

Plymouth, North Carolina

CPNI Workshop Report



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ABOUT CPNI

CPNI is an independent research institution focused on the construction industry and founded by the Construction Professional Network of North Carolina (CPN), a non-profit membership organization. CPN started the Institute in 2006 as a committee effort to expand its mission of service to the construction industry and communities throughout North Carolina. The mission of the Institute is to identify key issues related to industry performance, economic development, and the betterment of CPN members and the communities they serve. Through workshops in communities across North Carolina, members of CPN leverage their expertise to consult with local government and community leaders on redevelopment strategies for their towns.

Learn more at www.cpni-nc.org



ABOUT NCGROWTH

NCGrowth is a national center building an economy with opportunities for all to prosper. We provide technical assistance to businesses, governments, anchor institutions, and other organizations to create good jobs and new wealth in economically distressed communities. We produce applied research and develop innovative policies that promote equitable development. We host unique, cross-sector convenings and workshops to bring together diverse perspectives. NCGrowth is part of UNC-Chapel Hill and affiliated with the Kenan Institute of Private Enterprise and the Kenan-Flagler Business School. With staff in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Washington, DC, our work and thought leadership range in scope from hyper-local to international.

Learn more at <https://ncgrowth.kenaninstitute.unc.edu/>

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Executive Summary

CPNI members and NCGrowth staff met with officials, residents, community members, and local business owners from the Town of Plymouth for a two-day workshop on January 26th and 27th, 2023. Though Plymouth has faced economic and political instability in recent years, local leaders are optimistic about future growth. The Town is currently working on a master plan for downtown revitalization project – for which it has received a grant of \$725,000 from the state government – and the Harbor Town water transportation project.

The focus of the discussion was how to best use the current grant, and how to obtain more grants to strengthen education, employment, the town's historical image, and downtown itself. Participants expressed concerns over lack of new business downtown, employment opportunities for young adults, skills-based education/training for school children, and community economic resilience. Other topics included the desire to beautify downtown; create a mixed-use development to attract residents; and increase marketing/branding to encourage waterfront tourism, enhance volunteerism, and community participation.

To assist the Town in achieving these goals, we developed this CPNI Recommendation Report, which includes:

- An overview of the opportunities and challenges identified during the workshop and additional interviews
- Recommendations for:
 - Addressing building safety issues
 - Using current and future grants more effectively
 - Crafting a strong comprehensive plan to spur P3 development
 - Creating an historic district and preservation commission
 - Exploring possible uses for the old high school
 - Supporting ferry passengers and other river-based visitors
 - Promoting and supporting educational opportunities
 - Improving communication between the County and Town
- Case studies

Workshop Participants

A group of Plymouth's leaders attended the three-day workshop at the Rivertime Museum:

- Brian Roth – Mayor
- Deborah Brown – Plymouth Town Council member and Domtar employee
- Dennis Brown – Plymouth Code Enforcement Officer
- Sam Styons – Interim Plymouth Town Manager
- Scott Overman – Curator, Port O' Plymouth Museum
- Tad Howington – Curator, Roanoke River Maritime Museum
- Tom Harrison – Director, Washington County Travel and Tourism
- Lou Manring – Owner, Riverview Café; Board Member, Washington County Travel Tourism; President, Partnership for Downtown Plymouth (PDP); member, Downtown Development Authority (DDA)
- Jill Manring – Owner, Riverview Café, retired schoolteacher from Charlotte
- Vinson Lacey – Owner, The Casket Shop and a funeral arrangement business

The team from CPNI included:

- Jeanine Bachtel – Associate Director, Academic Affairs for UNC Charlotte Facilities Management; Civil Engineer; UNC Charlotte Team Leader
- Janet Brooks – Senior Business Strategy Manager, Barton Malow
- Doug Burns – Principal and Architect, SGA/NW (now Principal, Becker Morgan Group)
- Chuck Cardwell – Principal and Structural Engineer, Walter P Moore
- Victor Jones – Principal, Jenkins•Peer Architects
- Wayne Robinson – Senior Project Manager & Practice Builder, Landscape Architect, VHB
- Alan Steinbeck Pritchett – Vice President & Director of Community Planning, Steinbeck Group

NCGrowth was represented by:

- Jessica Wilkinson – Manager, Economic Development (now Economic Development Analyst with RTI International)
- Arpana Roy – Analyst

Workshop Overview

The 3-hour discussion among the elected officials, business owners, community organizations, CPNI team and NCGrowth included topics like problems, education, employment, and downtown revitalization.

Jessica Wilkinson from NCGrowth gave an overview of Plymouth demography, population, gender distribution, education, employment, housing, etc. This information led to a more detailed discussion about challenges and the desires of Plymouth residents, and sparked a debate over the current and future priorities of Plymouth. Grant usage took precedence over other topics.

As part of the workshop, participants took a boat ride on the Roanoke River from the old high school to close to the Domtar paper mill to explore the town's history of Plymouth and the significance of the river on its development. Next Mayor Brian Roth led a street tour of downtown and surrounding areas, explaining the importance and history of significant buildings such as Town Hall, the newly constructed clinic, gift shops, and churches. The tour surfaced building safety conditions and downtown beautification and business opportunities.

The workshop concluded with a session on providing the town with final recommendations for proper and swift utilization of the grant, and ideas for riverfront renovation, building safety, the master plan, education, and employment.

A detailed agenda for the workshop is included in the appendix. Following the workshop, we conducted four additional interviews with residents who represent business owners, new community members, local government officials, and long-time residents.



CPNI Workshop at the Rivertime Museum

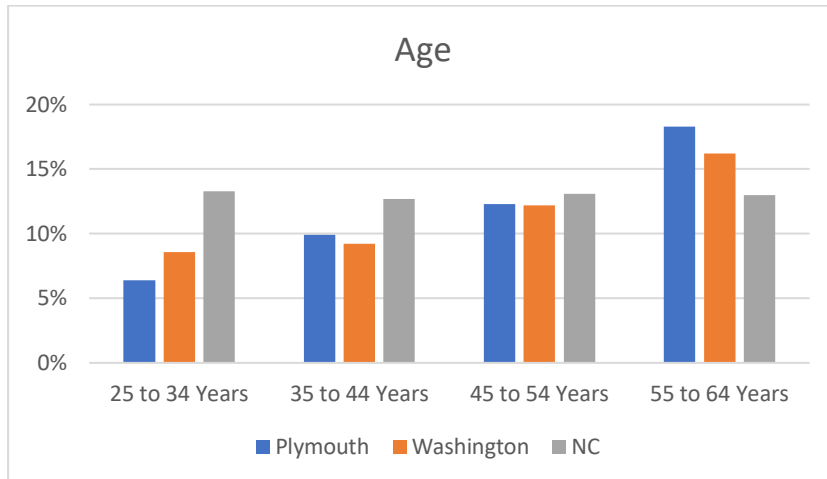


Roanoke River boat ride

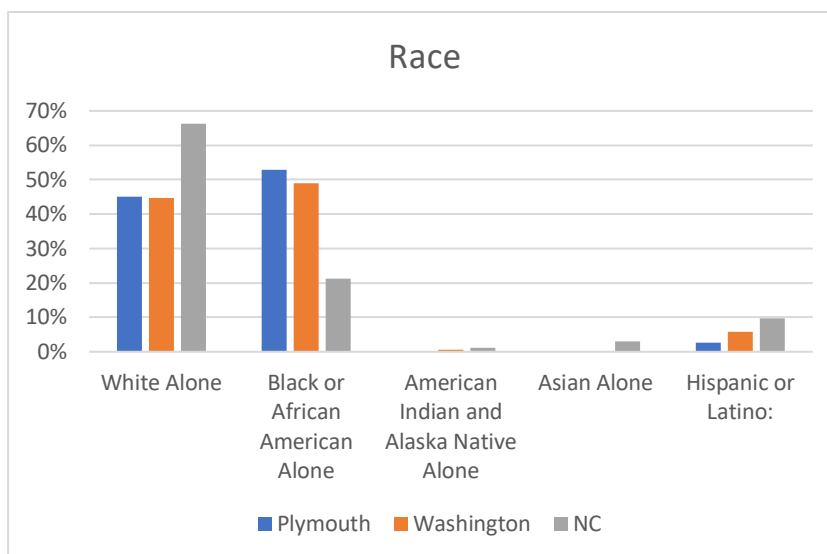
Plymouth Demographics

Below are demographic details about Plymouth in relation to Washington County and North Carolina. Participants of the workshop discussed wanting to see these figures included in the final report so that they could see how Plymouth compared to the County and the State.

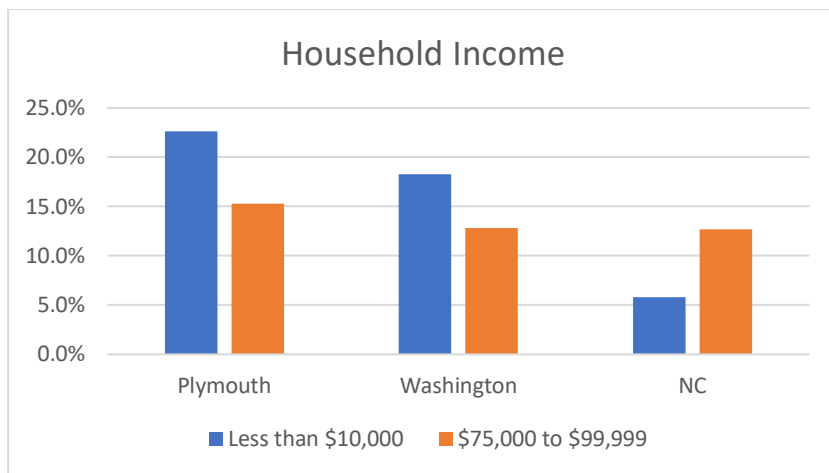
Age



Race



Household Income



Workshop & Interview Takeaways

The workshop and interviews revealed many challenges, concerns, and community desires. Following is a summary of the most prominent:

Poverty

Plymouth residents are concerned about growing poverty in the community. Lack of employment opportunities and skills-based education in the school were stated as top reasons. Just more than half (50.8%) of town residents live below the poverty line, far higher than the national average of 12.8%. Though a complex challenge without one solution, participants had many ideas for alleviating poverty in Plymouth including economic development strategies, increased tourism for revenue generation, educational and employment opportunities.

Racial Representation, Inclusion, and Harmony

During interviews and workshop discussions, Plymouth's majority Black population was highlighted as a unique and major strength for the town. Interviewees mentioned how the Town has an opportunity to leverage its diversity and history to bridge historical racial divides. As a majority Black town, interviewees identified an opportunity to increasing representation and inclusion of the Black community in Town events, activities, and decision-making. Participants also mentioned that Plymouth's historical museums should consider how key historical events are viewed by both the Black and white communities. They also suggested that businesses could show they are welcoming and open to all residents regardless of race.

Infrastructure

Residents shared infrastructure needs, including:

- Repair and/or replacement of old sewer water systems
- Improve access to adequate medical services, since local hospitals do not see all emergency patients and lack of primary, and specialist care forces resident to travel to appointments
- Install more effective Wi-Fi and broadband citywide and improve connectivity downtown
- Explore the impact of the potent smell from the papermill and on tourism
- Address the lack of parks, a children's play area and walking trails, especially along the waterway
- Investigate the feasibility of curb-side recycling services

More Businesses Downtown

Participants across the board expressed a desire for more restaurants – including breweries, seafood restaurants, pizzerias and healthy food spots – and entertainment spots for children and young adults like arcades and axe-throwing venues. Residents felt these activities could spark conversations and excitement among community members who could help spread the word about the town to people who live in nearby towns and farther away.

Preservation & Beautification

There should be a balance between Plymouth history and its development. Many residents requested a historical preservation society that could help take care of the historical buildings, including Civil War-era buildings and sites like Latham house, the Port o' Plymouth Museum, Roanoke River Lighthouse, etc.

IBX Ferry

Residents interviewed were unclear about whether the ferries will operate on a specific schedule or a reservation system. There is an opportunity for the Town to communicate about ferry operations and how the system contributes to the community's goals.

Beautification efforts could follow those of Edenton, Williamston, Belhaven, and Windsor. Ideas included brightly lit sidewalks and roads, spacious walking spaces, planters, trash receptacles, signage and public art.

Technical Education and Job Opportunities for Youth

Residents are concerned that young people often move away because of a lack of career and technical education and employment opportunities. These same factors stop businesses and industries from coming to the area, and contribute to long wait times for plumbing, electrical and construction contractors. Some noted that training in specialized skills often requires purchasing specialized equipment and hiring teachers with specialized skills, which can be expensive. Others mentioned that Craven Community College set up programs to train students in skilled jobs and suggested a satellite campus until demand increases and a local community college set up in Washington County. Workshop attendees also pointed out the role of the digital divide in hampering education and job opportunities.

Agri-Business

One interviewee expressed interest in local farming and suggested that North Carolina A&T can support that through its Small Farm Leadership 360 Initiative, which offers programming for small farms in 17 limited-resource counties in Northeastern North Carolina (including Washington). The resident also suggested that there are a few veteran farmers willing to work with other young farmers but due to the lack of young farmers and any agricultural support, it is a challenge.

The conversations at the workshop, follow-up interviews, and expertise among CPNI and NCGrowth contributed to the recommendations in the following section.

Recommendations

CPNI and NCGrowth offer the following recommendations to the Town of Plymouth to increase economic vitality and address key structural and safety concerns.

1. Address building safety issues.

The CPNI team noted three buildings needing immediate temporary shoring up because they have the potential to be life-threatening to people:

- **Cherry's Roanoke Electric Appliances** has a visible crack on the top of the building.
- **Roanoke Oyster Bar** is a freestanding façade without any bracing or roof.
- **Central Garage** next to the Courthouse is structurally unsound with freestanding walls.

We strongly recommend inspections of every building in the downtown and adjacent area by a structural engineer. This endeavor would cost \$10K to \$15K. The Town should also consider inspection of all publicly owned or abandoned private buildings downtown area, and should enforce existing codes to further protect the building and its residents.



The former Roanoke Oyster Bar



Central garage next to Courthouse



Cherry Roanoke Electric Appliance Shop

2. Use grants more effectively.

Plymouth received a \$725,000 downtown revitalization grant through the State's Rural Transformation Grant Program and should take the following steps to implement it:

- Contact the State for more information about required changes to the grant application.
- Work with a civil engineer to solidify implementation plans and avoid fund encumbrement.
- Secure construction contracts through open-source professional construction services.
- Work with CPNI to connect with another town that has gone through the RFP process.

To receive and implement additional grants and funding for education, employment, and community development, we recommend hiring a Grant Manager.

The Town should seek federal and state grants to fund resilience, redevelopment, energy efficiency, stormwater, and transportation, including:

- **U.S. EPA brownfields grants** could cover the investigation and potential remediation of old tank under the Central Garage and on other properties.¹
- **State building reuse grants** fund the redevelopment of older buildings in rural counties to attract new businesses. There are grants for vacant buildings and those occupied by North

¹ OLEM US EPA, "Types of EPA Brownfield Grant Funding," Overviews and Factsheets, September 29, 2020, <https://www.epa.gov/brownfields/types-epa-brownfield-grant-funding>.

Carolina-based businesses seeking to expand. There also is a specific category for the renovation, expansion, or construction of healthcare facilities.²

- **State grants and federal loans** support infrastructure development and job creation in rural areas with projects such as installing public broadband, upgrading public drinking water, repairing sewage systems, and building roads.³
- **National Endowment for the Arts Our Town grants** support activities that integrate art, culture, and design into other local initiatives with awards \$25,000 to \$150,000.⁴ Kinston's Mural Program is a nearby example of the Our Town grant in action.

Plymouth should also consider operating its own redevelopment programs, such as:

- **Format façade grants** could help public and private owners of properties on Water Street and elsewhere to improve and maintain commercial and residential buildings.
A not-for-profit community development corporation to pursue funding to address community development concerns, chronic poverty, education, job training, and healthcare⁵.

Mini Case Study: Downtown Development in Statesville, N.C.

Statesville's downtown hosts a unique combination of shops, boutiques, restaurants, breweries, outside seating areas, live music and live theatre, and art centers to entertain guests⁶. The revitalization is overseen by Downtown Statesville Development Corporation, which guides façade improvements, building renovations and new public and private projects⁷. For more information, visit <https://www.downtownstatesville.com/> and <https://www.downtownstatesville.com/about-dsdc>.

3. Craft a strong comprehensive plan to spur P3 development

To make Plymouth a more sustainable community and tourist destination, its comprehensive/master plan must:

- **Include all communities -- particularly Black people** – and the regional Council of Governments. The Town can encourage community involvement through surveys, meetings and focus groups that surface residents' desires and priorities.
- **Encourage waterfront/boardwalk development** to serve the ferries and boats arriving on the riverfront. The area needs wayfinding including maps or kiosks, and adequate lighting for safety and aesthetic purposes. Every restaurant and shop should have a back entrance to encourage patrons directly from the boardwalk.
- **Create overlay districts** to preserve and augment the quality of downtown and any established neighborhood with defined and regulated construction and design techniques like building height,

² "Building Reuse | State Rural Grants | NC Commerce," accessed February 9, 2023, <https://www.commerce.nc.gov/grants-incentives/building-or-site-funds/building-reuse/building-reuse-state-rural-grants>.

³ "Infrastructure | State Rural Grants | NC Commerce," accessed February 11, 2023, <https://www.commerce.nc.gov/grants-incentives/public-infrastructure-funds/infrastructure-state-rural-grants>; "USDA Rural Development | North Carolina," accessed May 8, 2023, <https://www.rd.usda.gov/nc>.

⁴ "OUR TOWN," accessed April 2, 2023, <https://www.arts.gov/grants/our-town>; "Downtown Kinston Mural Program," accessed May 8, 2023, <https://www.ci.kinston.nc.us/574/Mural-Program>

⁵ "What Is a Community Development Corporation?" accessed April 2, 2023, https://www.naceda.org/index.php?option=com_dailyplanetblog&view=entry&category=bright-ideas&id=25%3Awhat-is-a-community-development-corporation-&Itemid=171.

lot size, color and building material etc.⁸ The Town should also help private landowners invest in their properties to make them attractive to developers.

- **Address public property on Water Street.** If the sale of this property goes through, US Economic Development Administration (EDA) or state economic development funds can be requested to make redevelopment more financially feasible. If the Town retains ownership, it should repair the roof to make it and the two-story building next door easier to develop.

With the plan in place, the Town can develop a request for proposal for P3 development to attract private investors by showcasing goals for development and the historical buildings in and around downtown.

4. Create an Historic District & Preservation Commission.

Preservation is key for any historical town, yet Plymouth does not have formal means preserving historic buildings. We recommend the town establish an historic district to protect sites of merit.

The State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO)⁹ helps private citizens and public and private organizations assess, protect, and enhance properties important to State history and archeology. The Town review SHPO's repository of surveys, photographs, research, and field notes, and nominate places not on the National Register of Historical Places. SHPO performs environmental and historical reviews of each site and provides grant and technical assistance to the owners for restorations. Successful projects can qualify for a tax credit.

We also suggest the Town establish a commission alongside a review board. The commission should consist of members from the town and county (including private owners) who are representative of local population in terms of race and gender. Some important duties of the commission include:

- Maintaining an inventory of properties with historical, pre-historical, architectural, and cultural significance.
- Reviewing proposals related to alterations, demolition, and construction of buildings in the historic districts.
- Conducting educational programs to increase awareness about Plymouth's history and the historic district.

Mini Case Study: Historic Preservation in Edenton, N.C.

Like Plymouth, Edenton is an historic town situated on the banks of the Roanoke. It has transformed itself into a hub of business and tourism in the past 20 years by leveraging historical and natural assets to attract private investment and tourism¹⁰. For more information, visit <https://homegrowntools.unc.edu/index.php/studies/edenton/>

⁸ Aaron.Sheppard@raleighnc.gov, "Character Preservation Overlay Districts," accessed February 9, 2023, <https://raleighnc.gov/planning/character-preservation-overlay-districts>.

⁹ "About the NCHPO | NC DNCR," accessed February 9, 2023, <https://www.ncdcr.gov/about/history/division-historical-resources/state-historic-preservation-office/about-nchpo>.

¹⁰ "Homegrown Tools," accessed March 27, 2023, <https://homegrowntools.unc.edu/index.php/studies/edenton/>.

5. Explore possible uses for the old high school building.

The Town should advocate against demolishing the high school until it is determined there is no viable use for it. An inspection by a structural engineer can verify the building's safety, assess whether it can be salvaged without much additional cost, and suggest potential uses – such as a recreation area, community center, senior center, technology hub, business incubator, permanent housing, emergency housing, etc. If the building can be repurposed, the Town can re-allocate the demolition funding to other community development projects.

6. Support ferry passengers and other river-based visitors.

To prepare for the start of ferry operations, the Town should take the following steps:

- **Replace random parking lots and create riverfront parking** with bigger spaces for trucks with trailers. This could be included in the Comprehensive Plan. We also recommend planting one deciduous tree for every two parking spaces to boost beautification, reduce environmental impact and provide summer shade for parked vehicles.
- **Provide basic amenities for visitors** such as public toilets, drinking fountains, wayfinding, cell service and continuous high-speed internet, and accessible information about shops/restaurants.
- **Design a self-guided tour** with prerecorded messaging and other content available through a website or app, and increased historical signage about important points of interest.
- **Create streetscaping and dining options** by encouraging riverfront businesses to stay open later, and asking restaurants to create lighted backside dining and entrances within the next ten years.

7. Promote and support educational opportunities.

- **Increase participation in the College and Career Promise Program (CCP)**, which helps eligible high school students enroll in N.C. community college and university classes tuition-free through their high schools¹¹. The Town should focus on getting at least 10 students to enroll in the CCP next year. More information about the CCP can be found in the Appendix.
- **Encourage use of myFutureNC**, a statewide nonprofit organization administered locally by Empower NENC: An Educational Collaborative. It's focused on helping 2 million North Carolinians (25-44) earn high-quality credentials or postsecondary degrees¹². A Town representative should connect with Northeast Prosperity Regional Impact Manager Dr. Angie Jenkins at angie@myfuturenc.org.
- **Promote opportunities** – There could be a campaign to preach the benefits of competing high school for students which could lead to their free college in the state for free. Another initiative could be to bring back adults (25- 44 years) into the education system. Make people aware of the programs that are available at the schools.
- **Create educational programming to support development**. Consider an afterschool program for middle school and high school students teaching personal development, soft skills, business training and perhaps specialized skills-building. The Town could also create a low-tech incubator to support skills development and business formation.

¹¹ "Career and College Promise | NC DPI," accessed March 14, 2023, <https://www.dpi.nc.gov/students-families/enhanced-opportunities/advanced-learning-and-gifted-education/career-and-college-promise>.

¹² "About," myFutureNC, accessed March 14, 2023, <https://www.myfuturenc.org/about/>.

Mini Case Study: After-School Programming at The Griot Art Center in Clarksdale, Miss.

The Griot Art Center operates an afterschool program for elementary and middle schoolers that has been delivering training in music, dance, theatre, filmmaking, and visual art since 2011. Though focused on the arts, its programs provide students with academic assistance and life skills like problem solving and work experience at the Center's facilities, including the Meraki coffee shop¹³. For more information, visit <https://griotarts.org/>.

8. Improve communication between County and Town.

During the workshop residents, officials, business owners, and participants discussed the lack of communication and coordination between the Town of Plymouth and Washington County, despite the Town being the county seat. Many challenges discussed during the workshop including education, economic development, and tourism can be better addressed by stakeholders working together. Town and County officials should explore ways to consistently stay in touch and update one another on overlapping activities and priorities. Some examples are setting up quarterly meetings or inviting one another to existing events and meetings.

¹³ "GRIOT ARTS," GRIOT ARTS, accessed March 22, 2023, <https://griotarts.org>.

Additional Case Studies

1. Windsor, NC

Bertie County started the Tall Glass of Water Project in Fall 2022 which is preserving the 147-acre property and creating public beach access to recreational waters. The construction includes a ramp/walkway to the beach, restroom, outdoor showers, water bottle refilling station and Kayak storage. Apart from the essentials it also has picnic pavilion, hike trails, camping area and a restored meadow area.¹⁴ They have created three task forces to tackle education, human resource and Economic Development which is an efficient way of allocation of resources and time management. More information about that can be found in this link <http://www.co.bertie.nc.us/departments/ed/edplan.pdf>

2. Winder, GA

The Wimberly Center at Winder GA runs a family self-sufficiency program. Wimberly center helps families become self-sufficient by partnering with various organizations that help these families. Some of their partners are Action Incorporated, Adult Literacy Barrow, Adventure Bags, Barbara Shedd Prosperity Project, Winder Housing Authority and so on. These partners come together to help communities, share resources, knowledge and build relationships¹⁵. More information can be found here <https://wimberlycenter.com/>

¹⁴ "Bertie County, NC," accessed March 21, 2023, <http://www.co.bertie.nc.us/projects/2019/tgow/tgow.html>.

¹⁵ "The Wimberly Center for Community Development," The Wimberly Center for Community Development, March 20, 2023, <https://wimberlycenter.com/>.

Appendix

Workshop Agenda

Wednesday Jan. 25, 2023

6:15PM – 8:00 PM Presentation at “God’s Creation Wildlife Museum”

Day 1 – Thursday Jan. 26, 2023

- **9:00 AM- CPNI Team** Meet at Roanoke River Maritime Museum
- **9:30 AM- 11:30AM-** Meet with Mayor, council members, community members for discussion about Plymouth- Roanoke River Maritime Museum
- **12:30 PM- 1:15 PM-**Boat Ride/Tour Review Ferry Landing and view of town back “alley” of town
- **1:30 PM - 3:00PM** – visit/tour town buildings and waterfront
- **3:00 PM- 5:00 PM** - CPNI and NC Growth discussions on town and discuss possible recommendations

Day 2– Friday Jan. 27, 2023

- **8:00-9:30 AM Outline** recommendations for town to present that morning

10:00AM-12:00PM - reconvene with Mayor, town council and community members to provide overview of our recommendations for the town- Roanoke River Maritime Museum