Planning for Arts and Innovation in Wilson, NC

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An Evolving Economy

The City of Wilson got its start as a transportation center with a rail depot. Wilson’s economy began to thrive when agriculture in the surrounding area transformed from subsistence farming to cotton production. By 1920, Wilson was a major player in the North Carolina tobacco economy and became known as the “World’s Largest Tobacco Market.” After the decline of tobacco in the late twentieth century, Wilson turned to other types of manufacturing. Today, Wilson’s citizens and leaders must work to reorient the economy in order to remain competitive. To do this, Wilson is focusing economic transformation on the theme of “Arts and Innovation.” The community is building off of its investment in a gigabit, high-speed internet network, national attention around cultural assets such as the Whirligig Park, and attraction of aerospace, finance, pharmaceutical, and automotive industries to the community.

Taking the Lead on Local Utilities

Reliable electricity was a dominant factor in supporting cities’ early growth. While investor-owned, for-profit electric utilities companies focused on larger metropolitan cities, rural areas and small towns in North Carolina often forged ahead on their own to secure their economic future. The City of Wilson has operated their electrical system since 1890 when 96% of voters approved a measure to move forward with a municipal electric utility. The electric utility that resulted has seen broad success in Wilson and provides for both residential and industrial electrical needs. Without reliable electricity, the transformation from an agricultural to an industrial economy would not have been possible and the thousands of jobs these industries support would have never come. In today’s information economy, fast and reliable internet service is the new requirement.

As with electricity, Wilson was ignored by investor-owned providers, so the city again moved proactively and built its own fiber network. The network, known as Greenlight, serves every property in the city at some of the fastest internet speeds in the United States. This network made Wilson North Carolina’s first “gigabit city” in 2008. Access to a gigabit network means that users have the ability to upload and download content over 100 times faster than they could from cable modem or DSL providers. These speeds allow users to work efficiently from their home, office, or school, and to send or receive large files in seconds or minutes rather than in multiple hours.

Long-Term Planning for Quality of Place

However, high-speed internet isn’t enough to attract new economy businesses and workers. Wilson’s next challenge is leveraging Greenlight to attract investments. It is well written and researched, given the mobility of today’s workers, that infrastructure alone will not guarantee success. Quality of place is also a fundamental factor in economic growth. Recent surveys by the American Planning Association and the North Carolina Chapter of APA show that potential new residents want places to be rich in amenities and do not necessarily want to own a car but rather walk or bike to work and shopping. - For a small city like Wilson, this means reimagining a built environment that has been shaped predominantly by auto-oriented thinking. It means coming back to our center city and reinvesting in authentic places that historic downtowns and walkable neighborhoods offer.

Recognizing the need for long-term thinking, the Wilson community embarked on a multi-year planning program in 2006. The goal was to align the vision of the community with planning policy and development regulations that achieved that vision. Throughout the process, the planning team also used the process as an opportunity to educate citizens and decision makers about the connection between development decisions and the City’s fiscal health.

One outcome of the long-term planning process was the visioning document entitled Wilson 2020. It was a true partnership between community, business, government, non-profit, health, and education leaders. The School of Government at UNC Chapel Hill was hired to facilitate development of the plan, which identified seven action areas: 1) Community, 2) Economy, 3) Education, 4) Health, 5) Managed Growth, 6) Quality of Life, and 7) Collaboration. One major goal that the 1,800+ unique participants clearly articulated was the need to revitalize older neighborhoods and downtown and to improve walkability.

As a follow-up to Wilson2020, in 2007 the City embarked on a fiscal impact study to show the relative costs and benefits to the city for various land use types, including greenfield and infill housing, commercial development, industrial, and office. To measure cost/benefit, we looked at representative developments and mapped calls for service, infrastructure needs, and various other budgetary impacts as well as the specific revenue generated for the city budget. Unsurprisingly, infill development showed high net benefits because capital costs were reduced or even eliminated by using existing infrastructure. This analysis won support from City Council and was used to inform the citywide comprehensive plan and new development regulations with an emphasis on reuse and revitalization, rather than on the growth-as-usual approach.

Next, we embarked on developing the City of Wilson’s 2030 Comprehensive Plan. The 24-month process included elements typical of comprehensive plans and also took deeper dives into the topics of neighborhood, corridor, and downtown revitalization. Two three-day charrettes were held to examine these areas in greater detail and come up with implementable goals. In addition to the charrettes, we collaborated with Barton College on their campus.
master plan, which highlighted their role in the overall revitalization of the neighborhoods around them. Through this long-term planning process, Wilson built broad support for a vision to guide the City into the new economy.

Embracing our Uniqueness: Culture-Based Economic Development

These planning efforts brought about actionable direction on several key projects and initiatives. One was the creation of a public park in the downtown’s Historic Tobacco Warehouse District. Charrette participants thought this space would be ideal for highlighting the work of Wilson’s most famous folk artist, the now late Vollis Simpson, creator of the Whirligig sculptures. Many community members felt that the work should be celebrated and highlighted, and that this authenticity would become a calling card for the community. This uniqueness became a draw to developers interested in revitalization and historic preservation work. Best of all, the effort was led by a grassroots group of volunteers that were passionate about the vision for a park honoring Vollis Simpson’s work and the idea of creative placemaking. In creative placemaking, public, private, not-for-profit, and community sectors partner to strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, tribe, city, or region around arts and cultural activities.

Creative placemaking as an economic development strategy was an entirely new concept for the Wilson community, and certainly didn’t come without controversy. After much discussion with citizens and city leaders about the proper role for local government in the project, the City of Wilson took on the role of a supportive partner in the development of the park. The sculpture park is being built with leadership from a non-profit organization that brought in grants and donations as primary funding sources. The city’s role is more traditional, focusing on infrastructure improvements like streetscape and utilities serving the park and adjacent properties. The city is also providing extensive in-kind support through grant writing, grant management, and project management through the Downtown Development, Financial Services, and Planning and Community Revitalization Departments.

Ripple Effects of Project Successes

Through these two investments, Greenlight gigabit fiber optic infrastructure and the Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park, a new economic development theme emerged based on arts and innovation. The increased arts community has enlivened the downtown and historic district through art projects, music, and other live events. The community has also reinvigorated a nightlife component that had been absent since the late 1980s. The Greenlight infrastructure has already begun to attract businesses that need this resource and to help those in the community capitalize on their own creative ideas.

The park project is still ongoing as of this writing. Eleven Whirligigs have been installed, and nearly four million dollars in grant and donated funds have been secured to design the park, purchase the land, acquire, repair and conserve the artwork and install the sculpture on the park site. The project has received national and international attention and funding from some of the top foundations in the country including the ArtPlace, Kresge Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

In return for this work to date, the city has seen renewed interest in the redevelopment of downtown with $20 million in private investment. This includes two loft apartment projects that include live/work units on the ground floor and market-rate lofts on upper floors that have been completed in the last year within a two-block radius of the park site. The developer of the projects specifically cited interest in the Whirligig Park as a reason to complete these two projects in Wilson.

The project’s successes have been cumulative and, we believe, illustrate the importance of long-range, coordinated planning in Wilson.

The Next Challenge: Keeping the Momentum

The challenge that lies before us, in a weak market eastern North Carolina city, is how to make the end goal a reality with scarce resources. How can we continue to revitalize of the remainder of our downtown and center city neighborhoods into hip places that artists, high-tech workers, and millennials want to live? How do we overcome the skepticism of locals, the banking community, and other partners we need to be successful?

Some real challenges still exist for our continued success. For instance, how can we attract bank financing for large-scale redevelopment projects? During difficult economic times, can we raise the additional $3 million to complete the park or other additional funds for neighborhood revitalization projects? How does a local government make up for the lost development incentive with the sunsetting of the North Carolina Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credit?

We feel we can overcome these challenges through actively marketing our community through implementation of our new Strategic Communications Plan, ensuring that we treat private development downtown as a partnership by providing the best service possible to developers and working with them to secure financing for projects, and continue building on the national recognition around our development of the Greenlight system.

While these are examples of the steps the Wilson community is taking, we continue to examine ways to adjust our approaches to various issues until we find the right formula for success. What is clear is that the status quo would not result in successful transformation of Wilson’s center city and larger community. Planning, investment in infrastructure, public-private partnership, and aggressive implementation are necessary if the Wilson community is going to continue to be vibrant in the long-term.