

Local and Regional North Carolina Collaborations

Case Studies from the North Carolina Chapter of the American Planning Association

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Carol Rhea, Darren Rhodes, and Dana Stoogenke

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With an introduction from Ben Hitchings, 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). This year's submissions range from multi-county visioning efforts to small-town transportation planning, demonstrating that planning at any scale can benefit from innovative collaboration.

Innovative Partnerships

Ben Hitchings

I love partnerships, and here's why. Nothing catalyzes creative solutions like a shared problem and different viewpoints. For me, this process is like a controlled nuclear reaction – large amounts of creative energy are released when different perspectives collide in service to a shared objective.

This edition of the *Carolina Planning Journal* highlights innovative partnerships. In a time of growing societal challenges and declining resources, partnerships enable us to combine our expertise, link our networks, and leverage our resources.

These benefits do not always come easily. To realize them, we need to:

- 1) Push outside our comfort zone to engage unfamiliar partners;
- 2) Work together to identify shared interests;
- 3) Sort through our differences; and
- 4) Collaborate to build mutual trust.

I recently went through this process in developing a partnership to relocate a farmers market. The market had been operating successfully for five years, but was losing its space and was looking for a new home. Farmers market leaders approached the town where I work about finding

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a new location. These leaders, who were experienced in private business, engaged town staff, who were experienced in local government. Some of the early conversations were challenging. Farmers market leaders were surprised that town staff couldn't agree to build a million-dollar market pavilion. Town management was surprised that a small non-profit organization couldn't contribute more financially to the effort. Through continued dialogue we sorted through these issues, shared information, and built mutual understanding.

The process required patience, creativity, and an open mind. It was aided by hiring a third-party facilitator with expertise in local food systems, as well as by the shared task of preparing a grant proposal to seek outside funding for relocating the market. Preparing the grant proposal spurred us to refine our ideas, work collaboratively, and demonstrate our commitment to the project goals through the time and energy we invested. Successful submission of the proposal gave us a small "win" to celebrate together. The result was a strong organizational collaboration that combined the site acquisition, site development, and facility maintenance expertise of local government with the market know-how and operational expertise of a seasoned non-profit. Now that's an exciting partnership, and one that dramatically strengthens the prospects for a successful project.

This section of CPJ describes four examples of dynamic collaborations from across North Carolina. Such innovative partnerships take work, but the rewards can be substantial. If done right, they can generate an arc of creative energy to do something transformative in the life of our communities – by doing it together.

Opt-In Project Explores Uncharted Planning Territory in Southwestern NC

Stacy J Guffey, Ben Brown

"We're closer to five other state capitals than we are to Raleigh." That's a phrase you're likely to hear within the first five minutes of a conversation with leaders in the far western region of western North Carolina.

Although it may sound like a simple observation on geography, the obstacles our isolated location and rugged terrain create for regional planners and economic developers means that any attempt at a collaborative regional vision is likely to strain the limited capacities of existing governments and institutions. This is a difficult task, even in large metropolitan areas with plenty of leaders and resources to draw on. It is doubly so in a sparsely populated, rural region like ours.

These challenges are why the Opt-In SWNC visioning

initiative is so unique and so important. The initiative's ambitions are to fill in research gaps, identify opportunities, and test alternative strategies to inform decision-making about economic development, transportation planning and the environment in the far western North Carolina counties.

Spawned from an impasse between federal agencies over the proposed east-west highway corridor through one of the most remote sections of the mountains, the Opt-In (short for Opportunity Initiative) effort encompasses Haywood, Jackson, Swain, Macon, Clay, Cherokee and Graham Counties and the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians.

The Initiative was managed by the Southwestern Commission Council of Governments on behalf of the region's seven counties and 16 municipalities. A Leadership Council of elected officials, business professionals and nonprofit leaders from around the region acted as a steering committee.

Ultimately, though, this effort was run by the citizens and leaders of southwestern North Carolina, and the families, businesses and local governments in the seven westernmost counties and in the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians stand to reap its benefits.

Regional planning visions, in and of themselves, are nothing out of the ordinary and are increasingly relied upon to align development strategies with potential investment in an era of increased competition and diminished revenue sources. What makes this project distinctive is that it is the first of its kind, focused on an entirely rural region without a major metropolitan center. Depending on their location within the region, the counties and towns of the far west have connections with metro areas outside the region (i.e. Atlanta, Asheville and Chattanooga); however, there is no central job-generator, as with city-centered metro areas with rural exurbs. Adding to the Initiative's uniqueness is the involvement of a sovereign nation - the Eastern Band of the Cherokee.

Project Scope

The purpose of the Opt-In initiative is to develop a long-term vision that guides policy-making decisions in the far west over the next 25 years. The Southwestern Commission established the foundation of the regional vision by working in active collaboration with citizens and leaders to identify and confirm broad goals and principles. Then – again in collaboration with those who live and work in the western counties -- the initiative tested the likelihood of achieving those goals through a broad range of strategies.

Whether counties or municipalities choose to implement all, some, or none of the vision's components is up to them. This has been an opportunity exploration, not a legislative process, thus the name "Opt-In." Local governments can determine how they want to use the information, directing the Southwestern Commission to incorporate elements of the vision into regional infrastructure planning. They can leverage the research for



Citizens of Southwestern North Carolina gathered to share ideas at community workshops in every jurisdiction within the Opt-In project area. *Images courtesy of the authors.*



their own purposes or they can choose not to do anything.

However, because the process is designed to incorporate the ideas and concerns of citizens and leaders through each phase, the effort is likely to produce decision-making tools that enjoy broad support.

The Team

The Opt-In project has been several years in the making. In the summer of 2012, the Southwestern Commission issued a Request for Proposals for a consulting team to assist in the process.

The commission chose a multiple-firm, 20-member team of experts led by the Atlanta-based Tunnell, Spangler & Walsh (TSW) to help coordinate the project. The team also featured two local consultants, Ben Brown of PlaceMakers and Stacy Guffey of Stacy J Guffey & Associates, both of Macon County.

Funding for the project came from a diverse mix of regional, state and national sources, including the Southwestern Commission, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) and the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC). Additional staff support has been provided by the North Carolina Appalachian Regional Commission Program.

The Process

Compounding the challenges regional planners face in the far west is the area's reputation for distrusting perceived government intrusion into private lives. Planning efforts are often met with a skeptical eye, regardless of their intentions to bolster the regional economy and improve the quality of life of residents.

Bearing this in mind, Opt-In utilized a public input process involving hundreds of one-on-one and small group meetings. The idea was to minimize as much as possible the number of meetings people were asked to attend, while still providing room for honest conversation in comfortable

settings to help allay citizens' fears that any changes would be forced upon them.

The outreach effort included public workshops in each county for development of the regional vision, as well as two charrettes – one in Cherokee County for a Comprehensive Plan, and one in Graham County for both a Comprehensive Plan and a Comprehensive Transportation Plan. "Transportation" as used here is not limited to just roads or highways, but the full range of mobility options, including rail, cycling, pedestrian, mass transit, county transit systems, etc.

The project team used the input from the initial rounds of one-on-one and small group meetings and combined it with statistical studies, mapping and other data to create a draft baseline vision. Then team members tested their observations in follow-up interviews and in the county-by-county public workshops. Out of the first round of workshops came a draft vision foundation supported by five "pillars":

- The Place We're Given (natural and cultural environment)
- The Places We Make (built environment)
- The Ways We Get Around (transportation)
- The Jobs We Need (economic policy-making)
- The Quality of Life We Expect (public health, education, small town life)

In round two of the workshops, participants explored scenarios that tested their appetite for making changes in decision-making approaches in order to achieve their goals. They provided their answers to key questions: What trade-offs might be necessary? Which trade-offs are acceptable? Which aren't?

By May 2014, the Opt-In team will deliver the complete package of deliverables: The regional vision, the two Comprehensive Plans for Graham and Cherokee Counties and the Comprehensive Transportation Plan for

Graham County. The deliverables will represent an historic collaboration in a complex region and – depending upon how local governments choose to apply them – guidelines for prioritizing choices and policies for decades to come.

Lessons Learned

The three strategies that worked well and made this process successful were:

- Bookending support from both the grassroots and regional leadership by developing a Leadership Council made up of area political, business and non-profit leaders.
- Taking the project to the participants by holding dozens of small group and one-on-one meetings where people live and work and by holding workshops in each of the jurisdictions.
- Using a multi stage process where the team checked in with stakeholders and the public and incorporated their input into the refinement of the regional vision.

The greatest challenge has been the one we recognized from the beginning – the complex geography of the region. Most communities are separated by mountain chains. Travelling between towns like Franklin and Robbinsville, in close proximity on a map, might take upwards of an hour, creating a psychological barrier as well as a physical one.

The Opt-In Initiative created a model that attempts to overcome historical obstacles to collaboration. Even if it achieves only modest advancements in the perspectives of regional leaders that we are “better together,” Opt-In’s efforts at collaboration are worth emulating.

For more information, including digital version of the draft regional vision, visit www.optinswnc.org.

Transportation Planning in a Growing Community

Carol Rhea, Darren Rhodes,
Dana Stoogenke

The Town of Red Cross - Past and Present

Red Cross was founded in the late 1700s and for nearly two hundred years life changed very little. Originally called “Red Crossing,” the Town owes its name to the rich red dirt of the Piedmont and the crossroads of what would eventually become N.C. 24/27 and N.C. 205. N.C. 24/27 remained unpaved until 1925, and N.C. 205 was not paved until 1941.

Rolling farmland dotted by farmhouses dominated the landscape. A few small-scale farming-related businesses

and industries served the area, and by the early 1900s, several small stores operated at the crossroads. Life and land use remained fairly constant until the latter part of the Twentieth Century.

In 1962 Stanly County constructed a new high school in Red Cross. Housing developments began popping up in the 1990s as growth from Charlotte made the area more attractive as a bedroom community. More small businesses were established in response to the residential growth and more commercial development, pushing out of Charlotte and Albemarle, began creeping closer to town along NC 24/27. The quiet farming community was suddenly faced with being overtaken by unplanned, uncharacteristic growth. In an attempt to control this growth, adjacent municipalities began annexing new lands, coming closer to Red Cross. Their expansions threatened the Town’s very existence as a separate and distinct place.

Incorporation was the first step Red Cross took to address these threats. On August 1, 2002, the North Carolina General Assembly approved the Town Charter. Shortly after incorporation, the Town’s land area nearly doubled in size as many petitioned the Town for annexation. Years prior to incorporation, older town residents used to gather at Bill Hill’s store at the crossing to dream of becoming a town. None of these residents lived long enough to see



NC 24/27 (Old Red Cross Road) in the early 1900s (top image) and today (bottom image). Images courtesy of the authors.

the Town become official, but their story underscores the importance of vision and long term planning for the citizens of Red Cross. Residents Ike and Helen Williams lived in a home near the crossing that today serves as the Town Hall and the nucleus of a future Town Center.

The Growth and Impacts of N.C. 24/27

The rudiments of N.C. 24/27 were in place in Red Cross for more than a century before that stretch of road was designated N.C. 27 as part of North Carolina's original 1922 state highway system. It took years and lots of effort to develop this highway system and for most of that time the clear focus was on moving intrastate traffic with little or no thought to road impacts on the communities they traversed.

In the years since its designation as N.C. 27, the road has experienced many changes. It was paved in 1925 and co-designated N.C. 24 in 1963. In the mid 2000s, the road again "improved" through the town when it was reengineered as a four lane divided highway. It became clear to residents and Town staff that as a central road in the community, N.C. 24/27 no longer unified but rather divided Red Cross. The crossroads that was the center of the community for more than 200 years was no longer suitable as a town center. In 2010, in its first Land Development Code, the Town was forced to locate its planned town center in the southeastern quadrant of the crossroads to allow for density and pedestrian mobility.

NCDOT Plans for 24/27

In 2011, Red Cross staff worked with North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) staff on a draft Comprehensive Transportation Plan (CTP) for Stanly County. A key element of their plan was a continuation of refining access and intersections along the highway. This included implementation of NCDOT's Strategic Highway Corridor's Expressway designation. The Expressway design minimizes points of conflict, but in the eyes of the community, further separated the north and south parts of town. The mention of a potential, but highly unlikely, grade separation at the crossroads alarmed Red Cross leaders. One of the many potential designs discussed in the plan included a cloverleaf interchange that would, in essence, completely wipe out their planned town center. Red Cross declined to approve the draft CTP. Instead, they contacted Carol Rhea, AICP, a partner with the Orion Planning Group (OPG), and asked for her help. Rhea had provided ongoing assistance to the town since 2002, leading efforts on code updates and the creation of the Land Development Plan, a project she shared with Darren Rhodes, chief planner for the Piedmont Office of the NC Division of Community Assistance.

The Red Cross Transportation Master Plan

After discussions with town leaders, the various stakeholders decided to move forward with a town-adopted, policy-based transportation master plan. With the Town's

full support, Rhea and Rhodes pulled in Dana Stoogenke, AICP, director of the Rocky River RPO to help round out the consulting team. This team of public and private consultants not only provided a wealth of experience and knowledge, it helped to reduce costs and to make the plan affordable for the town.

For a town that owns and maintains less than one lane mile of road and has no sidewalk or bicycle amenities, a transportation master plan might seem unnecessary. The plan for Red Cross, though, communicated what the transportation network needs to be, in order to support their long range land development vision including the town center. While NCDOT made great strides in working with communities to address transportation needs within the context of planned land use, in the absence of a clear local vision of what the network needs to be and who it needs to serve, their plans may be at odds with a community's vision, as they were in Red Cross.

Working in concert, the consultant team took turns facilitating meetings, arranging speakers, researching plan elements and answering town questions. The Town's recently adopted Land Development Plan and the project's three consultants provided most of the guidance and information needed for the Transportation Plan; Tim Boland with the Region 10 office of NCDOT also attended a meeting to discuss NCDOT's Superstreet approach in greater detail as well as state plans for N.C. 24/27. The Stanly County Planning Director and the Town's Zoning Administrator attended meetings as well, more to observe than serve as speakers. Both were very involved in the creation of the Land Development Plan.

In 2013, the Town met once again with NCDOT and shared their Transportation Master Plan, triggering potential changes to the CTP in Red Cross. Dicky Hatley, town councilmember and former planning board chair, summed up the effect their new plan had at this meeting saying "The plan gives Red Cross a lot more credibility with NCDOT. With our current Zoning Ordinance, Land Use Plan and Transportation Master Plan, I think we can grow and be happy with what we see."

Keys to Success

Despite the fact they were from separate agencies, Rhea, Rhodes and Stoogenke worked as a team to provide support to the Planning Board on the draft plan and to help the Board present the draft plan to the public and the Town Council. Although OPG took the lead on writing and compiling the plan, this, too, was a collaborative effort that reflects the work of the whole team as well as the Town. Good communication was key to the effective partnership among the consultants and between the consultants and Red Cross. As evinced in Red Cross, effective partnerships require relationship building and good planning requires the development of trust and honest discussion. This cannot be achieved through email or text messages; it requires a commitment to be on the ground in the community working with community leaders and citizens. Other key strategies

that made this plan a success were:

- Help the community focus on the positive. Ask what does the community want instead of what do they NOT want.
- Understand roles and relationships within the community and between the community and other agencies such as NCDOT.
- Understand the purpose of the plan and how it will be used. Keep that in mind when structuring the planning effort and compiling the final document—don't over- or under-plan and don't use a one-size-fits-all plan because they rarely do fit.
- When the budget is limited get creative. There are often solutions, such as the 3-way consulting partnership used in Red Cross, that can leverage resources.

Perhaps the most important take away from this project is that even the smallest town can create a transportation plan as long as there are dedicated citizens with a vision and partners willing to collaborate.

Playing Around with Civic Engagement Strategies in the Triad

Deborah Ryan

In the 1989 film *Field of Dreams*, Kevin Costner plays the owner of a failing farm, who hears a voice repeatedly whisper, "If you build it, he will come" as he walks through his cornfield. Costner eventually learns "it" is a baseball field and that the "he" is the long-deceased Shoeless Joe Jackson and seven other equally dead baseball players banned from the sport in the 1919 "Chicago Black Sox" scandal. Costner plows down the cornfield, the players arrive, and his farm is supposedly saved by the hundreds of people seen approaching in cars to watch the game at the end of the film.

But urban planning is not *Field of Dreams*. Planners and leaders should understand that when it comes to public meetings, even "If you build it," it is unlikely the public "will come" to save the farm, or show up to share their thoughts about how growth should occur on or around it.

Who can blame them? Traditional civic forums in which public input is gathered can be boring, especially for highly involved and engaged citizens who have heard so much of the information in prior meetings. For the less informed, the forums can be mindboggling. Ubiquitous PowerPoint presentations by the planning staff or their consultants are so packed full of information that members

of the public trying to take it in feel like they are drinking from a fire hose. Not surprisingly, few attendees actually respond to the information presented, and public input is often limited to those people who arrive with a personal agenda already in hand, and whose passion can easily hijack a meeting.

These concerns were at the forefront when the Piedmont Together project, an initiative funded by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development to develop a regional master plan for strong, sustainable communities in the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina, hired Ryan-Harris LLC to create a public input process for the project. Piedmont Together Project Manager Mark Kirstner charged Ryan-Harris with developing a fun, educational and inclusive process that would deliver a consistent type of feedback from 13 geographically dispersed civic forums led by local facilitators who each had very different levels of planning knowledge and experience.

Rummyland was the first of many community engagement exercises undertaken during the Piedmont Together process, and was the focus of the first round of civic forums. The card-like game was designed to give even the most reticent participants a voice in the conversation about the regions' strengths and challenges. Almost 300 people played *Rummyland*.

Seated around tables of six, each participant-player was given a stack of nine cards. On one side of the card was the traditional image of a green playing card. On the other side were representative images of local strengths pre-determined by the project staff. Participants were instructed to fan out the cards in their hands, then choose and lay down on the "game" table what they believed to be the three cards that illustrated the most significant strengths in the region. If four or more players laid down the same card, that table had a "rummy" of consensus and could record that community strength on a sheet of green paper and hang it on a community wall. If there was not agreement at the table, as represented by four or more of the same cards, players were asked to discuss their card choices and attempt to reach a four card consensus, or forfeit the opportunity to post their thoughts on the community wall. This first round was limited to just 15 minutes.

Stacks of red playing cards with illustrative images of the region's challenges were then distributed to the players, and they were asked to play a second 15-minute round of *Rummyland*, identify and/or reach four card consensuses, and write/post their findings on red sheets of paper on the community wall. All the players were then invited to the community wall, where the facilitators assisted them in looking for areas of consensus across all of the six-person table games. The facilitators also invited additional strengths and challenges to be posted by participants on white sheets of paper to ensure that individual voices were also recorded.

Rummyland set a fun, relaxed tone and bracketed the public conversation around topics to which the project team was seeking input. Facilitators reported back

on a standardized form the information posted on the community walls, as well as the tone and direction of the table conversations.

Later in the project, the information gained in these and later forums served as the foundation for *Possible Piedmonts*, which consists of three scenarios written by Ryan-Harris in response to the question, “What will living in the region look like in the future?” All set in 2020, each scenario described the lives of three generations of the same Piedmont family and the opportunities and challenges they faced, given the community choices made and public policies enacted in the present day. *Possible Piedmonts* was also inspired by Crossroads Charlotte’s *Imagine Our Tomorrow* a component of a community building initiative in which four stories were written to illustrate four plausible futures relative to access, equity, inclusion and trust in the social, political, economic and cultural life of the city.¹

Possible Piedmonts’ Mother Mary scenario focused on the life of a local family’s matriarch and her life as a struggling and isolated farm owner, a probable story if existing trends in growth remained the same. The *Stormin’ Norman and Cookin’ Caroline* narrative described the life of Mary’s veteran son and his immigrant wife striving to build a life in the Piedmont with improved access to transportation and healthcare, but an overall lack of investment in education and limited job opportunities. The *Tech Twins* scenario focused on the lives of Mary’s adult grandchildren and the many choices and opportunities they had in the Piedmont because of the adoption of sustainable policies and the political will to fund them. Joint work group meeting participants were asked to respond to each of the scenarios and suggest strategies to move away from those they deemed to be less desirable, and towards the ones describing a better future.

To further expand community engagement beyond the civic forums, Ryan-Harris also developed a number of hands-on outreach activities. *Food For Thought* was designed to take advantage of the captive audience at bars, restaurants and coffee shops, while patrons were waiting for their orders to be served. Inspired by the information-rich, playful paper placemats set before restaurant diners to keep them occupied at mealtimes, and illustrator Marion Deuchars’ book *Let’s Make Some Great Placemat Art*,² *Food for Thought*’s disposable paper placemats contained word games and multiple-choice questions where local diners could learn about the Piedmont Together project and rank strategies for addressing the region’s strengths and challenges. Just under 100 placemats were collected.

Bright Ideas was designed for use at events where many people are gathered at informal, leisurely settings like festivals, farmers markets, food truck rallies, and school or church events. Candy Chang’s contemplative

experience *Confessions* inspired this initiative, where she invited gallery visitors to anonymously submit their secrets on wooden plaques to be posted over time like on a Shinto Shrine prayer wall. Triad Piedmont residents were asked to anonymously respond to the prompt, “What’s your bright idea?” and post their ideas about guiding future growth in the region on a portable tack board. To gently steer the participants’ comments, five different categories were suggested on the tack board: jobs, housing, transportation, healthy communities, and places and spaces. Project team members accompanied the *Bright Ideas* board and encouraged people to take part by handing out light bulbs.

For many people, *Food for Thought* and *Bright Ideas* offered both an introduction to the Piedmont Together project and a first-time opportunity to participate in the community planning process. Along with *Rummyland* and *Possible Piedmonts*, these civic engagement exercises garnered input from over 500 Triad citizens, and much of it is being used to inform the Regional Master Plan for the Piedmont Together project.

An important aspect of these civic engagement exercises is that they were inspired by popular culture and works of contemporary art. In asking for public comment, planners are competing for people’s precious leisure time. If we are to win that contest, we must draw from all of our experiences, be emboldened to play around with civic engagement strategies, and borrow from other professions. Just as long-range regional master plans are ultimately about improving people’s lives, the planning process should seek to do the same.

Endnotes:

¹ Crossroads Charlotte’s *Imagine Our Tomorrow* project can be found at <http://www.crossroadscharlotte.org/imagine/>

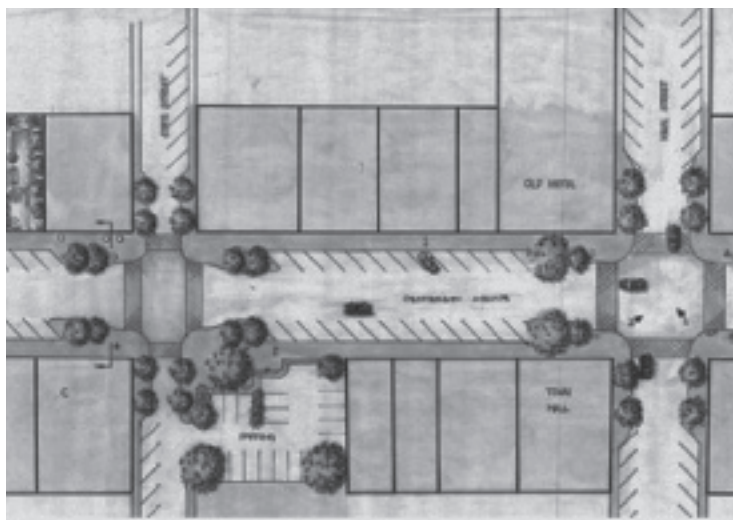
² For more information about artist Marion Deuchars and examples from her books, see <http://www.letsmakesomegreatart.com/>

Simple Changes and Collaboration: NCDOT and the Town of West Jefferson Partner to Revitalize Downtown

Dean Ledbetter, Lauren Blackburn

Significant planning and coordination produced important street system changes and remarkable economic revitalization in West Jefferson, NC, a mountain town of

We must draw from all of our experiences, be emboldened to play around with civic engagement strategies, and borrow from other professions.



Downtown Street Enhancement Plan for West Jefferson, NC. Produced as part of the 2003 NCSU West Jefferson Design Charrette. *Image courtesy of the authors.*

1299 people. This joint effort between the Town and the North Carolina Department of Transportation also involved the Appalachian Regional Health District, the business community, and a private engineering firm.

West Jefferson, located in Ashe County in the northwestern corner of the state, developed around a depot of the Virginia-Carolina Railroad (the “Virginia Creeper”) in the early 1900s. In the 1930s, the Kraft-Phoenix Creamery established a plant in West Jefferson. The plant is now home to the Ashe County Cheese Plant, the only major commercial cheese production facility in North Carolina. Other industries, such as furniture, agriculture and textiles, were the bedrock of the local economy through the late 20th century. However, in the later part of the century, major manufacturing companies moved from the town, resulting in the decline of once thriving downtown.

As decline in local industry saddled the Town with unemployment and disinvestment, a young fresco artist by the name of Ben Long began his work in the region. Long began painting frescos in mountain town churches in the 1970s, sparking a following of tourists interested in the emerging art scene. As a result of Long’s work, other artists moved to the West Jefferson area. These artists opened galleries in downtown West Jefferson, providing an opportunity for the reinvention of downtown as a tourist destination.

In October 2003, the town partnered with Handmade in America and the West Jefferson Revitalization Committee to host students from the North Carolina State University’s College of Design Department of Landscape Architecture. The students created conceptual designs for the downtown, focusing on Jefferson Avenue, Main Street, Back Street and connecting side streets. The team’s designs showed a more pedestrian-friendly downtown including public seating, slowed traffic, improved crosswalks, decorative paving materials and curb extensions.

The 2010 West Jefferson Pedestrian Plan was also a

catalyst for defining the vision for downtown. The plan built upon existing plans (including the 2003 Downtown Design Charrette), evaluated existing pedestrian conditions, and assessed the needs of citizens, and ultimately identified specific improvements. The Pedestrian Plan helped cement the community’s vision and commitment toward the improvements. NCDOT provided funding for the plan after selecting the Town’s application in a competitive grant process and reviewed the document for barriers to implementation.

Some storefronts and other downtown businesses began to benefit from façade improvements and other private investment. While property owners made improvements to the face of the buildings and streetscapes, the Town did not have the resources to make the necessary pedestrian and parking improvements. Nevertheless, the Town sought out funding to continue working toward the vision.

In early 2011, NCDOT began discussing a routine resurfacing and drainage improvement project along Jefferson Avenue with Town and county leaders. The Town asked what streetscape and pedestrian improvements could be accommodated as part of the resurfacing project. NCDOT had already awarded the contract for the original scope of work, so the Town and NCDOT had only weeks to make any adjustments. NCDOT engineers and town staff worked together to design a solution and educate downtown business owners about the proposal.

In a two-month period, engineers and town officials discussed plans for the removal of two traffic signals and replacing those signals with four-way stops. The plan also called for restriping on-street parking to include handicap spaces, new street marking to resemble curb extensions, and new pedestrian crosswalks. NCDOT committed to seeking \$250,000 of future funding for the permanent construction of the curb extensions, and the Town would identify additional funds for other decorative elements. Meanwhile, Ashe County Chamber of Commerce director Cabot Hamilton worked with business owners to explain the planned improvements and discuss potential benefits to the town. McGill and Associates, the Town’s consultant, was instrumental during this process. McGill and Associates prepared the 2010 Pedestrian Plan and continued to assist the Town in implementing its recommendations. They provided drawings and addressed many of the public’s questions about the project.

During a council meeting in August 2011, business owners assembled to discuss the project, even as the milling machine was removing pavement in front of town hall. During the council meeting, over 20 business owners expressed their support or concern about the proposal. Supportive business owners wore bright orange stickers reading “Vote Yes to DOT.” The Town Council voted to support the new plan and implement a future based on accommodating pedestrians rather than designing streets solely for tractor-trailers. The Council vote also supported NCDOT’s commitment to find the \$250,000 necessary to construct the permanent improvements. Work began three

days after the Council's decision to endorse the project. The removal of traffic signals, installation of stop signs, and on-street markings were completed within days of the vote.

In September 2011, the Appalachian Regional Health District hosted Mark Fenton, a nationally-recognized speaker on pedestrian mobility and public health, to conduct a workshop in West Jefferson. Following the workshop, the Health District awarded the Town funding to create construction documents and plans for the permanent pedestrian improvements in the downtown. The Town retained McGill and Associates to create the construction documents. The more extensive pedestrian improvements were constructed over two summers, including the curb extensions at the two formerly signalized intersections and two additional stop-controlled intersections.

"We have seen an impact here, I think mainly due to the slowing of traffic coming through Jefferson Avenue. It slows them down, they're forced to stop at the intersection directly above us. And it causes them to look around," reported Josh Williams, owner of Ashe County Cheese.

While the engineers were not surprised with the traffic calming benefits the project brought, the economic benefits have been remarkable. Since the traffic signals were removed, the number of vacant storefronts and apartments in the downtown area has dropped from thirty-three to five. Ten new businesses have opened in the two-year period since the initial traffic improvements were installed. Business owners have noticed that the project reduced traffic speeds along Jefferson Avenue, and residents report feeling safer crossing the roadway.

Kathy Corbett, owner of My Favorite Kitchen Things, said of the project, "It is fabulous. They've done a wonderful job. They put trees; they put shrubs; they put benches, lights. A lot of different items to attract people to come back to town. More of a friendly-type atmosphere."

Since the improvements, visitors to the Town have remarked on their experience more so than before the

project. Newspaper articles and television programs from across the state and other states have promoted West Jefferson as a walkable and welcoming tourist destination¹.

Now, the lessons learned in West Jefferson are spreading throughout the region. After showing the results of the West Jefferson project to leaders from other towns, NCDOT has successfully removed traffic signals and implemented traffic calming measures in other towns with similar positive results. NCDOT is now planning to extend the downtown West Jefferson project to replace an additional traffic signal with a four-way stop, fill gaps in downtown sidewalks, and add curb extensions and pedestrian crosswalks. This project is scheduled to begin in 2015 using a combination of state and federal funding.

The benefits of the streetscape project resulted from a rare level of collaboration and trust between the Town of West Jefferson and the NCDOT. By listening to one another and appreciating one another's goals, the Town and NCDOT were able to join together and pursue a common vision that has brought positive results to each as well as to the public. The short deadline for a decision also required the assistance of the Chamber of Commerce and McGill and Associates to quickly educate the Town Board, business owners, and the public. Ultimately, the collaboration overcame the fear of change that could have kept the Town's infrastructure – and economy – stuck in the past.

Endnotes:

¹ "West Jefferson, North Carolina: A Fun Place to Visit. The Herald-Dispatch, Huntington, West Virginia. August 2013



Pedestrians taking advantage of new walkability measures in West Jefferson, NC. *Image courtesy of Dean Ledbetter.*