

GroWNC: Together We Create Our Future

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GroWNC was a three-year planning program to develop a framework of voluntary, locally-implemented, market-based solutions and strategies to ensure that as western North Carolina continues to grow, the effects of this growth have a positive impact on the region and its communities. The regional plan weaves together existing plans and strategies with extensive public input from a variety of backgrounds and interests to identify issues, goals and objectives across multiple topic areas. The plan and toolkit of products and resources will foster economic prosperity through a regional vision that identifies implementable projects and actions. GroWNC was funded by a grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) through the Partnership for Sustainable Communities.

Background

Prior to the onset of the recent recession, citizens and leaders in western North Carolina identified the need for “greater regional coordination” on issues of growth management and sustainability for the region’s communities. This need surfaced due to the unparalleled levels of land speculation and development that occurred during the last decade. The region is a beautiful place to visit and live and draws many people, businesses and retirees. The NC Office of State Budget and Management Projections estimates that the population in the five-county region is expected to increase by 40% over the next 25 years. In some cases, growth has threatened the mountain culture and traditions and created new challenges for the preservation of the high quality of life, natural assets, and cultural values that the region is known for. The area features a few small to medium size cities with many smaller, linked rural communities and economies. The GroWNC initiative was an innovative project for the area, grounded in the need to improve coordination and systems thinking among communities in the region, in order to protect and enhance the character of the region. The primary areas of focus for the initiative are the natural and cultural resources sectors and their impact on the economy and quality of life for residents, including tourism, products and services based off these natural assets.

How the Initiative Was Started and Key Players

Local leaders decided to pursue a Regional Planning grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) through the Partnership for Sustainable Communities. The purpose of the grant was to develop a framework of voluntary, locally implementable, market-based strategies to ensure that the region remains a great place to live and work.

Over a dozen partners convened to plan for this project and grant proposal. Land of Sky Regional Council

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(LOSRC) was a natural fit to apply for and administer the grant due to the organization's position as the region's transportation planning agency and regional Council of Governments. LOSRC was already the entity in charge of both regional transportation and economic development plans; the organization also led a number of related regional plans focused on natural resources, clean energy and alternative fuels, farming, forestry and housing. Finally, the organization, with the support of its member governments, had the political will to lead the study.

An important partner in this effort was the National Environmental Modeling and Analysis Center (NEMAC), who helped to author the grant application. NEMAC has a history of working within the mountain region. They helped develop the regional green infrastructure network, Linking Lands and Communities, and were in the process of creating the Western North Carolina Vitality Index, an online tool that reports on the overall health of the 27 westernmost counties of the state through their natural, social, built, and economic environments. Moving the Vitality Index and GroWNC projects ahead in tandem allowed the study to frame the issues within a larger regional context. In addition, NEMAC was creating a national map viewer and strategic implementation web tools for the National Climate Assessment and the USDA Forest Service and was able to leverage these technologies with minimal investment from the local community. NEMAC's skill sets were complimentary to the other partners and each group was able to utilize their particular

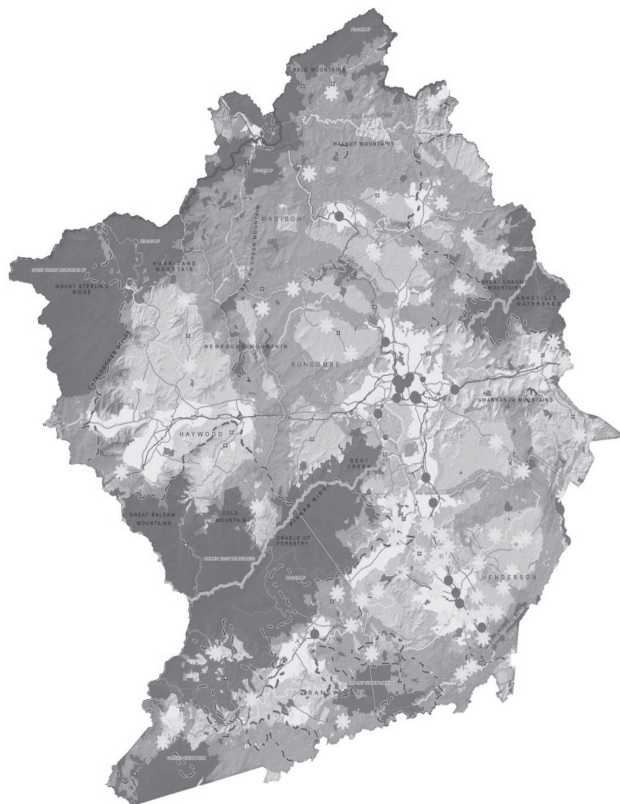
strengths. This collaborative approach was a key to the success of the project.

LOSRC also recognized the need for additional expertise related to planning and land use modeling at multiple scales from an entity that could provide an outside, objective view. LandDesign, a private urban design and planning firm, met this need and brought a comprehensive understanding of economic drivers and transportation-related issues from their work on planning efforts throughout the Carolinas and the greater southeast region.

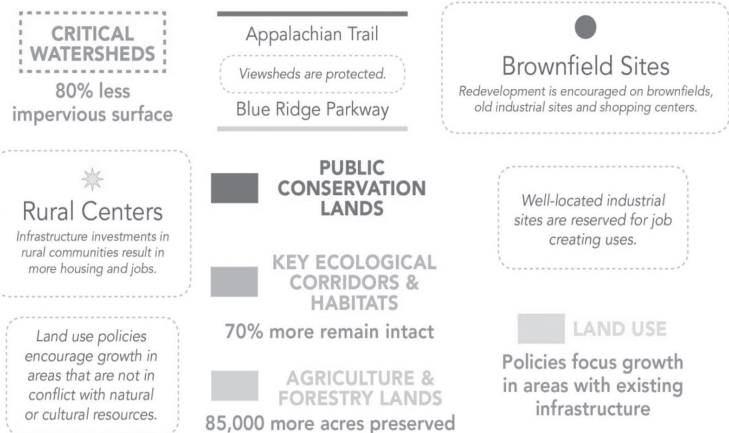
A Consortium of 64 members representing residents and organizations from various backgrounds in the five counties guided GroWNC and oversaw the development of the regional plan. A 13-member Steering Committee led the Consortium, and was responsible for prioritizing work activities, participating in the selection of consultants, approving public involvement approaches, and making recommendations to guide the project and staff.

Planning Process

A review of all existing land use plans provided a foundation for the regional planning work. Most of the existing plans had their own public involvement component, thus ensuring that the basis of the GroWNC process was grounded in established goals and objectives across the region. Eight collaborative, topic-specific workgroups formed during this time and included experts from areas such as economic development, cultural resources, and



Preferred Scenario



transportation. Participants assisted with plan review and the refinement of goals and objectives, which shaped the scenario planning process that followed.

The development of several alternative growth scenarios allowed all of the stakeholders to see different views of the future and the impacts that decisions would have on the key values. Public engagement helped to determine the preferences and value drivers for the various stakeholders. This allowed the core team to understand consensus points that were critical to a regional vision, as well as some unique local preferences based on factors such as primary economic drivers, local politics and geography. This understanding shaped the process toward an end goal of providing regional, county, and municipal level implementation steps.

Once a Regional Preferred Scenario was developed, its purpose was to serve as a guidepost for the development of a set of voluntary strategies, or action steps, that could be undertaken at the organizational, local, county, or regional level. Implementation of these strategies will move the region toward the Regional Preferred Scenario.

By the end of this process, the team identified about 300 strategies to share with the community. Packaging and distributing this amount of information in a meaningful way required a suite of accessible, flexible tools that could be used by multiple audiences in a variety of ways. The final toolkit was designed to allow all of the previous work and results of this study to be accessed in one online location. This aided in the transparency of the process and helped build trust. The development of the design and content of the final product was collaborative, and included both a multi-disciplinary staff team, as well as intentional opportunities for workgroup participants and interested local governments to help shape the final tools, ensuring a final product that is both robust and accessible.

Public engagement and outreach was crucial for success throughout the project. The project team used a variety of techniques to ensure that a broad cross section of the local constituency was involved in the process. This included traditional large public meetings, online and paper surveys, and “piggy-backing” at existing events. LOSRC administered small grants to individuals and community organizations so that they could gather feedback from traditionally under-represented groups such as low income, Hispanic, rural, and African-American residents. These partners met with small groups and conducted discussions to help identify values, challenges, and hopes for the future.

The GroWNC team ensured not only that the public was able to participate, but also that the input gathered was used and reflected back to participants. This included organizing and analyzing feedback so that it could be communicated back to local governments within the planning region. It also shaped the possible outcomes of the scenarios in the scenario planning process. Feedback received during scenario planning directly influenced the metrics used in the land use model, components of the Regional Preferred Scenario, and subsequent strategies

and recommendations. In this way, members of the public who participated in the process became collaborators as well. They actively helped shape and influence the plan, rather than just being invited to share their thoughts that were then catalogued in an appendix.

Challenges

Planning can be a difficult sell, especially during an economically challenging time and in a region with a strong private property rights ethic. The level of support for the project across the project area has varied. This was, in part, because the potential outcomes of the project were complex and difficult to explain at the outset. In addition, the structure required by the grantor, by which communities were asked to sign on to a Consortium Agreement at the start of the project, fueled some local skepticism and made it more difficult to gather full support.

About six months into the planning process, the team recognized that the project was unwieldy to explain and the name and branding of the project added to this confusion. One of the sub-consultants, Allison Development Group, led a rebranding effort to reshape and redirect the project with an economic development focus. In spite of these efforts to rebrand and more carefully explain the project, skepticism continued in some areas. Members of the public concerned about Agenda 21 began attending public meetings and vocally opposed GroWNC. Agenda 21 is an international, non-binding set of recommendations to support sustainability and reduce poverty. The resolution was initiated at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992. Some members of the public in Western North Carolina had the misconception that GroWNC was involved in Agenda 21. These individuals influenced local governments and contributed to two of the participating counties ultimately dropping out of the project.

Despite these misconceptions about GroWNC’s purpose, the team members still involved almost 5,000 residents in the region. Participation included such diverse groups as hospital CEOs, the Slavic and African American communities, young professionals, high school 4-H students, the Latino community, and farmers at a livestock auction.

Lessons Learned

GroWNC’s three-year process brought to light many important and lasting lessons. First, the support and continued engagement of local elected officials as well as other community leaders (such as those in the public health sector and active aging groups) is critical because without it, the project quickly loses momentum in the public’s eye. Another successful strategy was to develop partnerships with trusted community leaders or gatekeepers. By reaching out to these individuals, we were able garner input from historically underrepresented groups by hosting meetings in a variety of locations ranging from living rooms to public spaces.

Traditional public meetings have lost relevance and are being replaced by a suite of innovative community engagement opportunities. This process utilized online tools including virtual meetings, Facebook, blogs, Twitter, and surveys. It was critical to utilize a variety of strategies and approaches in order to reach groups that no longer participate in public meetings.

Scenario planning proved to be a valuable process, as it enabled discussions of possible futures for the region, while providing enough detail to connect with local concerns. Having quantitative indicators tied directly to goals and used to evaluate all scenarios allowed the team to present the public with discrete choices between competing values. Discussions of trade-offs resulted in multiple stakeholders, some with perceived differences in opinion, making connections and realizing shared interests.

This project also demonstrated that continued communication with partners is critical to success. It is essential to be present in the community as much as possible, because opponents may be influencing leaders who ultimately determine whether they continue to be involved in the process. Instead of limiting engagement with project opponents, it is important to reach out and help them see their voice is welcomed in the process too.

While input was gathered from a variety of groups with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, it became clear that some overarching values and goals remained the same across the board. Nearly everyone found the natural beauty of the area to be of great importance, along with the unique culture and strong sense of place in the region. Overall, respondents wanted to protect these exceptional resources while also improving the economy and overall well-being of the region.

Moving into Implementation: Partnerships and Funding

The GroWNC team recently convened a group of leaders that included the Steering Committee plus others who have been involved in the project to discuss implementation. The group helped identify some top priority strategies to begin working on and discussed various possible organizational structures. We are now forming an Implementation Committee to help with and oversee implementation activities.

We are currently seeking funds that will support a staff person to facilitate outreach and implementation activities, including: providing outreach and technical assistance to local governments and other organizations on the plan, strategies, data and tools; maintaining and updating the GroWNC websites; forming and providing staff support to an Implementation Committee; and to convene groups of stakeholders/leaders around high priority projects and issues. We also seek funding to build our capacity to provide assistance in the deployment of the Land Use Model and to maintain it so it remains useful.

In order to continue to build capacity and involvement in our under-represented communities, community leaders

need funding so they can convene groups around projects that are important to individual communities, and to implement these projects. Funds and resources are also needed to provide capacity building and leadership training opportunities. Local governments and other members of the GroWNC Consortium in the region will also receive "Preferred Sustainability Status" for some federal grants for three years, which will help them compete for limited funds.

In the meantime, several spinoff projects are already finding success. In an effort to bring together arts organizations throughout the region, the GroWNC project staff formed the WNC Cultural Alliance. The idea originated within the Cultural Resources Workgroup. Meetings have been ongoing and have included representatives from state, regional, and local arts organizations, including the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area, the Southern Highland Craft Guild, and HandMade in America.

Another implementation project, WNC AgriVentures, is largely based on input received from the Natural Resources Workgroup members in the GroWNC project. WNC AgriVentures' purpose is to grow the region's agricultural and natural resource based sectors and associated jobs. Three specific investments of the project are WNC FarmLink – matching people who want to farm with farmland; Blue Ridge TechVentures - supporting the establishment and growth of new technology-based businesses; and Innovation Council – regional experts identifying opportunities for strategic investment in these sectors.

The GroWNC Project team has also partnered with Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP) and NEMAC to incorporate local food systems geographical data into the online GroWNC MapViewer and possibly into the Strategy Toolkit.

Several of the products from the GroWNC toolkit are already being used. The Land Use Model will be utilized in at least one local jurisdiction's Comprehensive Plan update. The French Broad River's Metropolitan Planning Organization is using one of the scenarios developed through the project in its upcoming Long Range Transportation Plan update.

The development of this regional plan has been a unique experience for all participants in the Western North Carolina region. It has created new partnerships across sectors, geographies and populations. Our challenge now is to maintain and grow these relationships as we continue to share the insights and products with more people across the region.