

Strategic Planning for Regional Economic Development in Western North Carolina

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Community-based strategic planning is gaining wide acceptance in North Carolina. Communities large and small have used strategic planning principles to set priorities, focus their efforts and mobilize resources for community and economic development. The Regional Economic Strategy Project (RESP), undertaken by Western Carolina University's Center for Improving Mountain Living, applied strategic planning methods in an effort to stimulate regional economic development in seventeen western North Carolina counties. The project received a 1989 *Project of the Year* award from the National Association of Management and Technical Assistance Centers (NAMTAC). In 1990, it won a second NAMTAC *Project of the Year* award for applied research conducted under the project's Business Capital Task Force. A third NAMTAC *Project of the Year* award was announced in 1992 for the Mountain Commercial Lending Consortium, an initiative that grew out of the RESP. In a report to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the Corporation for Enterprise Development (CFED) cited the Regional Economic Strategy Project as an example of what CFED has called the new paradigm, or Third Wave, of economic development policy.

Background

In 1987, the Economic Development Division of Western Carolina University's Center for Improving Mountain Living began the Regional Economic Strategy Project to stimulate economic development initiatives in the seventeen westernmost counties of North Carolina. H.F. "Cotton" Robinson, former chancellor

of Western Carolina University, supplied much of the energy and vision for the project. Robinson, a native of western North Carolina, felt that the region's lagging economic performance fell far short of its potential. He was certain that substantial gains could be achieved if Western North Carolinians could unite around key development issues of regional significance. As chancellor, Robinson had established Western Carolina University's Center for Improving Mountain Living in 1976 as a means of delivering technical assistance and other services to communities, groups and individuals throughout the region. Ten years later, in collaboration with the director of the Center's Economic Development Division and an economics professor, he began to articulate his vision for a regional economic development initiative.

In 1987, Robinson assembled an Advisory Panel and a Steering Committee. The Advisory Panel, which included state and nationally recognized leaders from the public and private sectors, reviewed and critiqued the project design. The Steering Committee, on the other hand, had a more participatory role in the project. Its members, which included regional leaders representing a wide range of organizations and institutions, endorsed the project outcomes.

Funds were secured from the Valley Resource Center of the Tennessee Valley Authority to underwrite the costs of planning the regional initiative. A community development professional was hired in December 1987 to design and direct the project. Early in 1988, the North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center committed funds to implement the project. During the project's planning phase, the project director and the director of CIML's Economic Development Division met with a variety of leaders throughout the region to explain the intent of the project and to solicit insights that could help shape its design. Between January and May 1988,

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Western Carolina University, home of the Center for Improving Mountain Living.

the design of the project was refined continually. In addition, members of the Technical Committee were recruited from throughout the region. This group was comprised of 28 individuals with a broad range of expertise and experience. Its function was to identify and propose to the Steering Committee a manageable number of development issues to be addressed through the project. With this group in place, the project was launched in June 1988.

Project Design

Strategic planning initiatives typically begin with an assessment of the environment within which planning decisions must be made. This process is referred to as an environmental scan, and it involves looking at trends and outside forces that impinge on community and economic development. The RESP used a participatory scanning technique intended to build a broad base of public engagement and support as it identified and selected key issues. Readers who are technically oriented may question the validity of an environmental scan that is not grounded in exhaustive expert analysis. In designing the RESP, however, the director judged that the success of the project would be determined more by broad consensus than by analytical rigor. The scan was therefore designed as a series of half-day public forums engaging citizens in the process of issue identification and selection.

Project staff, co-sponsored by local economic development organizations, chambers of commerce and regional councils of governments, convened five forums in the seventeen-county area. The forums included as few

as three counties, and as many as seven. They were open to the public, and invitations were sent to public officials and civic and business leaders. Attendance at the forums generally ranged from 50 to 150. Participants included civic leaders, educators, elected and appointed public officials and business people.

Each of the forums used the same agenda. Following a brief introduction of the RESP and its purpose, participants worked in groups of ten to fifteen to discuss each of four questions.

To get participants to articulate their vision for the region, the first question asked was: "What would be the characteristics of a well-developed western North Carolina economy?" Project staff intentionally avoided using the term 'economic development' because it tends to evoke narrow thinking about industrial recruitment and business development. The question succeeded in eliciting broad thinking about the region's economic future. Participants' comments, which included factors such

as economic opportunity, quality of life, educational opportunity and sound infrastructure, were recorded by facilitators and posted for reference throughout the remaining discussions.

Participants were then asked to consider, and to state their ideas concerning, changes and events that will affect the development of western North Carolina by the year 2000. The responses were recorded and ranked by participants. The next two questions asked participants to identify factors that favor and those that limit the kinds of development they want to see in the region. Again the ideas were recorded and ranked. Finally, participants reviewed the results of the previous discussions and considered regional efforts that should be taken to ensure the kind of future that had been described at the beginning of the forum.

After the final forum was held on August 25, 1988, the results of all the forums were synthesized. The next stage of analysis began with the specific recommendations recorded at the end of each forum. The recommendations were summarized, and similar ones were consolidated. The resulting list of 30 "strategic options" was presented to the project's Technical Committee for further analysis. These options were more specific than issue statements in that they included general prescriptions for action to be taken.

The Technical Committee members drew on their own expertise and insight in analyzing the strategic options. They considered both the developmental impact of each option and the feasibility of achieving results within a two-year period, and plotted the results of their analysis on an evaluation matrix. Project staff

Strategic Objectives Adopted by the Regional Economic Strategy Project

Immediate Objectives:

- Improve the availability of business capital.
- Reduce solid waste and improve solid waste management.
- Enhance the contribution of tourism and recreation to the economy.
- Develop the region's leadership resources.

Secondary Objectives:

- Improve the region's transportation systems, with emphasis on strategic highways.
- Provide for conservation of Western North Carolina's land resources through the establishment of a method of growth management.
- Increase public support for continuing improvement of education in the public schools.
- Strengthen the region's institutional capacity to produce a workforce prepared for technical careers.
- Improve the education and skill levels of the region's present workforce.

synthesized the matrices before the meeting at which the Technical Committee made the final selection of options to be addressed by the RESP. This comprehensive evaluation of strategic options was not intended to determine the final decision of the Technical Committee. Instead this process was to help focus the discussion on those options with the highest impact and feasibility. At its decision meeting, the Technical Committee discussed the aggregate results, and had the opportunity to negotiate adjustments. This negotiation process allowed members with expertise or insight on a particular issue to challenge the group assessment of impact or feasibility, and to argue for an adjustment. If the group reached consensus that an option should be moved on the matrix, it was moved.

Through its process of discussion and negotiation, the Technical Committee reached consensus on four objectives to be addressed initially by the RESP. Five secondary objectives were selected in addition to these immediate objectives. [see box] The secondary objectives were seen as critically important but less feasible than the immediate objectives. The immediate and secondary objectives were presented to the RESP Steering Committee in October 1988. The Steering Committee adopted the objectives and appointed co-chairs for each of the four immediate objectives. The co-chairs were individuals from various communities within the region

who had expertise and leadership stature related to their respective objectives. The co-chairs had the responsibility to organize regional task forces and to lead those groups in the design of regional strategies to achieve their objectives. The task force members were recruited during the first three months of 1989.

Business Capital Task Force

Economic developers in western North Carolina and throughout the rural South have relied heavily on industrial recruiting for creating jobs. This is still an important development strategy, but only a partial solution. Stimulating the formation of new business and the growth of established ones is part of a well-balanced economic development program. Such a strategy necessarily focuses on small business. Most new businesses start out small, and the majority of the firms already operating in the region are small.

The relative abundance of small business and self-employment in the region indicate fertile ground for stimulating business formation and growth. However, obtaining equity and debt capital is difficult, limiting efforts to stimulate business. Recognizing this gap in the capital market, many of participants in the forums recommended a regional revolving loan fund to finance small business development.

The RESP Business Capital Task Force was organized to design a strategy to improve the availability of capital to finance small business start-up and expansion. The Task Force had 36 members, representing a variety of institutions and organizations. The group included small business owners, economic development professionals, lenders, utility representatives, providers of business assistance and staff of state economic development agencies.

The Task Force began by developing an understanding of the problem of business development finance in western North Carolina. All members of the group had insights into the problem, but a clear consensus did not exist within the group about the nature of the problem or its solution. To build this consensus, the Task Force began its work with a couple of panel presentations designed to share perspectives and stimulate some organized discussion of critical issues. The first panel included economic development professionals and providers of business assistance who served on the Task Force. The second panel included Task Force members who own and operate small businesses in western North Carolina. These panel discussions revealed some of the difficulties of small business development. However, they also demonstrated to the Task Force that a more systematic analysis would be required to provide the group with the information needed to understand and solve the problems of business development finance. More information was needed about both the nature

and the extent of unmet demand for business capital than could be provided by anecdotal data.

To gather the needed information, the Task Force asked lenders represented on the Task Force to participate in what came to be called the *Deal Stream Analysis*. This study measured the volume and nature of the "nonbankable" loan requests. RESP staff designed the analysis in collaboration with the lenders on the Task Force. A one-page form was used to collect specified information on each small business loan request that was denied during the three-month study period (November 1989 - January 1990). For the purposes of this analysis, small businesses were defined as those with annual sales of two million dollars or less.

During the three-month period, data were collected on 158 small business loan requests made at the six participating lending institutions. From the results of the *Deal Stream Analysis*, the Task Force concluded that intervention in the business formation and development process clearly was justified. The group was particularly impressed with the finding that in this one quarter, \$32 million in potential loan requests were denied. Since the data were collected during a quarter that is typically a slow business period, it is reasonable to estimate that there is more than \$130 million in unmet small business loan demand over the period of a year. Some lenders on the Task Force noted that even half this figure would represent a substantial amount of potential development.

The *Deal Stream Analysis* and the preceding panel discussions also made it clear to the Task Force that obstacles other than the availability of capital also constrained business formation and development. On June 27, 1990, the Task Force adopted a strategy to address a broader range of constraints. The strategy included three program components, the first of which was the development of improved educational programs to strengthen small business owners' capabilities in the areas of financial management and business planning. Institutional factors that are in the process of being resolved have held up the implementation of this strategy. The Small Business and Technology Development Center, part of the University of North Carolina system, and the Small Business Centers, based in the North Carolina Department of Community Colleges, are working to differentiate and articulate their responsibilities and functions. These negotiations are expected to be completed during 1992, after which work will resume on developing the types of training programs called for by the task force.

A second component called for development of the role of banks as points of entry into the business formation and development system, rather than simply serving as depositories for, and allocators of, capital. As points of entry into the business formation and development system, banks would connect unsuccessful loan appli-

cants with a technical assistance provider when appropriate. Considerable progress has been made on this strategy. The Small Business and Technology Development Center has adopted a program of routinely calling on local bankers to increase and maintain their familiarity with technical assistance services available to small businesses. As a result, the SBTDC reports a significant increase in the number of small business clients referred to them by lending institutions. The SBTDC is also planning a series of lenders' conferences to familiarize local loan officers with services available through the SBTDC.

The third component called for the establishment of a high-risk loan fund to finance businesses that cannot meet conventional underwriting criteria. The task force asked Smoky Mountain Development Corporation, a SBA-sanctioned certified development company, to take the lead role in putting the lending program together. The initial concept was that banks, and perhaps utilities, would contribute to a free-standing loan pool managed by Smoky Mountain Development Corporation. The banks, however, indicated during discussions that they would prefer lending directly to the businesses. The banks could commit more resources to a direct lending program than they could contribute to an independent fund. In response to this preference, staff at Western Carolina University's Center for Improving Mountain Living designed a consortium through which banks lend directly to small businesses on a rotation basis. The Mountain Commercial Lending Consortium was established in July 1992, with eight banks jointly committing to lend \$1 million through the program, in a 21-county area. Smoky Mountain Development Corporation is packaging the loans and will closely monitor performance of the borrowers. Loans are expected to average \$50,000, with a range of \$20,000 to \$150,000.

Solid Waste Task Force

The public forums revealed broad concerns among citizens about the adequacy of the region's infrastructure. The most urgent concern had to do with our capacity to manage solid waste. In western North Carolina, the traditional method of managing solid waste has been to bury it in the ground. But growing concern about protecting groundwater quality has led to changes in landfill regulations. New requirements would dramatically increase the cost of landfill construction and operation. Many landfills in this region were nearing their capacity, a problem compounded by relatively strong population growth.

As the cost of solid waste management escalates, it would increasingly compete with other functions and services for public dollars. The new sanitary landfills would be too expensive to fill with wastes that do not require advanced sanitary disposal or that could be

reused or recycled. Toxic wastes must be kept out to avoid expensive treatment of landfill leachate. Some forum participants felt that problems associated with solid waste management could severely limit economic development. Many recommended regional action to address this problem.

The Solid Waste Management Task Force was charged with creating a regional strategy to reduce solid waste and improve solid waste management. The Task Force had 30 members, including local public officials, staff of regional councils and representatives of private industry, public interest organizations and several public agencies.

Through a series of discussions, the Task Force determined that the lack of developed markets for recyclable materials was one of the most pressing waste-management problems in this region. In collaboration with Regional Councils A, B, C and D, the Task Force explored ways to encourage a regional approach to the development of market infrastructure, and designed a strategy to improve the market for recyclable materials in the region. The strategy called for the establishment of a regional material recovery and marketing system that would consolidate the marketing power of small rural communities.

Under the direction of the task force, staff of the Center for Improving Mountain Living designed a project and secured funding from the North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center and the North Carolina Department of Environment, Health, and Natural Resources. Two additional councils of governments (serving regions E and I) joined the effort, expanding the project region to include 31 counties. The Appalachian Regional Commission, which routinely funds projects of regional councils, provided additional funding to support the councils' participation in the project.

The strategy initially proposed involved the development of a regional material recovery and marketing

system that would aggregate the selling power of local recycling programs through regionally-coordinated marketing services. This proposed system would not physically agglomerate materials from 31 counties in one place for delivery to buyers. Instead it would manage the marketing and delivery of the materials, which might be delivered to one buyer in several separate shipments. The proposed system would initially handle two materials, and additional materials would be added as feasible.

The project team, composed of one staff representative from each of the six councils of governments and a project coordinator from CIML, explored the feasibility of a quasi-public material recovery and marketing system that would represent an association or cooperative of local governments. The team also explored the feasibility of a marketing cooperative of private recycling companies. For a variety of reasons both of these approaches were found to be unworkable. A more feasible arrangement was the development of material processing and marketing systems in the private sector, with numerous subregional market areas for processing and marketing services.

Although this system had already begun to develop through the initiative of several private companies, the project team observed that a couple of factors controlled by the public sector are critical to the successful development of private sector material recovery and marketing capacity. The first is an adequate and dependable supply of material that meets market-quality standards. The other factor is mitigation of the risks, such as dramatic price fluctuations, inherent in private material recovery and marketing enterprises.

The project team directed its efforts to the publicly-controlled factors critical to the development of a private sector system. The project team facilitated the development of improved material collection systems to ensure a dependable supply of material. In some cases, this work involved assistance to local governments in the examination and formation of multi-county systems. In other cases it involved exchange of information among counties that allowed them to learn from the experience of others further along in developing their own recycling systems. Near the end of the project period, this mechanism for exchanging information and experience was expanded statewide when the councils of governments participating in the project organized an informal network of their peers to meet quarterly with state agency representatives to discuss current policy and program issues in solid waste management.

The project also developed relationships between the public and private sectors. Contacts between local governments or groups of



Hot Springs, NC was a thriving spa in the late 19th century. Hot Springs was the first community chosen for RESP's tourism development project.

local governments and private recycling companies were arranged to discuss potential service options and conditions. Project team members did not engage directly in negotiations between governments and private companies, but they provided information and helped local governments analyze options. By the end of the project, all 31 counties in the project region had access to markets for at least two recyclable materials, and most were marketing five or more materials. The most commonly marketed materials are aluminum, glass, plastics, paper and cardboard.

Tourism Development Task Force

As employment growth slows or declines in the industrial sectors that have traditionally dominated the region's economy, the tourism industry has been promoted as a stabilizing force or possibly even as an engine for future economic growth and development. Communities in western North Carolina are increasingly drawn to economic development strategies that focus on opportunities in tourism.

The RESP Tourism and Recreation Task Force was charged with designing a strategy to build on western North Carolina's scenic beauty and recreational opportunities in an effort to enhance the contribution of tourism and recreation to the region's economy. The Task Force included: operators of tourism-related businesses; representatives of tourism promotion organizations, public resource management and planning agencies, and organizations interested in natural resource management; university faculty; and state legislators.

From the outset, the members of the Task Force acknowledged the many existing efforts to promote western North Carolina as a tourist destination. The group also recognized that far less effort was being invested in developing, improving and protecting the region's tourism product (i.e., attractions, amenities and infrastructure). The Task Force therefore decided to concentrate on development efforts rather than promotion efforts. The Task Force defined tourism product development to include product improvement as well as establishment of new product. It emphasized the importance of protecting against haphazard or inappropriate development.

After a year of study and discussion, the Task Force tentatively adopted an initiative to analyze the region's tourism and recreation resources and markets and to identify strategic product-development opportunities for western North Carolina. The goals of the initiative were as follows:

- to enhance the western North Carolina region as a tourist destination by protecting the environment and other tourism resources from degradation or depletion;

- to stimulate the region's economy through the development of new tourism and recreation attractions and support services and infrastructure as well as through improvements to existing tourism and recreation product;
- to deepen understanding of the existing tourism markets for western North Carolina and determine ways to expand market opportunities;
- to increase visitor satisfaction and encourage repeat visitation; and
- to better integrate tourism into community life and local economies.

Prior to developing a detailed methodology for the initiative, the Task Force presented the proposal to independent reviewers in an effort to gauge support for, and feasibility of, the initiative. Included in the group reviewing the proposal were: a chamber of commerce executive; two executive officers of the Cherokee Historical Association; the executive vice president of the Biltmore Company; a county planner; the executive director of a multi-county tourism-promotion organization; the executive director of a county economic development commission; a senior regional planner with the North Carolina Department of Economic and Community Development; the principal owner and a senior officer of one of the region's major outdoor attractions; and the owner and developer of two of the area's larger resorts.

The reviewers concluded that a tightly-focused initiative concentrating on product development at the local level, but with a regional perspective, would have greater potential for success than a regionwide undertaking. All of the reviewers recognized the value of a regionwide initiative; however, they also pointed out the enormous cost and time required to complete a full-fledged regional analysis of tourism and recreation resources and markets. Furthermore, there was some concern that substantial resources would be invested in analysis of areas where there was insufficient local interest. Consequently, the initiative was modified to concentrate on a small number of locations in which leadership and interest were evident.

The modified project was designed to: (1) develop and demonstrate a participatory decision-making model for communities considering tourism and recreation development as an economic development strategy; and (2) develop an information base and institutional capacity within the region to assist communities and clusters of communities in their product development efforts.

The strategy involved selecting two demonstration communities, and drawing on strategic planning principles to analyze market opportunities and develop tourism attractions or infrastructure. Unlike the other

three strategies, which were implemented by the Center for Improving Mountain Living, the Division of Community Assistance of the NC Department of Economic and Community Development implemented the tourism development strategy. They were supported by a project team that included representatives of a variety of public agencies with interests in tourism or natural resource development.

One of the communities selected for the demonstration project was Hot Springs, a very small town that straddles the Appalachian Trail. In addition to the Trail, the town is a base for several white-water rafting companies, and is the site of an historic resort and spa built around the geothermal springs for which the town is named. The project in Hot Springs was designed to build on these assets to make the town a more significant tourist destination. However, a fundamental change of personnel on the town board of aldermen brought to power a group that opposed further tourism development. The aldermen dismantled the planning board, which was coordinating the local tourism development efforts, bringing the project to a halt. Tourism development will continue in Hot Springs, driven by private interests who have already invested in the community. However, development will not be as well-coordinated and probably will not be as well-integrated into the rest of the local economy.

The second demonstration site is McDowell County, a community east of Asheville known more as a manufacturing center than as a tourist destination. The county has identified Lake James State Park as its primary tourism asset. As is typical of North Carolina state parks, there is relatively little development on Lake James. Leaders in McDowell County are examining other lake destinations to gain ideas for the development of a resort at the lake. The work in McDowell County does have the potential to serve as a model of community-based tourism development.

Leadership Development Task Force

The issue of leadership emerged frequently during the forums, primarily in discussion of strategic actions to be taken in the region. As people confronted the complex issues facing the region they ran headlong into the question: "Where will the leadership come from for dealing with these important issues?" Recognizing that it must be supplied by the people of western North Carolina, many suggested a regional program to further develop the region's leadership resources.

Western North Carolina has a strong tradition of leadership. Significant accomplishments have been achieved through the efforts of local and regional leaders who recognized a challenge or opportunity and acted on it. This tradition has furthered economic development in the region, but substantial leadership

resources are still not being used. Throughout western North Carolina, there are potential leaders with insight and energy--untapped resources that could help solve local and regional problems in rapidly changing times.

The forums produced numerous recommendations for an action-oriented regional leadership development program. The Technical Committee and the Steering Committee agreed that such a program could build a stronger "civic infrastructure," enhancing the region's capacity to address other substantive issues. The Steering Committee called for a fourth task force to design a strategy for developing leadership resources. This Task Force had 27 members, a diverse group who are actively involved in local and regional civic affairs. Some were elected officials, others were on the staff of regional organizations, and others served on voluntary boards.

The Leadership Development Task Force heard presentations from two experts in leadership development, and had several meetings to discuss the necessary functions of and design criteria for a leadership development program. The Task Force was particularly committed to the concepts of economic development leadership and regionalism. The members wanted a program that would build the region's capacity to solve economic development problems. After six meetings, the group recommended that an implementation committee be established to refine the program design and to institutionalize it.

The Implementation Committee further developed the design of the leadership development program and asked Western Carolina University to administer it. The University agreed, and in September 1991, the pilot cycle of the Western Carolina Leadership Development Program was launched, in partnership with the North



1992 Class of the Western North Carolina Leadership Development Program.

Carolina Rural Economic Development Center, the Tennessee Valley Authority and MDC, Inc.. The initial class of 40 emerging leaders represented all seventeen of the target counties. It included elected officials, business owners and managers, nonprofit executives and managers, educators and bankers. It reflected the diversity of the region in terms of gender and race.

The program prepares emerging civic leaders to be effective players in regional economic development. During the program, participants apply the methods and information they learn by designing and implementing an actual regional development project. The class of the pilot cycle of the program selected two project issues, and two subgroups were established to work on them. Although the class graduated in August 1992, most of the members have remained involved in the implementation of their projects.

One group has designed and will implement a strategy to increase citizen understanding of the region's workforce development needs and problems, and to increase citizen involvement in addressing them. The group will commission a report designed to present a "citizens' view" of workforce development issues and their significance to the region's economic future. The report will describe current workforce development efforts in the region and will explain how citizens can strengthen these efforts or fill in strategic gaps. The release of the report will be followed by a series of public forums designed to spark greater levels of community activity around workforce development issues.

The other group of participants has established a strategy to improve performance (e.g., job growth, profitability, start-up rates, business growth rates and sustainment rates) of small businesses in western North Carolina. This strategy involves developing and implementing seminars to inform lenders, CPAs, attorneys and local business and economic development groups about available business assistance services and resources (training, technical assistance and special financing programs). Historically, these resources have been used mainly by individuals considering establishing a business. The strategy is intended to increase the use of assistance resources by more established businesses. Despite the fact that these technical and financial resources can substantially benefit established businesses, they rarely use them. This strategy will complement and reinforce the strategies developed by the RESP Business Capital Task Force.

Conclusion

The Regional Economic Strategy Project has not been a quick-fix approach to regional development. The project was launched in early 1988, and the first regional strategy was initiated in September 1990. The pilot cycle of the leadership development program was completed

in July 1992, and that same month eight banks committed one million dollars to the Mountain Commercial Lending Consortium. The RESP has borne fruit, but the process took longer than initially anticipated. It will be several more years before any of the programs can be considered sufficiently mature to evaluate. The leadership program has graduated only its first class of participants, and their performance as regional economic development leaders must be tested over the next several years. The lending consortium will likely make its first loan in early 1993. Its effectiveness as a business formation and development strategy will become clear only after several years of lending.

When the RESP was initially designed, it was anticipated that the project would be a catalyst for regional intervention. The resulting strategies were to be spun off for implementation by organizations other than the Center for Improving Mountain Living. In fact, all but one of the four resulting initiatives were implemented through the Center. Through its staff support of the task forces, the Center became quite familiar with the strategies and developed credibility among key regional players, making it uniquely suited to implement the strategies. Furthermore, through the course of the project, the Center became increasingly committed to ensuring that the strategies were carried out.

Providing staff for the design of four regional development strategies, and the implementation of three, has been extremely demanding. In hindsight, it would have been prudent to limit the number of strategies selected to two, or perhaps three. Any organization contemplating a project like the Regional Economic Strategy Project should be prepared to commit substantial resources over a long period. The RESP occupied two full-time professional staff and considerable support staff. A third full-time professional was hired to coordinate the solid waste project. Other professional staff at CIML have also committed significant amounts of time to assist with strategy implementation.

CIML has no plans for another round of the Regional Economic Strategy Project. However, the process of designing and initiating regional development strategies has not been abandoned. Indeed the process is continuing through the Western Carolina Leadership Development Program, which can be considered the second generation of the RESP. The leadership development program has the capacity to produce strategies similar to those produced by the RESP; pilot cycle participants have already designed a strategy that may address all three of the workforce objectives that were on the secondary list of the RESP. Because the participants in the leadership program are given training in strategic analysis and planning, they will be able to take on the tough issues facing the region in the future. CP