North Carolina in the New Economy
Case Studies from the North Carolina Chapter of the American Planning Association

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With an introduction from John Morck, APA-NC President

Editors’ Note: Carolina Planning regularly publishes a feature highlighting projects from members of the North Carolina Chapter of the American Planning Association (APA-NC). These stories feature economies transitioning from manufacturing to services and culture and generational shifts in values and community preferences.

The Economic Value of Planning
John Morck, AICP

As a land use planner, I can remember sitting in multiple conferences and workshops discussing the coming changes to the labor force and the consequences of the retiring baby boomer generation. Since then, time has passed, and that “future” event is now in full swing. The entry of the millennial generation into the labor market has been a popular subject in the past few years. Several polls have been taken to try to understand what motivates this new generation, informs their decision making, and sets them apart from previous generations. In his article Planning for Prosperity: Understanding the Economic Perceptions and Community Preferences of the Millennial Generation, Ben Hitchings shares the summary results of a national poll commissioned by the American Planning Association in 2014.

This poll is of interest to planners because it focuses on attitudes toward locational preference and desired community features. This is timely information for communities trying to remain competitive and, in some cases, relevant in post-recession North Carolina. The NC Chapter of the American Planning Association participated in this study by sponsoring an oversample of North Carolina workers thus ensuring better local data. The poll not only surveyed millennials, but also the attitudes of Gen Xers and Active Boomers. The poll and its subsequent summit and forums kicked off the Chapter’s Planning for Prosperity initiative. This signature program is designed to highlight the importance of planning to sound economic development and community well-being.

John Morck, AICP, is President of the North Carolina Chapter of the American Planning Association and Planning and Community Development Manager for the City of Wilson. Mr. Morck has served the NC Chapter as professional development officer among other capacities. His planning career includes service as a manager with the NC Dept. of Commerce and city, county, and regional agencies.

Ben Hitchings, AICP, CZO, is the Planning Director for the Town of Morrisville, NC. In his role as the past President of the North Carolina Chapter of the American Planning Association, he received the APA Chapter Presidents Council Leadership Award for 2014.

Rodger Lentz, AICP, is the current Chief Planning and Development Officer for the City of Wilson and is a former President of the North Carolina Chapter of the American Planning Association. Mr. Lentz is also a current Board Member of the APA Board of Directors from Region II.

Lance Hight, AICP, has been the Planning Director for the City of Conover since 2007. He has worked on a variety of transportation, economic development and recreation projects. He is currently a 2016 Master’s candidate in Public Administration from Appalachian State University.

Jenny Mizelle has served as the Director of Economic Development for the Town of Holly Springs since 1998. She received her B.A. in Urban Affairs from Virginia Tech and worked professionally in the fields of mortgage banking and community development prior to her current position.
It’s been said many times that thriving communities do not happen by accident. It takes a well-defined vision and the desire to pursue that vision through creative strategies, partnerships, and hard work. The three case studies presented in this issue demonstrate what can be achieved when the planning process, coupled with commitment, is used to craft a new economic vision for a community. Each of these communities was faced with a challenge. Two of the communities, Conover and Wilson, were formerly thriving industrial towns of the “old” economy. Each community used their visioning process to develop a revitalization strategy to become competitive in today’s market place. They then took bold action and moved successfully toward their visions. The third community, Holly Springs, was a small town turned suburban bedroom community that needed to diversify its tax base. Through leadership and creative partnerships, the town became its own industrial recruiter and successfully attracted a new bio-pharmaceutical industry to balance its economy.

The power of cooperative planning to shape our cities and counties cannot be overestimated. In a 2012 documentary, WRAL-TV in Raleigh described what it called the “Other NC.” The report focused on the rural communities and small cities outside the piedmont crescent that have not shared equally in the recent economic recovery. In contrast, the authors of these articles demonstrate that, through vision and partnerships, rural communities do not need to be left behind and can compete successfully in North Carolina’s new economic future.