

# 2018

## Robbins, NC CPNI Workshop Report



Prepared by:  
James Carter  
Analyst, NCGrowth



Construction Professionals Network Institute, Inc. is a non-profit initiative focusing on construction industry related projects and community service throughout the State of North Carolina. CPN of North Carolina, Inc., a non-profit construction industry membership organization, founded CPN Institute in 2006 to expand its mission of service to the construction industry and provide assistance to communities throughout North Carolina. The CPN Institute was incorporated as a non-profit 501(c)(3) corporation in 2011 to focus on education and community services. CPNI's mission is to volunteer design and construction industry expertise as a catalyst to empower North Carolina's communities to improve their physical and economic environment.

Learn more at [www.cpni-nc.org](http://www.cpni-nc.org)



NCGrowth is an EDA University Center at the University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill that helps businesses and communities create good jobs and equitable opportunities through applied research and technical assistance. With a passionate staff and a dynamic pool of graduate student analysts, NCGrowth partners with businesses, communities, governments and other organizations to tackle outcome-based economic development and entrepreneurship projects.

Learn more at [www.ncgrowth.unc.edu](http://www.ncgrowth.unc.edu)

## WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS

Town of Robbins citizens, elected officials, and business leaders present included:

- David Lambert – Town of Robbins, Town Manager
- Lonnie English – Town of Robbins, Mayor
- Terri Holt – Town of Robbins, Commissioner
- Joey Boswell – Town of Robbins, Commissioner
- Pat Corso – Moore County Partners in Progress, Executive Director
- Melanie Thompson – Moore County Partners in Progress, Office Manager
- Valerie Freeman – Situs, Assistant Vice President Operations
- Theron Bell – Town of Robbins Resident and Community Theatre Advocate
- Neal Wolfe – Fidelity Bank
- Jessica Coltrane – Fidelity Bank
- Ed Dennison – Moore County School Board Member
- G. Cardando – Town of Robbins Community Advocate

CPNI team members supporting the workshop included:

- Phil Jones – Team Leader, UNC-Charlotte, Engineer
- Richard Conner – Conner Gwyn Schenck PLLC, Construction attorney
- Doug Burns – Narmour Wright, Principal Architect
- Janet Brooks – Clark Nexsen, Business Development
- Anne Goodson, Barringer Construction, Project Manager
- Josh Spencer – Barton Malow, Senior Preconstruction Manager
- Carolyn Fryberger – NCGrowth, Economic Development Manager
- James Carter – NCGrowth, Analyst
- Pat Fogleman – CPN Staff

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CPNI and NCGrowth held a two-day workshop in Robbins, NC on October 18 and 19, 2018. During the workshop CPNI members, town officials, and community stakeholders gathered to assess the built assets and economic conditions of the town. In addition to touring buildings of interest, workshop participants identified key issue areas and brainstormed potential strategies for the town moving forward. Discussion and recommendations centered around two themes: Community & Planning, and Buildings & Infrastructure. The recommendations derived from these conversations are categorized under these themes below and further developed in the recommendations section later in this report.

### **Community & Planning**

- Embrace the town's diversity and leverage it as an asset for further community development.
- Create site-specific planning documents for prioritized development areas.
- Partner with Moore County Partners in Progress and County Commissioners to pursue regulatory and legislative changes that will allow exceptions to the Tier 3 designation in accessing state economic development support.
- Explore partnerships to establish a day care in Robbins.

### **Buildings & Infrastructure**

- Address town's existing water and sewer infrastructure issues.
- Explore creating a downtown historic district and revitalizing the streetscape.
- Pursue opening an incubator space utilizing existing building inventory.
- Support the opening of the Village Theatre.
- Pursue an RFQ and RFP for the former Robbins Mill Site.

## EXISTING CONDITIONS

Under the leadership of Town Manager David Lambert, Robbins, NC has become proactive in its economic development efforts. Formerly a manufacturing dependent locality, the community is looking to reinvigorate its economy and community pride. While the town's financial abilities are limited, Mr. Lambert has actively sought grant funds to strategically address issues and build community capacity. An important award was a \$75,000 grant from the NC General Assembly for downtown revitalization. The grant was used to construct the Robbins Greenspace Stage as a catalytic project to revitalize downtown, simultaneously providing greenspace and an outdoor concert venue. The town received a total of \$600,000 from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) brownfield grant program to clean up the half-acre Robbins Mill-Smokestack site. Formerly a textile plant, a 2008 fire left the site contaminated and blighted. Town officials hope to redevelop the site with affordable multifamily housing.

Robbins has also increased its code enforcement activities as a commitment to community appearance. As a result, instances of blight have been reduced and downtown is a more attractive gateway. A key abatement was the demolition of The Ray Building—a former department store—which had fallen into disrepair.

In April 2018, the NC Department of Commerce selected Robbins as an "Opportunity Zone" under the federal legislation of The Tax Cuts and Jobs Act. Robbins is one of 252 Opportunity Zones in North Carolina, and over 9,000 nationwide. The Opportunity Zone Program makes new investment capital available by providing tax incentives for qualified investors to re-invest unrealized capital gains into designated communities. This status could make investment opportunities in Robbins more attractive to outside investors. In addition to this, Robbins has been granted a \$2 million Community Development Block Grant to update its water infrastructure.

## Community Assets

- Small town environment, passionate people, family ties
- Natural recreational resources such as Bear Creek hiking, mountain biking and paddle trails, disc golf course, and forested area
- Proximity to urban centers (Fayetteville, Asheboro, Greensboro, Charlotte) and tourist destinations (Seagrove and Pinehurst)
- Robbins Mill-Smokestack Site
- Milliken Park (city park offering baseball fields and other recreational amenities)
- Dedicated town manager
- Abundant municipal water supply
- Civic-minded residents with an entrepreneurial spirit
- Low cost of living

## Community Needs

- Community engagement
- Access to healthcare services
- Affordable and new multifamily housing
- Stronger local employment base
- Daycare facility for children under 3 years old, to enable parents to work
- Business/innovation incubator space to foster entrepreneurship
- More business activity to increase downtown vibrancy to attract residents and visitors (restaurants, grocery, additional places to socialize)
- Continued support from Moore County Board of Commissions and Moore County Partners in Progress
- Additional funding to rehabilitate water and sewer infrastructure

## DOWNTOWN ASSESSMENT

Robbins has taken a renewed interest in invigorating its downtown. Stakeholders expressed their desires for it to serve as a hub of activity and entertainment. Desires include greater commercial activity including restaurants and shops. A three-room hotel was recently permitted and is in the construction process. The restoration of the historic train depot has also been completed, hopes are that it in the future it will serve as a welcome center or museum. The Greenspace Stage, an outdoor event space for public gatherings and concerts, is the crown of Robbins downtown revitalization efforts. These efforts demonstrate Robbins' dedication to improving the aesthetics of downtown to enhance the town's image in coordination with its marketing efforts.



*Recent building renovations in Downtown Robbins seen on CPNI community asset tour*



## OPPORTUNITY SITES

### **Robbins Village Theater**

161 E Salisbury Street

Owner: Robbins Village Theatre Foundation

Building Value: \$39,000

Land Value: \$29,110

Total Value: \$68,110

Town citizens envision the historic Village Theater as a gathering place for community events and entertainment. The theatre has been purchased by a group of civic-minded individuals who created the Robbins Village Theatre Foundation to organize their efforts. Fundraising continues to finance its restoration. CPNI members believe with traction it can serve as a focus of downtown revitalization, this is explored further in the recommendation section of this report.



### **American Growler Inc**

121 North Green Street

Owner: BH Grace Properties, LLC

Building Value: \$641,930

Land Value: \$234,610

Total Value: \$876,540

This transportation equipment manufacturing facility serves as an overflow production site to American Growler's full-scale production line located 13 miles away in Star, NC. The property is thus intermittently vacant. The building is 50,000 square feet and the site itself totals nearly 60 acres. American Growler is one of Robbins' few remaining manufacturers and represents an opportunity for the town to retain manufacturing jobs. The Robbins operation is in close proximity to Milliken Park, Milliken Lake and the former Robbins Mill site.



*Source: Google Maps*

### **Former Robbins Mill Site**

200 South Kennedy Street

Owner: Town of Robbins

Land Value: \$105,250

Formerly a textile mill until its closure in the 2000s and a 2008 fire, the Robbins Mill site has been remediated as a brownfield site with several EPA grants. Town officials hope to revitalize the area with affordable multifamily housing. A lake and town park are adjacent to the mill site and add character to the location.



*Source: Google Maps*

### **Eagle Springs Manufacturing**

13117 Hwy 24-27

Owner: Plants & Doors, LLC

Building Value: \$749,460

Land Value: \$68,200

Total Value: \$817,660

Almost 28,000 SF, the former Eagle Spring Manufacturing facility was constructed in 2004. Formerly home to War Sport Manufacturing the building is now vacant. Partnership between town leadership and Moore County Partners in Progress to actively market the building is encouraged.



Source: Google Maps

### **Old Purdue Factory**

160 NC 705 Hwy

Owner: Marty R Maness

Building Value: \$381,550

Land Value: \$137,120

Total Value: \$518,670

Once a Purdue processing facility, this building has been vacant since the operation closed in 2003. The plant represents one of two available industrial buildings in Robbins, NC. The facility sits at a prominent town entrance. The town upgraded its water system to support processing at the plant. This is another economic development marketing opportunity for town leadership and Moore County Partners in Progress to collaborate.



Source: Google Maps

### **IGA**

280 South Middleton Street

Owner: Ribbons Food Inc

Building Value: \$183,830

Land Value: \$42,640

Total Value: \$226,470

A newly shuttered IGA Grocery Store, the town sees potential in the property's central location. Its centrality has engaged the town's interest as a potential location for a joint UNC Pembroke-Sandhills Community College Entrepreneurship Center. This idea is further explored in the recommendations section of this report.



Source: Google Maps

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations developed from the CPNI Workshop in Robbins are organized into two themes: Community & Planning and Buildings & Infrastructure.

### Community & Planning

1. *Embrace the town's diversity and leverage it as an asset for further community development.*

Robbins is home to a diverse population of citizens with an array of skills, talents, and background experiences. Residents readily contribute these abilities to aid in the town's betterment such as starting businesses, community organizing, and advocating for community needs such as a library branch. While the individual contributions of each resident will differ, collectively, these strengths serve as a powerful synergy. Despite Robbins' close knit community, it is not realistic to expect all citizens to be able or willing to contribute to plan implementation. Additionally, while town officials and civic leaders desire greater citizen participation, it is important to recognize how much work a few dedicated individuals can achieve. Town leadership should use the formal town structure to delegate tasks and projects to town staff permitting the town manager to address other needs, while continuing to move Robbins forward.

One strategy to increase community participation is to seek greater community representation in the ideation and visioning processes. Intentionally identifying and tapping grassroots leaders in different sectors of the community serves as a conduit for the process. Because the Hispanic community makes up such a large portion of the overall town population, it is particularly important to pursue this strategy with that group. Finally, the importance of informal community engagement should also be noted; hosting events such as festivals and concerts that bring the community together helps foster a sense of engagement and identity, which is an important first step to deeper civic involvement.

2. *Create site-specific planning documents for prioritized development areas.*

Robbins has a vision for the future. To achieve its vision requires prioritization and commitment. The town's master plan outlines principles such as "active town center and economic hub" and "safe and affordable housing." The master plan also outlines strategies for achievement which the town should actively work to achieve. An additional step forward is to create small area plans for key locations, such as downtown and the Robbins Mill site. Site-specific planning documents will help the town move toward implementation by defining the vision for a site and identifying project phases. These plans can then be used to communicate the vision to potential partners and the community.

3. *Partner with Moore County Partners in Progress and County Commissioners to pursue regulatory and legislative changes that will allow exceptions to the Tier 3 designation in accessing state economic development support.*

Robbins historically has faced difficulty in leveraging state support for economic development efforts due to the Tier Three status of Moore County – a designation that puts Robbins in the category of least distressed communities. Some of the state's economic development support programs, such as the building reuse grant, are open to rural communities within Tier Three counties. Pursuing legislative and regulatory changes that allow this exception for more of the state's economic development programs would be of benefit to Robbins.

4. *Explore partnerships to establish a day care in Robbins.*

Due to decreasing enrollment trends, North Moore High School in Robbins has excess physical capacity. CPNI members suggest capitalizing on this by partnering with the Moore County School Board to explore the feasibility establishing a daycare onsite. Potentially, its operation in a public school helps address NC licensing requirements and exempts the facility from regulation by the state Division of Child Development and Early Education<sup>1</sup>. In addition to providing a safe and convenient childcare option for student parents, teachers, and community members this location could provide an opportunity for North Moore Students to complete coursework in Early Childhood Education and gain vocational skills. The lack of an in-town daycare facility emerged during the CPNI workshop discussions as a critical workforce development issue affecting residents and local businesses.

## Buildings & Infrastructure

1. *Address town's existing water and sewer infrastructure issues.*

Infrastructure is the bedrock of any community and thus, reflects the CPNI committee's chief recommendation to continue rehabilitating the town water and sewer system. Robbins' future depends on increasing its number of residents and businesses. As Robbins seeks to grow, it is imperative for the town leadership to ensure its infrastructure can accommodate further demand. Currently \$10 – 20 million in water and sewer infrastructure needs have been identified. To date, Robbins has received \$2 million from numerous Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) and other funders to begin improvements. It has also completed an Asset Inventory Assessment of its water system needs. Most recently, Hurricane Matthew caused hardship resulting in \$2 million in damage to the town pump station. While the need is greater than the town's financial capacity, town officials should continue to diligently apply for grant funding and prioritize repairs.

2. *Explore creating a downtown historic district and revitalizing the streetscape.*

There is presently no historic district in the corporate limits of Robbins. CPNI members encouraged the town's leadership to explore creating a historic district as a mechanism to allow buildings in the downtown to qualify for historic tax credits. The only local administrative requirement for creating a historic district is to create a local historic preservation committee. Further support on the process and benefits of creating a historic preservation committee and qualifying for historic tax credits is available through the North Carolina Historic Preservation Office. An important project to move this initiative forward would be revitalization of the downtown streetscape per the master plan. This would be another small "win" that will pay long term dividends. Relocation of the overhead power lines to the rear of its downtown businesses should be a part of this project. Alongside this, it is equally important to continue and enhance the Town's on-going zoning and code enforcement efforts to maintain and improve the downtown streetscape.

3. *Pursue opening an incubator space utilizing existing building inventory.*

Small business development is a component of the Robbins Master Plan. In fact, numerous of the downtown storefronts under revitalization are the efforts of local entrepreneurs. Harnessing such synergy is vital as Robbins' moves forward with its redevelopment.

Pat Corso, Executive Director of Moore County Partners in Progress is actively working with UNC Pembroke and Sandhills Community College to explore a joint entrepreneurship center in

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ncchildcare.ncdhhs.gov/Services/Licensing/Child-Care-License-Overview>



downtown Robbins. He is also exploring Economic Development Administration (EDA) and Golden LEAF funding opportunities. In developing the programming and operational plan for the space it is imperative for Robbins to identify its niche in terms of what type of businesses will be served and how.

The CPNI team discussed two potential locations for an incubator space:

- **Situs**  
Situs, the town's largest employer, located ~2.5 miles from downtown. The company has strong roots in Robbins, as it is the hometown of the company's founder. Located in a 150,000 SF refurbished sock mill, the Robbins facility has currently has excess capacity. Upfitting this space as temporary incubator space would reduce startup costs and provide budding entrepreneurs with high-speed internet that many residents do not have access to at home.
- **IGA**  
Given its central location, the recently shuttered IGA grocery store represents an opportunity to tie the incubator to the redevelopment of downtown. The centrality and connection to downtown position the property to have a greater catalytic affect. The renovation and start-up costs are unknown.

4. *Support the opening of the Village Theatre.*

Built in 1946, the Village Theatre operated as a movie theatre for the community. In 2010 the building was purchased by a group of citizens who founded the Robbins Village Theatre Foundation. The group endeavors to restore the venue to serve as a culture arts center and gathering space. Through volunteer labor preliminary renovations have been completed, however additional fundraising is needed to continue the renovations. CPNI members shared several suggestions regarding the project:



*Village Theatre Renovations – CPNI Community Asset Tour*

- Request the county building inspector to convey minimum requirements needed to open the facility. Once minimum requirements are met, open the venue to start generating revenue through rentals. Conduct the remaining renovations in phases.
- Do not join the theatre property to the adjacent barbershop at this time; opening the adjoining wall positions the property to stricter building codes.
- Engage an architect to review the plans and develop realistic cost estimates. Consider contacting NC A&T, NC State, UNCG's Center for Community-Engaged Design, or UNC Charlotte Architectural Design programs to see if they would consider this a student project to provide an assessment.
- Consider joining the League of Historic American Theatres (LHAT) for access to resources specific to historic theatre renovation and operation: [www.lhat.org](http://www.lhat.org)

5. *Pursue an RFQ and RFP for the former Robbins Mill Site.*

The Milliken brownfield site is a site with strong local significance. Town leadership envisions a reuse project providing much needed affordable and multifamily housing. In anticipation of future development, Robbins has added “conditional zoning” to its ordinance. As remediation progresses, Robbins can continue planning for the site. Next steps include drafting a site plan. Partnering with a developer with adequate financing is critical. Robbins can facilitate this process by issuing an RFQ and RFP which states the town’s vision for the property.

6. *Explore renovation of the historic Robbins Elementary School.*

The historic Robbins Elementary School located at 250 Hemp Street presents a redevelopment opportunity for multifamily or senior housing. A developer who specializes in low-income housing tax credits (LIHTCs) can explore project feasibility. The Albemarle Central School Apartments in Albemarle, NC is an example of a former school in a similar condition that was converted to affordable senior housing using LIHTC.



Albemarle Central School Apartments, <https://albemarlecentralschool.com/>

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office (NC SHPO)  
<http://www.hpo.ncdcr.gov/>
- League of Historic American Theatres (LHAT)  
[www.lhat.org](http://www.lhat.org)
- UNCG Center for Community-Engaged Design  
<https://iarc.uncg.edu/cc-ed/nc-main-street/>
- Opportunity Zone Program  
The designation as an Opportunity Zone may attract new investment into Robbins if leadership proactively identifies potential projects and markets them to investors. Robbins is one of 252 census tracts in North Carolina, and 9,000 nationwide, to be designated as an Opportunity Zone. The incentives offered through the program are directed at investors and do not flow into the financing of the project itself. As such, a project needs to be financially feasible on its own, with the OZ designation acting as a way to get the attention of outside investors who might see a return on the project. More information on the program and how it works can be found through the links below:
  - IRS Guidance issued Oct 19, 2018: <https://www.irs.gov/newsroom/treasury-irs-issue-proposed-regulations-on-new-opportunity-zone-tax-incentive>
  - Opportunity Zones Frequently Asked Questions, IRS: <https://www.irs.gov/newsroom/opportunity-zones-frequently-asked-questions>
  - School of Government Resources for Local Governments and Investors: <https://www.sog.unc.edu/resources/microsites/development-finance-initiative/opportunity-zones>
  - Direct IRS contact for questions related to Opportunity Funds and Opportunity Zone Investments:  
Phone: (414) 231-2240  
E-mail: [CC.ITA.Section.1400@irs.counsel.treas.gov](mailto:CC.ITA.Section.1400@irs.counsel.treas.gov)
- North Carolina Department of Commerce Building Reuse Program
  - Grant Information: <https://www.nccommerce.com/grants-incentives/building-or-site-funds>
  - Map of Eligible Areas (Robbins qualifies as a rural area of a Tier III County): <https://nccommerce.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=5863f411469f4c08a40edded88b42167>