonville and New Bern</td>
<td>• Main highway, US-17 being by-passed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2010-2012)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Major US Marine Base Camp Lejeune nearby</td>
<td>• Loss of manufacturing, car dealerships and oil companies</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Borders Croatan National Forest</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• New homes currently being constructed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plymouth</td>
<td>3,805</td>
<td>• Location of major historic battle and port</td>
<td>• Main employer Weyerhaeuser Plant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2006-2009)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Partnership with East Carolina University for river exploration</td>
<td>shed much of its workforce in 1990s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Located along Roanoke River</td>
<td>• Hit hard by Hurricane Isabel in 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• High poverty rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramseur</td>
<td>1,699</td>
<td>• Located close to Greensboro, Sanford, and Asheboro</td>
<td>• Largely dependent on declining manufacturing industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2010-2012)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Retained major employers: Tower Components and Universal Healthcare</td>
<td>• Lost large portion of employers, taxpayers, and water and sewer customer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• New businesses recently opened</td>
<td>• Majority of residents commute outside of town to work</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Siler City  
(2010-2012)  
7,972  
• Located central to Greensboro, Chapel Hill, Sanford, and Cary  
• Access to local rail station and airport  
• Large minority population creates diversity  
• Lost 1,000 manufacturing jobs since 2008  
• One-fifth of water revenue lost with Pilgrim’s Pride poultry plant closing

Valdese  
(2006-2009)  
4,492  
• Located close to Hickory and Morganton  
• Originally settled by historic Waldensian population  
• Located near Lake James and mountains  
• Lost over 1,000 jobs in last decade  
• Lost $500,000 in utility revenue and additional tax base

IV. Key Takeaways/Best Practices

The following section describes key practices that led to the success of the five NC STEP towns in completing the process. Each practice is identified and examples are provided of its importance from each town.

Stakeholder Identification

One of the desires of the Rural Center is that each STEP community builds a community-wide, diverse STEP team. That means race but also gender, age, experience, knowledge, and talents. A diverse team provides a more accurate vision for a communities’ future as well as a much more likely chance of successfully implementing a teams strategies and projects.

There are examples of the importance engaging stakeholders throughout the STEP towns. In several towns identifying and engaging particular community members allowed the STEP program to reach goals they otherwise would not have. While many different types of stakeholders are important there were three key roles that were important in these five communities.

The role of political liaison was helpful in each town. The political liaison keeps the town elected officials informed and supportive of the STEP process. The political liaison may additionally provide legal expertise and ideas of political feasibility. In Maysville, including Miss Body, a lifelong resident and extremely influential member of the African American community, ensured several projects had the blessing of the town board.

In Plymouth, a town council member played this role, sharing her opinions, but remained neutral in decision-making and made sure not to take a leadership position. She thus played a role more akin to a conduit to action than a decision maker. In these successful towns the elected officials did not drive the process but were resources to their citizens. Town staff members in the other locations played this same role.

A facilitator or peacemaker is also crucial to team success. This person facilitates the creation of mutual learning and helps the group work together. Filled by the NC STEP coach during the visioning process, each town either contracted with that individual for the rest of the process or found its own. Most towns were in agreement that an outsider or new community member was the best choice, as they were able to bring a balanced view and hear all views. This was true in Siler City, where Pam, a newer resident was able to reach out to a diverse group of the community because she had no prior relationships that painted her as bias.

Finally, Group representatives fill another important role. Working to build a vision for an entire community means engaging many different elements of that community. Valdese made a great effort to identify stakeholders and assure that every constituency of the community had representation. These efforts included outreach to bankers, minority leaders, county officials, regional citizens, and the art foundation, as well as others. Siler City made a particular effort to reach out to the Hispanic
community, a large and growing segment of their town. In fostering an inclusive atmosphere, these towns buy-in throughout the community.

Even in thorough stakeholder identifications it is seldom possible that a community can foresee all the stakeholders necessary for success. Some of these STEP towns’ saw roadblocks arise from individuals and groups who chose not to engage in the process. Plymouth, after several months of planning, was close to completing a project to acquire a downtown building. Unfortunately, at the last minute, a stakeholder with the Downtown Development Authority, who was not involved in the NC STEP process, refused to sell the building and the plan fell through. Luckily the Plymouth STEP team was able to work together to find additional projects, however, having larger stakeholder engagement may have avoided this situation. This example emphasizes the importance of stakeholder engagement.

**Community Engagement**

In order to create a vision that will benefit the town for years to come it is key to promote widespread involvement in the STEP process. Every town sees the number of participants dwindle from its onset through the implementation phase, with most of the dropout coming in the first couple months. However, it is crucial to continue to engage and reengage the public to incorporate new opinions and inform.

All five communities found it important to continue to engage those citizens who were not formally involved in the STEP process. This was done through e-mail lists, Facebook, town websites, newspaper ads, and word of mouth. Ramseur, understanding many of its residents didn’t use the Internet, used direct postal mail to inform its citizens.

The towns used additional tactics to engage citizens including town wide kick-off celebrations incorporating live music, free food, and family activities that accentuated assets such as recreational facilities and local businesses. Every town collected contact information and Siler City distributed surveys in both English and Spanish to gather data on community desires as well as to reach out in the future. Several towns had additional celebrations during the process to reengage the community.

Additional methods of community engagement included holding meetings at different locations such as churches to engage faith-based groups. Maysville held their meetings at the local elementary school to get out of town hall and show that the government was an equal partner with the citizenry in the process. In Siler City meetings were held at different restaurants around the city to promote local business. Siler City also held meetings at different times of day to help accommodate different personal schedules.

Before initiating projects an effort was made to inform the public and provide them a platform to have their voices heard through public hearings. This sometimes led to slower processes than desired, such as the case in Siler City when a planned project was delayed to hold further public hearings in order to allow further public discourse from those outside the group. However, the towns understood the importance of this process to all members of their community. Making efforts to include everyone, even those who have not engaged fully in the process, is important to successfully implementing a vision for the community that will be efficient, inclusive, and long lasting.

**Forming Partnerships & Leveraging Funds**

A key tenet of the NC Rural Center is the idea that communities can accomplish more when they partner with other institutions and leverage their assets. This was in full display throughout the NC STEP towns. These five NC STEP towns did not merely use the funds granted through the Rural Center but actively sought additional money, skills, and capacity to help them in the future.

Possibly the strongest partnership each of the towns created was with the Rural Center itself. Most of the towns indicated that while they previously had a relationship with the Rural Center, the NC STEP process catalyzed this into a full-blown partnership. Many of the communities learned of additional grant opportunities and received new pools of money that were not previously available from the Rural Center, such as grants for building reuse, infrastructure improvements, built asset assessments and park and recreations funds.
Smaller communities often lack knowledge capital due to small pools of people, which can limit their ability to gain new assets. The STEP process facilitated communities’ involvement with other local organizations. Several towns utilized their local councils of government for expertise on grant writing and technical skills. Maysville and Valdese partnered with their local community college branch to create new certifications and educational programs. Several communities reached out to county, state, and federal agencies such as National Parks Services and the state DOT to develop new and stronger relationships. All communities said they strengthened a relationship with the UNC School of Government that was weak prior to the program.

The towns also looked to each other as resources. Whether through official regional STEP meetings or by informal conversations, the communities involved in the process reached out to each other to learn from each other’s successes and failures. In some cases this even led to new projects for towns. Most importantly it provided support to ensure STEP teams that they were capable of making changes in their communities, like other STEP teams had.

Each of these communities realized that through the NC STEP process they had created partnerships and bonds that changed their communities. Looking towards the future each community either partnered with or developed its own organization to continue the work of the STEP committee after the process ended. Maysville, Valdese, and Siler City all chartered new organizations to run economic development with the membership largely the same as the NC STEP team. Ramseur and Plymouth are now working with already existing economic development agencies through the county and private partnerships to build on the progress they’ve already created.

V. Conclusion

The NC STEP program through the NC Rural Center is helping towns face challenges head on with an eye towards future prosperity. The five towns observed in this study each successfully completed the STEP process, moving from applying, to creating a common vision for their community, identifying specific projects, and successfully receiving the funding to implement them. These projects have begun to show economic impacts in communities.

The NC STEP process was successful in another way that is more important that the economic impact, however. Diverse citizens engaged each other in these communities and worked together to solve problems, not through government alone, but through collaboration and cooperation. While government may have helped to foster this process, its role was not to direct citizens, but to empower them. In going through the NC STEP process citizens became aware of their community, its strengths and weaknesses. Most importantly, citizens became aware of their own power to address community problems and are seeking to continue to solve them, together.
Appendix A: Bibliography


Town of Ramseur, NC STEP Program. (2011). Executive Summary. Ramseur, NC.


Town of Siler City, NC STEP Program. (2011). Executive Summary. Siler City, NC.


Appendix B: NC STEP Process

To accomplish these goals the Rural Center developed a four-step process to guide each town toward an overarching vision for its future. The four steps are:

*Coaching* – A community coach works closely with each town to provide guidance and recommendations, but the town determines their course of action.

*Training* – Through leadership training, skill-building workshops and information sharing townspeople gain knowledge and skills that will serve their communities for years to come.

*Planning* – The planning process seeks the active participation of all elements of the community in developing an economic development strategy. This promotes widespread buy-in and builds teams for project implementation.

*Grants* – Planning and implementation grants give NC STEP communities a jump-start in carrying out their economic development strategy. The team members also are introduced to other funding opportunities from the Rural Center and elsewhere.

After being selected as an NC STEP community the municipality holds a kick-off celebration to start the process. Next the group undergoes a process of community asset mapping and visioning to determine what their strengths and challenges may be and how they can use these effectively to build a prosperous future. Once strategies are identified the process moves to the implementation phase where funds are used to pursue specific projects tied to the selected strategies. The process occurs over a two-year period.

Towns of 7,500 or less are eligible for the program. The municipalities are selected based on economic need, capacity to grow and commitment to the program. So far there have been 67 communities that have joined the program.
Appendix C: Interview Questions

Base Questions Asked

1. How many people were involved in the NC STEP program? Was this number consistent or did it fluctuate? How about the “Leadership Team”?
2. Were the town staff and elected officials involved? If so, describe their involvement.
3. Did projects lead to strategies or strategies lead to projects? How long was the process to develop the strategies? Projects?
4. What was the organizational structure of the committee? How did the committees operate with each other?
5. Are efforts continuing with the strategies? Have plans changed (informally) or have expectations of what can be accomplished changed?
6. What has been the role of the leadership team?
7. Was there any disagreement during the process? How was that handled?
8. What are the results of the strategies so far? Have they produced an economic impact in the community?
9. Did any of these strategies produce or encourage other types of private or public investments in the community?
10. Were there any collaboration between the STEP committee/town and other organizations established that had not been established prior to this process?
11. How did the committee try to encourage new or former members of the team to join? Was this continued throughout the process?
12. How did the committee let the community know what was happening? Was this continued throughout the process?
13. Did you attend any of the Rural Center’s regional meetings? Did you correspond with any other STEP towns?
Appendix D: Full Case Studies

County: Jones County
Population: 1,005 (2011)
Area: .70 square miles
Surrounding Cities: New Bern, Jacksonville
NC STEP years: 2010-2012

Town of Maysville
Profile
Demographics
Maysville is a small town centered at the intersection of NC Highway 58 and US Highway 17 in Eastern North Carolina. The town is a majority-minority community with 55% of its residents classified as non-white. Out of residents over the age of 25 nearly half have a high school diploma. The median household income is $35,547.

Challenges
Maysville has seen significant struggles over the past 50 years. While highway 17 was the main north to south highway on the East Coast, Maysville saw flourishing industries in manufacturing, car dealerships, and oil companies. However, after the construction of I-95, traffic slowed tremendously and all three of these industries left Maysville and its rail station shut down. The town has an unemployment rate of 14%, higher than the state average. The current top employment industries are sales and service occupations.

To make matters worse, a by-pass of Highway 17 has been studied for the past decade and it is thought that it will be constructed in the near future. This will further decrease the estimated 10,000 trips currently passing through Maysville and hurt existing business.

Assets
There are two major urban populations on each side of Maysville, with New Bern to the north and Jacksonville to the south. Maysville is centrally located and can take advantage of opportunities presented from both cities. For instance, Jacksonville is home to a major U.S. Marine Corps base in Camp Lejeune and many young families seek housing in the area.

The town is also located on the western edge of the Croatan National Forest. The forest is the only coastal forest in the East and offers abundant outdoor activities including hiking, camping, hunting, and fishing. Tourists from across the world visit the forest, an opportunity for Maysville to take advantage of.

Another asset at Maysville’s disposal is the presence of a branch of Lenoir Community College 20 minutes away in the town of Trenton. Additionally, Maysville has its own elementary school. These education opportunities are useful in educating a workforce towards a strategic goal.

Finally, Maysville is not without signs of hope. There have been 50 new homes recently constructed in Maysville. These are the first new homes built in the town in over 40 years. These homes are being targeted towards young Marine families and additional homes are planned and already being built.
NC STEP Process

Initiation
The NC STEP program accepted Maysville into the program for the 2010-2012 process. Newly elected town commissioner Dan Ryan initiated the STEP application after hearing about the program from another STEP town.

After its acceptance the town held an initial kickoff at town hall to create excitement for the process and recruit participants. The event had a DJ, dancing, and free food and was attended by a diverse crowd of around 50 town residents. All of the residents’ information was collected so they could be followed up with during the process.

Visioning
The buzz created by the kickoff party lasted and there were close to 60 residents attending the first several visioning meetings. The once monthly meetings were held outside of the town hall at Maysville Elementary School in order to “get out of town hall and show that the community was an equal partner”.

The process of visioning lasted for approximately a year and a half. After the first several months the attendance waned and settled on a key group of between seven and ten members. These members were a diverse set of residents spanning both time and experience. Some of the members had been in the neighborhood for less than ten years while others had lived their whole life there. Among the team there was a town commissioner, a youthful school principal, two former marines, a developer, and minority representation.

Recruitment was continued throughout the remainder of the visioning process. Information was gathered from attendees of each meeting and they were entered onto an e-mail list serv. Individuals who had not been involved with the program but showed interest in the process were also added. E-mails were sent about every event planned during the process.

Other avenues of recruitment were also used. The team reached out to churches, the local media, community leaders, and to their own networks via mouth-to-mouth communications. The team even took advantage of their unique authority and used the elementary schools notification system to let parents know of the meetings.

These systems were not only used for the purpose of recruitment, but also for informing the public. This continued throughout the entire STEP process. Any events, plans, successes, challenges, or ideas were alerted to the public during the process. This was also a way that those outside the process could provide feedback with the team receiving many questions about their choices and feedback on ideas from those not involved.

The group had several ideas for projects they believed would be beneficial for the town, however, repeatedly brought themselves back to first thinking about what was plausible. While this may have been frustrating at times, they all saw the value in first identifying what strategies would feasibly work in Maysville. After identifying the towns’ assets and challenges, the team selected three overarching development strategies and specific projects to go with each.

Implementation
The first step in implementing these projects was to gain approval from the town commissioners. While most projects were not controversial the team had sought the council and assistance of Miss Body, an elderly resident who had great influence within the town and on its leaders. With her blessing, all projects were given the green light.
Before any projects were initiated the town held a second kickoff event to alert the public that the STEP process was now in the implementation phase. This event, similar in nature to the first kickoff was to attract the public to the work on the STEP team and recruit individuals to help with the implementation phase.

Because of the size of the group and the number of projects, each project was designated a point person and others assisted as desired and needed. Most project point people were selected by interest but if there were no volunteers each of the members stepped up to take on the responsibility. These project “teams” took the lead but always consulted with the main group at monthly meetings to provide context and hear feedback on how the project was going and if changes needed to be made.

The group discussed which projects were to be pursued and completed first and chose based on the need to finish some for the success of other projects and the ease of completion. Also, the group wanted to build momentum by showing visible change in the community. Because of this, they decided to complete a branding study, established a 5k trail, and updated the town park first. These visible signs of progress added to the buzz created by the STEP process.

The team also used the funds and projects to create valuable partnerships and gain access to additional capital. Leveraging STEP funds the committee applied for and received grants including: the Built Assets Assessment Grant from the Construction Professionals Network Institute and the UNC School of Government Development Finance Initiative; several grants from the NC Rural Center including for infrastructure, building reuse, clean water; and a Parks and Recreation Authority Grant to assist in the Frost Park update.

Beyond the financial benefits of the grants the STEP team also built valuable relationships with all the grantors as well as the DOT, League of Municipalities, Lenoir Community College, the UNC School of Government, and strengthened their relationship with the Eastern Carolina Council of Government. The ECCG connection was particularly important as none of the STEP team members had expertise in grant writing and they relied heavily on Judy Hills of the ECCG to assist them in grant proposals. Likewise, other relationships showed tangible pay offs with the DOT providing expertise in developing a downtown master plan and the town partnering with Lenoir Community College to develop a program and certification for outdoor guides that will lead expeditions from Maysville in the Croatan Forest.

Maysville has made great strides in completing their projects and efforts are still on going with new projects even being thought of for the future after STEP funding. The committee has taken the proactive step of creating the Maysville Economic Leadership Organization to continue pursuing their economic development strategies indefinitely.

Though difficulties have arisen during the process, the team has overcome them by always focusing on their common goals of restoring the town and instead of any disagreements. While the team has remained flexible on how they get to their destination, they have stayed true to their vision of a restored Maysville.
# Maysville Economic Development Strategies

| STRATEGY #1: Promote the Outdoor Lifestyle, Projects: | • Maysville Outdoor Adventure Website (cost included in Web Site project below)  
• Maysville Outdoor and Local Guide Service, Maysville Mountain Biking Trail, Horse and Hiking Network  
• Maysville earns Tree City Designation  
• Frost Park Improvements  
• Certified Run Courses within the Town |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| STRATEGY #2: Maysville as the Village Alternative to Jacksonville and New Bern | • Community Branding (Planning funds)  
• Web Site Development  
• Community Event Enhancement  
• Marketing Seminars  
• Marketing Analysis for Business Recruitment and Growth  
• Branding Implementation |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| STRATEGY #3: Improving the Marketability and Functionality of Downtown Maysville, Projects: | • Develop a Streetscape/Landscape Architecture Master Plan for the Town of Maysville (Planning funds)  
• Implementation of Streetscape/Landscape Architecture Master Plan |
County: Washington County
Population: 3,805 (2011)
Area: 3.6 sq miles
Surrounding Cities: Edenton, Washington
NC STEP years: 2006-2009

**Town of Plymouth**

**Profile**

*Demographics*
Plymouth is a small town along the eastern edge of US Highway 64 and NC Highway 32 in Northeast North Carolina. The town is a majority-minority community with 70% of its residents classified as non-white. Out of residents over the age of 25, just over one-third have a high school diploma. The median household income is $25,248.

*Challenges*
At the time of the Civil War Plymouth was the second largest port in North Carolina and was so important that the Union Navy blockaded it. In the latter half of the twentieth-century, however, Plymouth came under hard times. Plymouth’s main employer the Weyerhaeuser Plant shed much of its workforce in the late 1990s after it divided into two companies. Additionally, Hurricane Isabel struck the town hard in 2003 and devastated the fishing industry.

Plymouth has seen its unemployment rate rise and it now stands at 14%. Additionally, Plymouth has a high rate of poverty with 41% of working age adults living below the poverty line. The service, professional, and sales industries are currently the largest employers in the town.

*Assets*
The town of Plymouth is located close to two larger towns: Edenton and Washington. Additionally, it is only an hour away from the city of Greenville, NC and the campus of Eastern Carolina University. Plymouth can take advantage of the industry in each of these populations and has already done so. Plymouth has partnered with Eastern Carolina Universities nautical programs to host divers searching the Roanoke River.

The town has also used its historical and natural assets to diversify its economy. Plymouth has made a significant push in developing its history as a port of trade and as a historical marker in the Civil War when it was the scene of Union occupation and the second largest battle in North Carolina. The town hosts a replica version of the Roanoke River lighthouse as well as the Roanoke River and Maritime Museum. The museum focuses on the Civil War and houses several of the oldest small boats in North Carolina’s history.

Additionally, Plymouth has encouraged the development of ecotourism by emphasizing their port and river walk. A nature trail was constructed through town and the town is cooperating with organizations to design a birding trail.
NC STEP Process

Initiation
The NC STEP program accepted Plymouth into the program for the 2006-2009 process. Mayor Brian Roth was well informed of the program from his relationships with the town of Columbia and brought up the idea of applying at a meeting at the local food stamps center.

The initial members worked diligently with the Mayor to advertise the program and bring in a broad spectrum of the local population.

Visioning
The town created a buzz around the STEP program and the initial visioning meetings averaged between 30-40 participants. The meetings were held once a month and the process of visioning lasted about a year and a half.

After the first four months of meetings the group had narrowed itself down to a highly devoted group of between four and seven members. The group represented a broad spectrum of the community including minorities, elected officials, small business owners, retirees, and members of the historical society, chamber of commerce and downtown development association. The group’s diversity of experience created a great amount of shared knowledge that benefited the creation of a vision that served the entire community.

The variety of individuals also helped in keeping the process on track with each member playing distinct roles. The town council member purposefully delegated herself as a resource and made clear that she was not going to single handedly make any decisions. Meanwhile, there were members who pushed the group forward and others who maintained the peace and focus on an overall vision.

The visioning process hit a few snags along the way but was ultimately very successful. Because of turnover in both Rural Center coaches and town elected officials the process lasted longer than it normally would. However, the devotion of the core members kept the process on track. The efforts of the team to continue a dialogue with other NC STEP towns such as Pinetops, West Jefferson, and Windsor helped them understand the process as well and they ultimately agreed on a clear vision with clear strategies.

Implementation
Once the strategies and projects had been identified all members went into implementation mode seamlessly. With each member working within their own specialty knowledge tasks were assigned leaders by skill and desire. The group as a whole, however, was always willing to work with any individual when assistance was needed.

Individuals who had left the process or never engaged were also recruited when it came time for implementation. Several community members who were not necessarily interested in the decision making process were more than willing to help in the implementation. Citizens were continually recruited and informed via e-mails, word of mouth, and advertisements in the local paper.

The Plymouth team saw some serious challenges during the implementation process with several emergencies interfering with their plans. The first was the deterioration of a building in downtown. After the building collapsed the Plymouth team adjusted and helped support the town in clearing the property and constructing a parking lot downtown. This was not in their original plan but fit their broader strategies of downtown development.
Additionally, a major plan to acquire a downtown property and turn it into an incubator fell through when an individual refused to sell the property at the last minute. As a result the STEP team worked tirelessly over the final three months to identify and accomplish new projects under their strategies.

While the Plymouth STEP process did not go exactly how the team had expected, the team was able to accomplish major efforts in revitalizing the town. The team remained true to their shared vision for the town and most of all remained flexible and motivated. What could have been a devastating blow to their efforts ended in major successes for the town.

**Plymouth Economic Development Strategies**

| STRATEGY 1: Downtown improvements | • Streetscape improvements  
| | • Wifi installation  
| | • Downtown building acquisition and demolition for parking lot  

| STRATEGY 2: Waterfront development | • Lighthouse landscaping  

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>STRATEGY 3: Linkage and wayfinding improvements</th>
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<th>STRATEGY 4: Increase homeownership</th>
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<th>STRATEGY 5: Address drug related issues</th>
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| STRATEGY 6: Tourism development | • Ecotourism development & marketing  
| | • Research and welcome center  

| STRATEGY 7: Expand business support | • Business incentives program  

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<tr>
<th>STRATEGY 8: Highway 64 development</th>
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<tr>
<th>STRATEGY 9: Develop airport and airport technology corridor</th>
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| STRATEGY 10: Improve infrastructure |
County: Randolph County
Population: 1,699 (2011)
Area: 1.7 sq miles
Surrounding Cities: Siler City, Asheboro
NC STEP years: 2010-2012

**Town of Ramseur**

**Profile**

*Demographics*

Ramseur is a small town located along US Highway 64 in the Central Piedmont Region of North Carolina. The town has a minority population of 24% of residents classified as non-white. Out of residents over the age of 25 close to 40% have a high school diploma. The median household income is $32,371.

*Challenges*

Ramseur is a town that was built on manufacturing. The town was established from the small community of Allen’s Falls with the construction and expansion of the Columbia Manufacturing cotton mill in the 1850s. It is no surprise that Ramseur, like many other manufacturing towns has struggled through the turn of the 21st century.

The town was largely dependent on furniture and textile manufacturing industries that were devastated in the second half of the 20th century. In fact, since the year 2000 Ramseur has seen three major factories close. One of those manufacturers was Ramtex, a textile manufacturer that was also the town’s largest employer, taxpayer, and water and sewer customer. With the loss of these major industries the majority of its residents now work outside of the town.

Ramseur’s unemployment rate now stands at 10% and its main occupational industries are sales and still manufacturing, even with its decline.

*Assets*

The town of Ramseur is right beside the town of Siler City on US 64 and therefore is able to tap into many of the same markets. Like Siler City, Ramseur is within an hour distance of both Greensboro and Sanford and can utilize the industries and talents native to these urban centers. The several public and private universities that make their home in Greensboro are resources to Ramseur along with Randolph County Community College, 15 minutes away in Asheboro.

Even with the downturn in manufacturing, Ramseur still has several small industries. Two of the major employers in town are Tower Components; a manufacturer of parts for industrial and commercial cooling towers and the Universal Healthcare nursing home built in 2002 along US 64. In addition to these several other businesses have recently opened in town including a service station, Domino’s Pizza and a Dollar General.

**NC STEP Process**
Initiation
The NC STEP program accepted Ramseur into the program for the 2010-2012 process. Former town Commissioner and Town Administrator Kevin Franklin took the lead on the STEP process, applying the same year as neighboring town Siler City.

The town held their STEP kickoff on August 4th, 2010 at Ramseur Lake. This event was a successful family affair and coincided with Ramseur’s Summer Concert Series, drawing a very large crowd. Many members of the community were recruited to take part including the Boy Scouts and elected officials from nearby Star and Siler City were also in attendance to show support.

Visioning
At the beginning of the visioning process around 35 residents participated in the process. Over the first four months of meetings the crowd narrowed to a consistent group of approximately eight-ten members. These members included three elected officials, two mayors throughout the process, a local bank manager, Kevin, and other members of the community.

The group tried to include as much of the community as possible. Meetings were held at different locations around the community including churches and restaurants. Traditional forms of media were used to keep people informed, and recognizing that the community had some elderly citizens, letters were sent through the postal service. The team struggled to get active participation from the business community so they sought to engage them by attending the Ramseur business breakfasts.

The STEP team reached out to other economic development organizations in the area including the Randolph County Economic Development Corporation and the Piedmont Triad Council of Governments. Ramseur made sure that their vision was in line with these larger organizations.

The visioning process took approximately 15 months due to the change of mayors and a new coach during the process. At the end of the process Ramseur identified two overarching economic development strategies and projects fitting under these strategies. The team then broke up into subcommittees to work on individual projects. Having such a small group however, the entire group often pitched in on every project, sharing their time and expertise.

Implementation
The team began the implementation phase by identifying the projects they selected that could be accomplished the quickest with the least amount of difficulty. As a result, the town was able to get signage around town directing travelers and citizens to places of interest, which created a visible sign of progress in the town.

The town realized that some of the more difficult projects they had decided to pursue could not be done with just their own efforts and knowledge. The Ramseur STEP team reached out to organizations such as the NC State College of Design, the Construction Professionals Network, the NC Forestry Service, and Randolph Community College in order to gain additional expertise and funds. The team also took advantage of other funding opportunities through the NC Rural Center.

In working to take projects from ideas into reality the Ramseur team ran across difficulties. The team, however, had decided from the onset that they would not take “no we can’t” as an answer. The team remained flexible and worked around problems to accomplish their goals by different means.

At the end of the process, Ramseur was able to show some tangible results for its community. In addition to signage there is a new restaurant opening its doors in Ramseur, sign of new economic life. In order to
continue the progress created through the STEP process Ramseur established the Ramseur Community Fund. This fund will help pursue the economic strategies the town created through the STEP process and that have already begun to show results for their community.

**Ramseur Economic Development Strategies**

| STRATEGY 1: Bolstering Business Development: Sustaining What We Have and Growing Our Own, Projects: | • Building Renovation Incentives  
• Small Business Assistance  
• New Business Development, Marketing, and Branding (Arnett Muldrow analysis)  
• Multi-tenant Business Center |
|---|---|
| STRATEGY 2 Reanimating Ramseur: A Place to Live and to Play, Projects: | • Civic Infrastructure  
• Public area improvements  
• Public Infrastructure |
Town of Siler City

Profile

Demographics
Siler City is a small town located at the intersection of US Highway 64 and US Highway 421 in Central North Carolina. The town is a majority-minority community with 56% of its residents classified as non-white, including a 50% Latino population. Out of residents over the age of 25 one-third have a high school diploma or equivalent. The median household income is $33,305.

Challenges
Siler City is a great example of many of the small towns across North Carolina and the South over the latter half of the 20th Century. During the height of manufacturing the town was producing large quantities of textiles, furniture, and hosiery. However, as manufacturing left the region, it also left Siler City. Since 2008 over 1,000 manufacturing jobs have left the town due to plant closings. The town now has an unemployment rate close to 17% and its main industry remains production and transportation.

The loss of manufacturing has created additional negative effects than just net job losses. With the closing of the Pilgrim’s Pride poultry plant in 2007 Siler City lost one-fifth of its water revenue. A growing Hispanic population that is stretching its schools systems capacity has also tried local government.

The loss of business downtown has left the area with dilapidated and vacant buildings and the lack of foot traffic creates a struggling environment for local businesses. Additionally, many residents who haven’t had the opportunity for skills retraining after manufacturing left are stuck in lower paying jobs or are commuting to larger metropolitan areas like Sanford and Greensboro.

Assets
Siler City is positioned at a central point in the Piedmont region to reach many urban areas. With its position along Highways US 64 and US 421, Siler City is less than an hour drive from Greensboro, Chapel Hill, Sanford, and Cary, all major population and economic centers in the state. Siler City thus has access to multiple industry and talent pools.

Along with the two major highways Siler City also possesses a municipal airport and rail service. The many accessible modes of transportation from Siler City is inviting to a number of industries that need quick access to local markets.
The town’s location approximate to so many different areas also provides it with several different educational options. Major state schools in the area include the University of North Carolina branches of Chapel Hill and Greensboro and NC A&T, as well as several private universities. On top of this, Central Carolina Community College has a branch office in Siler City and close by in Sanford. Guilford Tech is also close by.

Siler City is also seeing a large increase in a diverse population with diverse skill sets.

**NC STEP Process**

*Initiation*

The NC STEP program accepted Siler City into the program for the 2010-2012 process. Jennifer Everage of the Chatham County Economic Development Corporation approached the town leadership and assisted in filling out the application.

Following its acceptance the town held a large kickoff celebration at the NC Arts Incubator on August 27th, 2012. The festivities included free food and drinks, live music, games and door prizes, and drew over 500 people. The town also distributed surveys to attendees in both English and Spanish asking what they saw as the future of the town. This was also a helpful way of collecting contact information.

*Visioning*

At the start of the visioning process there were around 50 attendees each month. This group was eventually gleaned to around between 20-30 individuals who continued through the program consistently. The decision was made to allow anyone who attended to be designated as a part of the leadership team and so new members as well as those there from the beginning were seen as equals.

Out of the group there were some key stakeholders who were present including the Town Manager, Mayor, Jack Meadows the Director of Planning and community development, county staff members and representatives of the Latino community. Efforts were also made to engage other stakeholders including local business owners.

The Siler City team continued efforts to engage and inform other members of the town as well. Meetings were held at different times and locations throughout the town to accommodate different segments of the population. Food was provided at each meeting to encourage attendance. Additionally, announcements were spread via e-mail, Facebook, websites, direct letters, and through local television, radio, and print media.

During the visioning process the STEP team did not only look within but at its surroundings as well. Early in the process the Chatham County Economic Development Corporation, the Triangle J Council of Government and the Research Triangle Research Regional Partnership all presented their economic development plans to the STEP team so that they could plan in context.

The STEP team also drew inspiration from the Main Street Conference, and other STEP towns. A group of volunteers attended the Rural Center’s regional summits among STEP teams to learn about the challenges, victories, and successful strategies of other STEP teams.

After a year of visioning the Siler City team identified core strategies to revitalize the town and designed projects that fit under these strategies.

*Implementation*

The Siler City team split up into groups of 8-10 people per STEP strategy and then further broke up by project. The groups worked together throughout the month and then reported back to the main group in a
monthly meeting. Though this structure was official, often groups would work together throughout the month to provide support when needed.

At the full STEP meetings each month Pam, a resident, took over the role of facilitator from the NC STEP coach. Each of the committees reported and any decisions were made by the entire group and were almost always unanimous.

The town did run into some problems along the way, however, when individuals who had not been fully engaged in the process disagreed with some of the decisions being made. The STEP committee fully demonstrated its principle of inclusiveness and responded by reaching out to these individuals and stepping back to hold more public meetings to engage additional comments and ideas.

The STEP committee did not only engage these stakeholders but reached out and created more partnerships throughout the community. The team created 50-50 partnerships for downtown façade grants with local businesses and worked with the local hospital to provide street signage. The team also worked with the Rural Center to leverage funds and gain even more grants such as the Construction Professionals Network grant for built asset assessment.

Throughout the entire process Siler City continued to reflect on their goals and adapt. In the case where some of their projects either did not pan out or did not fit into their overarching strategies they eliminated them and refocused. As a result they filtered out some projects moving from 14 to 10.

Siler City is looking towards their future with excitement after the STEP program. Continuing the vision and strategies they identified in this process they have created a non-profit organization called Siler City Development Organization (SC!DO) in order to continue to affect change.

The Siler City STEP team showed resilience and commitment to their goal of creating a shared and prosperous community. As a result of their deliberate actions through the STEP program they are starting to see new business growth and excitement in the community.

**Siler City Economic Development Strategies**

| STRATEGY #1: Business Development, Projects: | • Bridges and Seeds Learning and Microfinance Garden  
• Business Corridor Wayfinding Signage  
• Downtown Master Plan  
• Downtown Façade Improvement Grant Program  
• Entrepreneurship Club (No STEP funds)  
• Income Development Center (No STEP funds)  
• Plugging Money and Energy Leaks  
• Welcome Center/Incubator |
|———|———|
| STRATEGY #2: Marketing Siler City, Projects: | • Branding Implementation  
• Siler City Downtown Festival (No STEP funds)  
• VisitSilerCity.com Website |
| STRATEGY #3: Further Develop and Build on the Existing Downtown Arts Community, Projects: | • Siler City Central Park Project  
• Siler City Creativity Awards Program (No STEP funds)  
• Siler City Film Festival  
• Catalog of Locally-Crafted Products and Unique Local Services  
• Public Art Competition & Celebration (Expenses incorporated into Business Corridor Wayfinding Signage project)  
• Siler City Design & Creativity Student Mentorship Program (No STEP funds) |
|---|---|
| STRATEGY #4: Siler City as a Retirement Destination, Projects: | • Boling Chair Lumber Yard Park (No STEP funds)  
• Siler City as a Certified Retirement Community  
• Milo Holt Old Time Western Film Festival (No STEP funds)  
• NCDOT Pedestrian Planning Grant Website Dedicated to Retirement (No STEP funds)  
• Creation of a Nature Trail along the Rocky River in the Central Carolina Business Campus |
County: Burke County
Population: 4,492 (2011)
Area: 5.5 sq miles
Surrounding Cities: Morganton, Hickory, Lenoir
NC STEP years: 2006-2009

**Town of Valdese**

**Profile**

**Demographics**
Valdese is a small town that is located directly off US Interstate 40 in the Central Western North Carolina. The town has a minority population of 8% of residents classified as non-white. Out of residents over the age of 25 nearly half have a high school diploma or equivalent. The median household income is $38,032.

**Challenges**
The town of Valdese became a textile center in the 20th century like many of the other towns and cities in western North Carolina. When the industry began to leave the United States Valdese was not immune to the losses. The town lost over 1,000 jobs in the last decade prior to the new millennium.

Not only did the loss of jobs hurt Valdese, but the effect it had on the revenue stream of local government was affected as well. With the closing of several textile mills Valdese lost over $500,000 in utility revenue and additional tax base. This severely increased the burden on taxpayers in the town.

The loss of textiles mills occurred mainly in the 1990s and 2000s, and the unemployment rate in Valdese is now around 9%. The top employment occupations in the town now are professional and service industries.

**Assets**
Valdese is extremely close to two major population centers in western North Carolina in Morganton and Hickory. Both of these towns have their own industries as well as a myriad of public and private universities as well as community colleges that Valdese residents are able to access.

Additionally, Valdese’s location in the mountains of North Carolina has allowed it to expand and focus on its tourist industry. The town was originally settled in the late 19th century by a group of Europeans fleeing persecution called the Waldenses. Using its rich history, Valdese has established several tourist attractions including museums and an annual theatrical production and festival centered on the history of the Waldensians.

Another benefit of its mountain location is its ability to attract individuals to establish second-homes in the area. Lake James is located in the area and has been developed and marketed towards individuals purchasing second homes.

Also, being centrally located in an area that clustered around textiles, Valdese has been able to work with other local towns and cities to help diversify its economy. The town has partnered with the county to develop a county industrial park and help recruit industry for vacant buildings.
NC STEP Process

Initiation
The NC STEP program accepted Valdese into the program for the 2006-2009 process. The town of Valdese had a strong relationship with the NC Rural Center for several years and town manager Jeff Morse was made aware of the program at a conference.

After being accepted into the STEP program, Valdese held its kickoff party with a large crowd in attendance. The kick-off party was a huge success, included free food, live music, and even t-shirts and created excitement for the visioning process.

Visioning
Coming off of the enthusiasm created from the kick-off, the STEP visioning process for Valdese started with approximately 60 citizens participating. This number stayed consistent throughout the entire process.

The leadership team for the STEP committee was made up of 12 members selected by the town council. These council members, however, were selected to empower and represent the entire citizenry of Valdese. A thorough stakeholder analysis was conducted and members of several key constituencies were recruited. Some of the diverse members of the group were the Mayor, Town Manager, minority leaders, the small business center, County Commissioners, bankers, the art foundation, the community college, and even individuals from outside the town limits. This broad alliance helped create a more complete vision for the town.

Paul Combes, a facilitator from the NC Rural Center, led the process. Paul did such a great job that the town partnered with him after his contract and continued to use him as a facilitator.

The town continued to engage members of the citizenry and outsiders. The STEP committee used the town’s website, council meetings and newspapers to announce STEP meetings.

Though no other towns had completed the STEP process at this point, Valdese reached out to surrounding communities who were undergoing the process. The committee was able to gain valuable insight into best practices by engaging leaders from Marion, Sparta, and Marshall.

By the end of the visioning process, this broad group of stakeholders had identified a vision for the future of Valdese that included six economic development strategies. From these six strategies eight projects were initiated. Subcommittees made up of a member of the leadership team and members of the full STEP committee oversaw these projects.

Implementation
The Valdese team used their natural habitat and existing assets to get a quick start to restoring economic prosperity. Working with existing organizations such as the community college, the STEP team was able to establish a small business center that provided loans for start-up businesses and also training for possible entrepreneurs. Valdese also used their location around Lake James and marketed the community as an area where individuals would purchase second homes.

These were just some of the many partnerships Valdese formed to accomplish their goals. The STEP team used their extensive relationships with both the NC Rural Center and the Western Piedmont Council of Government to leverage their STEP funds into additional grants.

Eventually Valdese was able to create synergy in their entire region and expand into a larger organization that was creating economic impacts. Multiple counties and towns, including Hickory, are taking part in
Valdese’s revolving small business loan program. Valdese has become a model example of how to do local and regional economic development and through their partnership with Advantage West, are continuing to pursue and accomplish their economic development strategic goals.

Valdese Economic Development Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STRATEGY 1: Growing the Valdese economy through attraction of retirees</th>
<th>• Develop and implement a Plan for Marketing Valdese as a Destination for Retirees and 2nd Home Buyers</th>
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</table>
| STRATEGY 2: Supporting existing business and industry | • Evaluate/establish wireless Internet access in downtown Valdese  
• Support adaptive reuse of the Waldensian Mill into a mixed-use facility incorporating, housing, retail, office and community meeting facilities |
| STRATEGY 3: Marketing the availability of housing for second homes | • Update the Valdese Land Development Plan to reflect the current vision and needs of the Town |
| STRATEGY 4: Supporting regional growth initiatives | • Inventory and evaluate all potential industrial sites in Eastern Burke County |
| STRATEGY 5: Strengthening tourism | • Establish overnight accommodations in Valdese  
• Update, revise and implement the Tourism Marketing Plan |
| STRATEGY 6: Building an entrepreneurial community | • Plan and implement the Valdese Business Initiative (VBI) to establish Valdese as a truly entrepreneurial community |