

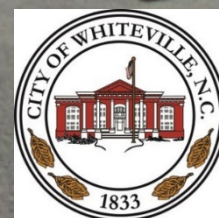
# Exploring the Economic Development Potential of the Built Environment in Whiteville, NC



NCGrowth-SmartUp Report  
January 2020



NCGrowth  SmartUp



## ABOUT NCGROWTH-SMARTUP

Founded in 2012, NCGrowth-SmartUp is an EDA University Center that helps businesses and communities create good jobs and equitable opportunities through applied research and technical assistance. Our work is focused in rural and economically distressed parts of North and South Carolina. With a passionate staff and a dynamic pool of graduate student analysts, we partner with businesses, local governments, other universities and colleges, and community organizations to tackle outcome- based economic development and entrepreneurship projects. Since 2012 NCGrowth-SmartUp has worked with over 70 businesses and 45 communities. NCGrowth-SmartUp is also part of CREATE, an economic development research center working to tackle the problem of severe and increasing wealth inequality by generating shared economic prosperity through a combination of research, data analytics, homegrown interventions and policy development. CREATE is also home to an economic development research lab, which examines the fundamental determinants of shared economic prosperity. CREATE hosts events that bring together policymakers, practitioners, investors, entrepreneurs and academics, such as the Black Communities Conference, North Carolina Investment Forum and Closing the Wealth Gap Conference.

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

## ABOUT CPNI

The Construction Professionals Network Institute, Inc. (CPNI) is a non-profit initiative focusing on construction industry-related projects and community service throughout the State of North Carolina. CPNI volunteers its members' design and construction industry expertise as a catalyst to empower communities across North Carolina to improve their physical and economic environment. CPNI offers the comprehensive professional and technical expertise of its membership and collaborating partners in the form of workshops tailored to assist communities and engage local governments and community leaders to facilitate discussions and efforts toward redevelopment strategy, community engagement, visioning, and financial considerations.

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



# Exploring the Economic Development Potential of the Built Environment in Whiteville, NC

Rachel Taylor & Jess Wilkinson

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## CPNI Workshop Team

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Rachel Taylor, Economic Development Analyst, NCGrowth  
Stephanie Cooper, Moseley Architects, Charlotte  
Jessica Freeman, CPNI of NC Communication Manager, CPNI Staff, Greensboro

## City of Whiteville Attendees

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Anthony Grippe, Restaurant Owner  
Becky High, Local Reporter  
Darren Currie, City Manager  
Jim Alden, Business & Property Owner  
John Fisher, Theater Owner  
Justin Smith, City Council Member  
Paul Nichols, Community Member  
Robert Lamb, Planning Director  
Sally Mann, Director of Columbus County Arts Council  
Sam Jacobs, Property Owner  
Sandra Sellers, Business Owner  
Sara Thompson, City Council Member; Property Owner  
Sean Martin, Economic Development Planner  
Terry Mann, Mayor  
Tracy Robinson, Community Member



## Executive Summary

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CPNI members and NCGrowth staff met with officials, residents, community members, and local business owners from the City of Whiteville for a two-day workshop on November 14 and 15, 2019.

The workshop opened with a brief presentation describing the current economic and demographic landscape of the City of Whiteville. Though Whiteville has experienced significant flooding in recent years, the city has been incredibly resilient

and is optimistic about future growth. The city also has significant existing plans to address issues such as flood mitigation, streetscaping, and downtown development.

During the workshop, participants expressed concerns over future floods and fears of how flooding might impact future development. Whiteville has made concerted efforts to address stormwater mitigation and alleviate the impacts of flooding. In 2018, the city received a grant to improve the storm-water drainage system and construction has begun on the drainage system. On the positive side, the recent flooding has opened the city to new downtown investment opportunities by reducing Whiteville's inflated property prices to levels closer to the rest of the Columbus County.

Additionally, the city has worked closely and collaboratively with the Department of Transportation to build a gateway to downtown. The city and Department of Transportation are also working together to address concerns over traffic and street parking.

Other primary concerns discussed during the workshop include the desire to beautify downtown Whiteville, create mixed-use development to attract residents downtown, and increase marketing and branding initiatives to attract beach tourism and enhance volunteerism and community participation among residents.

Following this discussion, Economic Development Planner Sean Martin took the CPNI team and workshop participants on a tour of Whiteville to locations of interest in the community such as the historic theater, the depot event center, the courthouse, and downtown. The tour also included a walking tour through downtown to view the current streetscaping conditions, as well as a visit to Soules Swamp.

This CPNI Recommendation Report provides the following information:

- An overview of the opportunities, assets, and challenges identified during the workshop
- Recommendations:
  - Create a master plan to obtain funding and build collaborative relationships
  - Activate your downtown:



- Engage in streetscaping projects
- Encourage placemaking projects
- Diversify the downtown economy
- Improve regulations and processes
- Create a social media marketing campaign



## Workshop Overview

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Session one of the CPNI workshop opened with discussion of key concerns from local citizens and business owners. A consistent theme presented during the first session was the future impact of storms and flooding. Significant storms and flooding will continue to present challenges for the City of Whiteville, but flood mitigation and adaptive renovation has helped lessen the impact of significant flooding events. Furthermore, although flooding remains a concern, it has not dissuaded investors from building and renovating property downtown.

The first session continued with discussions of the future of Whiteville with the goal of “dreaming big” and making plans accordingly. Beautification and streetscaping were two consistent themes during this session. A member of the local garden club suggested that the club would be interested in assisting with “green scaping” initiatives such as planters and trees. Several participants suggested centering beautification initiatives around a consistent theme and restoring the buildings to their original state. The future Department of Transportation gateway would be a central starting point for these initiatives. A new vision for Whiteville is to move toward mixed-use buildings downtown to attract people to live, dine, and shop downtown. Participants also suggested that the city and the Department of Transportation collaborate to increase pedestrian traffic and sidewalk dining along major streets by addressing parking, traffic, streetscaping, bike paths, and parking behind the buildings.

After the first session, the CPNI team went on a tour of Whiteville led by Economic Development Planner Sean Martin and Planning Director Robert Lamb. The tour focused on several historic buildings, Soules swamp, and a walking tour of the downtown and uptown areas.

The second session included discussions about streetscaping and traffic, renovations for downtown buildings, green space planning near Soules swamp, and business recruitment for downtown and the BB&T campus. Workshop participants discussed community needs and the future of Whiteville. The discussion included creating an image-building campaign to engage in placemaking, encouraging residents to shop local, and engaging in business recruitment to attract a variety of businesses to the area. Participants suggested that revitalizing and investing in the city demonstrates community investment, which in turn, can attract outside and future investment.

The workshop reconvened on Friday morning for a wrap up session. The main themes discussed in the final session included marketing, walkability, leveraging historic tax credits, code

enforcement, wayfinding and signage, grant capacity and opportunity, culture building, streetscaping, the historic theater, and business incubators.

## Workshop Agenda

Day One: Thursday, November 14, 2019 at Whiteville City Hall

1. First Session: 9:30 am to 12:30 pm
  - a. Introduction, participants, CPNI and NCGrowth's roles and missions
  - b. Presentation from NCGrowth
  - c. Discussion and Public Comment
2. Lunch and Tour: 12:30 pm to 2:30 pm
  - a. Tour of downtown, uptown, and Soules Swamp areas
    - i. Historic Theater, Courthouse, and Vineland Depot
3. Second Session: 3:00 pm to 5:30 pm
  - a. Afternoon discussion and recap
    - i. Brainstorm potential uses for each building and activation strategies for the city

Day Two: Friday, November 15, 2019 Whiteville City Hall

1. Third Session: 9:00 am to 12:00 pm
  - a. Discussion, ideas, thoughts, and summary of final ideas and potential recommendations



## Existing City Plans

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Much of downtown Whiteville lies in a flood plain, and due to recent hurricanes, such as Florence and Michael, the town has suffered severe flooding, up to six feet in some areas. Whiteville has actively pursued stormwater mitigation techniques, and in 2018, the city received a grant to improve the storm-water drainage system, which will help to draw water away from downtown.<sup>1</sup> The Storm Water Committee has been active in cleaning out drains, but more substantial and long-term projects are needed to address the extent of the maintenance issues. While much progress has been made, flooding from severe storms will remain a concern. Flooding and the surrounding swamplands present constraints to the existing and future

development of the city. However, local businesses are adapting and becoming more flood resilient, replacing carpet with painted concrete floors for example. Building improvement grant programs can provide incentives for flood mitigation measures ahead of significant flooding events. Finally, Whiteville is working on a project to identify various funding sources to reduce impervious surfaces downtown, return the swamp to its natural footprint, increase green spaces, and buy-out buildings.

Whiteville is a designated Main Street community and hosts an active downtown development association. As a main street community<sup>2</sup> the city focuses on “asset-based economic development strategies.”<sup>3</sup> The City of Whiteville has worked diligently to leverage its existing assets and build on the opportunities in the city. Whiteville has established a historic downtown zone as well as a downtown incentive grant program.<sup>4</sup> The county is also working to restore the historic courthouse located in uptown and the city is working with the railroad to build a line to Wilmington, but the process has been slow.

The City of Whiteville and community partners have also been working with the Department of Transportation to provide a gateway to downtown along Columbus Street from the bypass. Whiteville has worked to increase green spaces and outdoor opportunities for residents, which includes the “Madison Mile,” a pedestrian greenway that connects uptown and downtown.

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<sup>1</sup> Bennett, “Cutting down on Some, but Not All Flooding in Whiteville | WWAY TV.”

<sup>2</sup> “Whiteville to Reapply for N.C. Main Street Program.”

<sup>3</sup> “NC Commerce: NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center.”

<sup>4</sup> “Downtown Incentive Grant Program Set to Begin in Whiteville.”

There are seven new businesses scheduled to open downtown, and five buildings have recently sold in the downtown area. The City hopes that these new businesses will increase foot traffic and provide nightlife.

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## Tour of Whiteville

During the two-day workshop, Whiteville city officials led the CPNI team on a visit to a few of the city's key assets. The team visited the historic theater, the Vineland Depot event venue, the historic courthouse, downtown Whiteville, and Soules Swamp. Following the guided tour, the CPNI team regrouped with workshop participants to debrief.

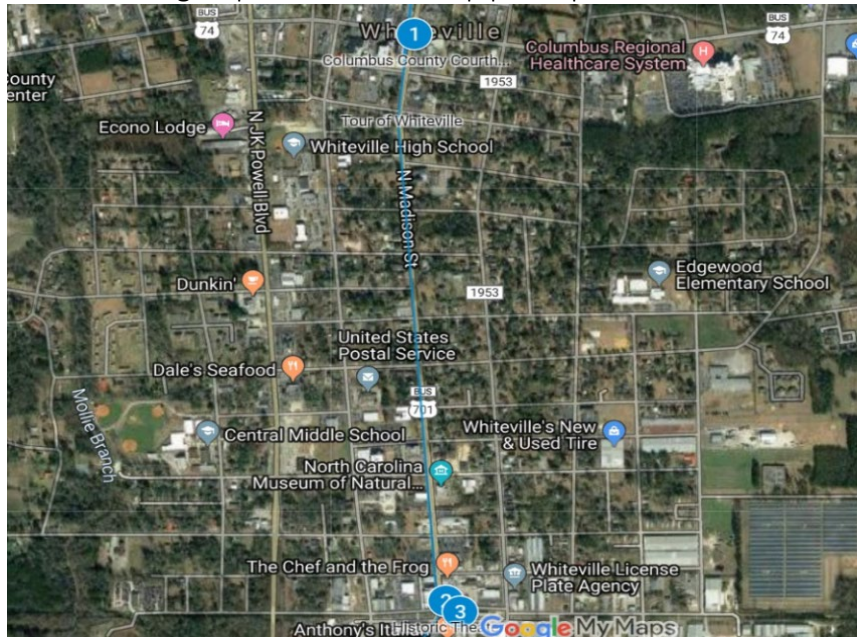


Figure 1 Map of City Tour: Uptown and Courthouse

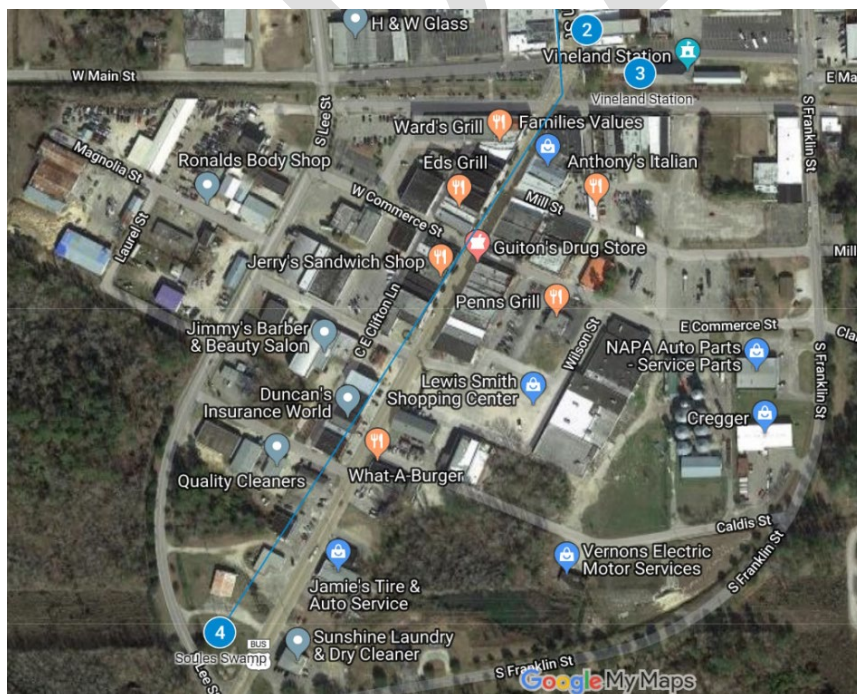


Figure 2 Map of City Tour: Theater, Vineland Depot, Soules Swamp

After evaluating the properties, several recommendations were made to increase growth potential, address community needs, and repurpose visited sites and buildings. The primary recommendations are to:

- Adopt zoning incentives such as an overlay district with conditional uses and / or development incentives to make revitalization goals more attainable. The City can leverage the Historic District to incentivize and expedite the development process.
- Form partnerships with nearby community colleges to explore whether abandoned buildings can be repurposed as business centers or educational facilities.
- If buildings cannot be reutilized, donate the structures to the fire department for demolition training or contract demolition at a lower rate. Open spaces can be used to create public gathering areas to enhance downtown and engage in creative placemaking.
- Leverage the code enforcement program to hold property owners accountable for keeping vacant or underutilized properties well-maintained. This would allow the city to make improvements at a premium, or hire out a third-party, and then assess fines or tax-liens on buildings that owners have failed to upkeep.
- Through the master planning process, determine infrastructure needs to accommodate the future growth of the city.

For funding revitalization efforts, the CPNI team recommends utilizing Historic State and Federal Tax Credits in conjunction with Historic District Contributing Structures and the National Registrar of Historic Places. The city can rely on the 501(c)3 downtown development organization to apply for grants (such as the Bank of America Community Reinvestment Grant and other community investment grants), acquire property, and engage in public-private partnerships.

### Built Assets

If the City of Whiteville is considering acquiring and renovating vacant properties downtown, each property should be assessed to determine code violations and ADA accessibility. Each building should also receive an environmental and condition assessment with attention to asbestos, lead, mold, and water penetration. These assessments will help establish a cost-benefit analysis to determine the feasibility of rehabilitating each building. According to the workshop discussions, Whiteville's current needs include a music venue or community theater, mixed-use development, and a community college satellite campus.



Figure 3 Businesses in Downtown Whiteville

## Historic Theater

Renovation of the historic theater has been halted by negotiations between insurance companies and the property owner. The property owner plans to address flooding damage and increase resiliency against future flooding. The CPNI team recommends that the property owners restore the theater to its original state with one large room. The team also recommends a phase two renovation that includes removing the second floor and updating the balcony. The CPNI team recommended that this building be used as a complementary venue to the depot and provide flexible space for community events such as plays and music events. Historic tax credits may be available to address some of these renovations.



## Historic Courthouse

The Historic Courthouse is currently the focal point for entry into the city and is currently being renovated by the County. The courthouse has the potential to draw residents and visitors into town while serving as a complementary “gateway” to the proposed DoT gateway on Columbus Street. It also acts as an anchor point for the Uptown area. With streetscaping and other improvements to Uptown, the Courthouse could activate this area of the city as well. In each quadrant surrounding the courthouse, activation and streetscaping strategies can help bring new business and pedestrian activity to this part of Uptown.



## Vineland Depot

Vineland Depot serves as an event center and community focal point between the downtown area, city hall, and “BB&T block.” This venue will continue to benefit Whiteville as downtown begins to grow and services and events begin to expand. Located near the “Madison Mile” greenway, this historic building helps Whiteville engage in key placemaking strategies that help draw residents and tourists to the area. Attendees of the workshop indicated that more greenspace around the depot would be welcome. The CPNI team suggests partnering with organizations such as the garden club to increase the greenspace feel while working within the constraints of the railway. Additionally, the CPNI team suggests that the city work with the DoT to update the striping and remove a lane on either side of the street to provide additional greenspace.



## Recommendations

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This recommendation report provides a roadmap to aid the city and community members in prioritizing initiatives, resources, goals, department operations, and projects.

### Create a Master Plan

Master planning facilitates strategic development and can help municipalities obtain funding and build collaborative relationships. Whiteville will benefit from creating a master plan that clearly lays out a vision for the future and guides the future development for the city. Through the process of creating a master plan, the city will be able to clearly define its priorities, fundamental goals, and actionable items to achieve its vision for future development. This process will also help the city to address challenges that may arise from changing markets, shifts in funding, and increased demand for services. The master plan should include actionable goals for the short, middle, and long-term.

There are three main approaches a community can take to create a master plan:

#### Strategies for Master Planning

1. **Visioning:** works backward from the overarching long-term vision down to more specific actionable steps.
  - During the workshop, stakeholders and the CPNI team emphasized the vision of a livable downtown Whiteville, which attracts young residents and families to live, work, shop, and dine in an organic and authentic way.
2. **Incremental planning:** a realistic approach that makes small changes, evaluates them, and moves on to the next phase.
  - The CPNI team recommends creating a five year plan divided into increments of one year to achieve specific phases of development.
3. **Analytical planning** uses in-depth analysis to improve the strategic fit between the city and the environment by examining many opportunities and challenges. The analytical approach relies on market research to determine the feasibility and impact of different planning items in the community. The strategic plan should account for changes in the environment, such as changing laws and collaborators.

The CPNI team suggests that Whiteville engage in **comprehensive master planning** for the following reasons:

- To create a long-term vision for the City of Whiteville
- To control development and growth toward that vision through incremental phases
- To coordinate and consolidate the existing plans and maps
- To ensure the future is considered and well planned for through:
  - Identifying potential properties to acquire and creating a land acquisition timeline
  - Creating a guide for future zoning, overlay districts for mixed-use, and conditional uses
  - Creating a plan for built assets that include:
    - architectural standards and guidelines,
    - historical designation for standalone buildings or a Historic District,
    - plans for conditions assessments, environmental assessments, best use and practice, and decommissioning.
  - Planning for the growth of municipal departments
  - Engaging the community and intentionally seeking buy-in from community stakeholders
  - Engaging in diversity, equity, and inclusion as a unifying aspect of the planning process

The strategic planning process can be a difficult one involving significant time and resources, and it can be a challenging and uncomfortable process; however, a comprehensive master plan will help Whiteville reach its short-term, middle-term, and long-term goals with more efficiency and intentionally. It is also necessary when seeking funding sources and communicating with funders.

By having a master plan, Whiteville can make informed decisions regarding which projects to engage in based on a variety of factors, including funding and support. Whiteville can use the master plan to create a budget and grant application guide for specific projects. Additionally, the city can leverage the master plan to collaborate with the local construction industry in the planning and development process from an early stage and help to develop relationships. Master plans can also be used to help develop a relationship with potential project donors or “champions.” The CPNI team recommends that BB&T be directly involved with many of the broader initiatives.

Master planning should seek to facilitate buy-in from other stakeholders, such as local business owners, council members, and a diverse and representative set of community members. The comprehensive master plan also provides an umbrella under which other master plans can reside, such as a parks and recreation master plan, a strategic marketing plan, and a master plan for addressing built assets.

By engaging in this planning process, Whiteville will capitalize on the energy and enthusiasm that helped Whiteville create the many plans it has today. It will also provide a platform to build relationships within municipal government and lay the groundwork for building collaborative partnerships with other local governments, private businesses, and non-profit organizations.

Through this process, stakeholders will be more aware of the unique problems facing the city while also being able to focus on the overall goal of working toward becoming a recreation destination.

The costs of master planning are the time and labor spent in the planning process, the potential disagreement during strategic planning meetings, as well as the potential loss of initiative and momentum.

The CPNI team recommends addressing the need to create overlay districts to encourage mixed-use development downtown and creating specific master plans or detailed phases within the initial master plan to address issues such as streetscaping and greenspaces. Master planning should address the need for evening dining, community engagement activities, and parking. The CPNI team also recommends that the city conduct a market study to assess the potential for various businesses in Whiteville and a robust assessment of current and future infrastructure needs to foster, accommodate, and enhance the growth of Whiteville.

### Master Planning Guidelines

The master planning process should include the following steps:

**Step 1: Build the infrastructure necessary to develop a plan.**

- Appoint a planning committee
- Distribute master planning literature to the entire committee and invested stakeholders
  - This should include existing consolidated plans, land use maps, zoning maps, a comprehensive land assemblage plan, and flood zone maps
- Decide on a facilitator or consultant
  - This can be a member of the local government or a paid or volunteer consultant

**Step 2: Decide how many years the strategic plan will cover.**

- The CPNI team recommends that a five to ten year vision guide the process, with a five-year strategic plan and shorter incremental phases of one year.

**Step 3: Put in writing the timetable and process.**

**Step 4: Prepare a memo on what is expected of the master planning process.**

- Send to the planning committee
- Highlight significant problems to be addressed

**Step 5: Have the city council approve the planning process and fund it.**

**Step 6: Send out the orientation materials and schedule the first meeting.**

- Make a plan for public input and diverse community engagement

## Build in Equity

Equity needs to be at the center of Whiteville’s downtown redevelopment efforts. The city can address equity in many ways and in all areas of the planning process. Below are a few strategies.

Redevelopment strategies should foster economic opportunities for all. Redevelopment initiatives can encourage this by offering discounted rents to independent and minority-owned businesses, working with minority-owned construction companies, supporting entrepreneurship and job-training opportunities, protecting existing small businesses.

### Develop a Community Profile

**The first step towards building an equitable community that strengthens the economy and acknowledges environmental concerns is understanding the context of the community.** The history and heritage of Whiteville shape how the community sees itself today and inform the steps the city needs to take to create a sustainable future. An example of community assets that led to the creation of the town is the Vineland depot and Vineland village areas, which were named for the cultivation of scuppernong grapes in the area.<sup>5</sup>

**The second step towards building an authentic sense of place is understanding the city as it is now.** With 5,400 residents, the city of Whiteville is more racially diverse when compared with the county and surrounding communities. Forty-four percent of the city’s population is Black, 41% is White, 9% is Hispanic, 4% is Asian, and 2% is “two or more races.” Columbus County as a whole is 60% White, 30% Black, and 5% Hispanic.

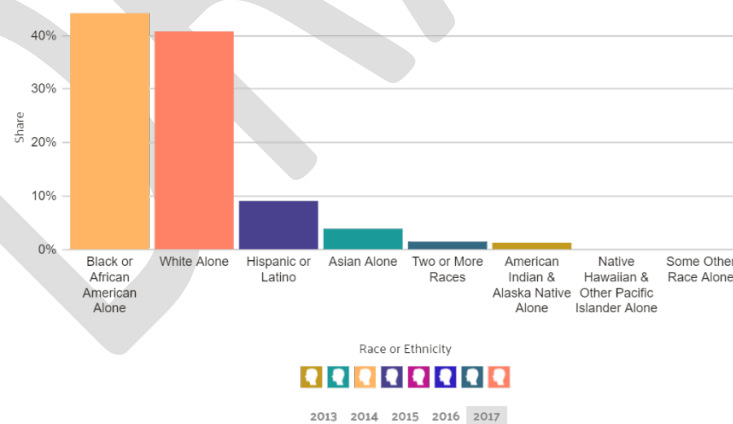


Figure 4 Race or Ethnicity Source: Data USA

This diversity is a source of strength and can be a guiding force in shaping the future of the city. Through community dialogue, Whiteville needs to determine what it wants the city to become and the vision it wishes to strive for over the next several decades. The strategic and master planning

<sup>5</sup> “History of Vineland, NC.”

process can help the city determine where it wants to be in the next ten to twenty years. This process can also help identify unique opportunities to move forward.

**To fully understand the community, the city's needs, and the vision for the future, the city must engage community members** through staff liaisons to diverse and representative stakeholder groups, regularly coordinate between department heads, and facilitate public participation from the business community and community organizers through public feedback and regular engagement activities. Recommended strategies to increase community participation include adjusting meeting times, providing childcare and food, and working with existing community organizations such as charitable organizations, and faith-based community groups.

**Research will also inform the direction of planning and identify needs within the community.** Market studies can identify leakages and the feasibility of different business sectors within Whiteville. Demographic information and surveys can help the city continually develop its community profile. Fiscal impact studies can help city leaders understand the costs and benefits of policy decisions. **With this research, the city and community will be able to specify goals and create plans to achieve them.**

## Activate Downtown

### Create Attractive and Walkable Spaces

Improving the physical spaces in a city can bolster economic growth in a community as well as strengthen community culture and engagement. Regularly maintained clean and safe spaces can be achieved in various ways through the revitalization process. The city can partner with “ambassadors” or sponsors to help keep areas maintained; some communities choose to create a business improvement district to help fund safety and maintenance projects in the area. **The CPNI team recommends narrowing the streets, creating more outdoor walkways or gathering space through demolishing existing abandoned buildings downtown, and moving some parking behind buildings and converting street parking spaces to parallel parking.**

Creating beautiful and inviting spaces is a vital aspect of improving downtown districts and increasing the quality of life throughout the community. Streetscaping initiatives can be a manageable way for communities to attract investment and business. Through investing in streetscaping, cities can create attractive and walkable communities that invite visitors and promote economic development while creating a sense of community. Cities that emphasize people and place first demonstrate their commitment to quality of life factors that attract tourism, residents, and employers. An example of this type of initiative includes the “Complete Streets” program which emphasizes safe, convenient, and comfortable access and travel for all users through increased access to safe bike lanes, bus shelters, frequent crossing opportunities, pedestrian signals, narrower travel lanes, roundabouts, sidewalks and curb extensions. Additionally, streetscaping can benefit other downtown activation and revitalization strategies



including examples like the Better Block Project<sup>6</sup> and alley projects, which can create outdoor art galleries or community venues.

Elements of sustainable and community-minded streetscaping include focusing on sidewalks, planters, and street furnishings like lighting, benches, trash receptacles, signage, bus shelters, medians, and bicycle facilities. Streetscaping should also address crossings, public art, and café spaces. Planters and trees can enhance the aesthetic value of an area while also emphasizing and defining building entrances. Stormwater planters can help reduce water pollution and minimize stormwater runoff. Street furnishings enhance the experience of all users and the attractiveness of the area. Complete street considerations facilitate the safety and comfort of all users. As Whiteville grows, the city can develop its transit infrastructure to allow for a circular bus system and connection to regional hubs. Together these streetscaping techniques serve to enhance the quality of life and economic impact within communities. These considerations can improve communities especially when paired with outdoor lighting for pedestrians, façade improvement programs, public art and/or an arts district, and easy to use maps and directions.

The City of Whiteville has identified the future Columbus Street gateway project as a springboard to a larger streetscaping initiative. The Madison Street downtown area will benefit from enhanced streetscaping by creating a more attractive and enjoyable visitor experience, which will attract more pedestrians to the shopping and dining district. Enhanced streetscaping can also help alleviate current traffic issues through updating traffic signage, adding roundabouts, creating shared parking to allow for more space on the road and open sidewalk dining, and adding parking behind storefronts to help alleviate traffic concerns. The creation of a parking authority could help to enforce these changes while also providing an avenue to fund additional streetscaping projects. Uptown Whiteville will also benefit from streetscaping, and, as the city grows, it will benefit from increased connectivity to downtown. Streetscaping can improve the overall experience of visitors to Uptown and the historic courthouse, and will improve the dining experience that caters to the professional service sectors in that area.

**In the short term, Whiteville can activate empty spaces through a variety of initiatives** such as creating a space for “pop-up” shops, allowing interim use of vacant lots, establishing a farmers’ market or seasonal market, bringing in food trucks, and partnering with building owners, local artists, and the arts council to create installations in empty storefronts and vacant spaces downtown. Summer outdoor cinema series, temporary parks, “better block” projects, and outdoor music are additional examples of temporary activation strategies.

**To facilitate redevelopment in the long term, Whiteville can rely on many strategies and community partners such as the Whiteville Downtown Development Commission to achieve redevelopment goals.** The city can streamline and remove regulatory barriers to redevelopment, create more flexible zoning definitions of building use, and identify landowners of large parcels. The Downtown Development Commission can support the city and redevelopment efforts by

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<sup>6</sup> “About | The Better Block | Dallas.”

applying for redevelopment grants and assist the city in encouraging private sector development of underutilized private land.

### Increase Wayfinding and Develop Placemaking Initiatives

The City can increase its visibility by continuing to implement streetscaping plans and defining gateways and points of arrival in the city.. This future Department of Transportation gateway is an excellent opportunity to create an artful and welcoming entrance to the city that invites tourists and community members to enjoy the city. Additionally, Whiteville can increase the visibility of the city through wayfinding signs that promote recreation, dining, and shopping opportunities. These wayfinding signs should have a consistent theme according to branding and style guides for the city. Whiteville can promote awareness of recreational opportunities throughout the city via standardized informative and promotional material.

Creative placemaking can increase the livability and diversity of an area, create jobs and income, and help to create an authentic sense of place that attracts residents and visitors alike. Placemaking does not have to be a complicated process and can grow incrementally. Important considerations for successful placemaking include implementation, activation, emotional connection, inclusion, and both public and private investment and buy-in.

Whiteville can encourage private investment through small scale “vibrancy” grants. An example highlighted in the workshop was the the open alley-walk way outside of Anthony’s Italian restaurant. Once a place is established, people need something to engage with, such as music. An event could promote small donations to continue to improve programming and other placemaking initiatives.



## Establish On-Going Place Management

As downtown begins to activate and grow, the city should engage in on-going place management to ensure that the day-to-day needs of the area are met, programming continues in public spaces, and the downtown is marketed to potential investors. Additionally, the city will want to assess performance through metrics such as diversity, equity, and inclusion, meet regularly with key stakeholders, and promote redevelopment opportunities.

**Regular programming and events are an important piece of downtown activation.** Promoting seasonal or temporary markets can bring people downtown, and local food and beverage vendors can encourage people to stay downtown by staying open later. Shop local initiatives and pop-up locations can boost local businesses and can encourage growth in start-ups. Alleyways can be used as event spaces and outdoor art galleries. Regular programming can occur in these spaces with relatively little effort compared with larger once a year festivals. Additional temporary activation techniques include hosting an outdoor cinema series which can occur in parks or in under-utilized spaces downtown. The Better Block Project focuses on engaging community and creativity to activate downtown one block at a time. The Better Block Project has many resources; some suggest inviting artists to perform downtown, creating an activity square, mini parks, a bocce ball court, or a garden plaza. The Sound Places Program emphasizes the impact that music can have on placemaking initiatives by inviting small ensembles to perform downtown.

## Diversify the Downtown Economy

Through research gathered in the community profile phase, the city can strategically attract companies in specific sectors and encourage small businesses to open downtown. The city can cultivate and rely on relationships with local educational institutions and the non-profit community and economic development organizations to promote employment downtown.

Building new housing opportunities downtown will help diversify the economy and increase pedestrian traffic downtown. Through visioning and the creation of a community profile, the city and community will have a better understanding of potential businesses that are needed in the area. Downtown infrastructure provides excellent opportunities to mix uses vertically, and “adaptive reuse” can help create housing from former office buildings. The city can also consider providing homeownership grants and leveraging historic resources to encourage homeownership in or near downtown. High Point, NC is an example of a small town that addressed a need for downtown housing by through a multi-phase a project that will eventually provide more than 120 apartment units.

In order to create a diverse business and retail ecosystem downtown, the city should create a strategy to develop diverse retail in the area and concentrate retail in a walkable area. The city



should initially focus these efforts on one block to create a density of amenities which will draw more people into the area and prevent amenities from becoming scattered and creating a disconnected downtown. The city or partnering organizations can also build relationships with retail brokers and can identify and market vacant properties.

### Improve Government Regulations and Processes

Whiteville can facilitate investment in downtown by improving regulations and public processes by updating zoning codes and ordinances that allow desired development. These updates should bring together existing public initiatives that encourage revitalization. The city can also consider creating specific guidebooks for small business owners and developers, walking them through common permitting processes.

### Build Relationships for Financing Projects

Funding is a persistent concern, especially when transforming whole sections of a city. The city can and should build relationships with corporate donors, explore foundation funding, state, and federal tax credits and grants, and create public-private partnerships. The city can also consider creating a special assessment district, inclusionary zoning, tax increment financing, and leveraging public investments.

### Engage in External and Internal Marketing

Whiteville has much to offer and the potential to create an inviting downtown that attracts residents and employers. Residents and visitors are attracted to Whiteville for its proximity to the beach, urban centers, and other recreational opportunities. Once in Whiteville, visitors can explore inviting storefronts and a variety of recreational events and festivals. All participants of the workshop agreed that if Whiteville could create a vibrant downtown community, it could be an ideal place for many to locate permanently.

After creating a master plan and a downtown activation plan, Whiteville should focus on a strategic marketing plan with two primary components: external marketing for tourism and business; and internal marketing to build stakeholder buy-in, increase volunteerism and community involvement, facilitate relationships amongst business owners, and increase optimism within the community. Through visioning sessions and master planning, Whiteville can create a branding and marketing initiative.

Create an online and social media strategy

Publications, printed materials, social media, and other websites are critical outlets for marketing and promoting the City of Whiteville. Websites should include information such as maps, guides,



overnight stay options, detailed trip planning information, links to local businesses and other services, and upcoming events. Maps and other important trip information should be formatted so that visitors can download and print the material. It can also be made available through existing mobile platforms such as google maps, trip advisor, and social media travel accounts. Websites can also provide links to educational material, training opportunities, community events, programs, amenities, and other promotional efforts. Links to partner organizations, management organizations, and volunteer opportunities should also be readily available.

Whiteville may also utilize social media to impact its growth efforts. Social media can be a convenient and useful way to build relationships, get feedback, and integrate with other marketing efforts. Whiteville can partner with the county tourism development authority to develop a social media marketing plan. **First, focus on a few social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn and link them together to reduce the number of individual posts.** For example, Instagram will link to facebook so that a post to Instagram will automatically post to facebook as well. **Second, utilize social media and marketing management tools to schedule posts and create content when it is convenient, set up searches and monitor performance metrics such as mentions and hashtags, and coordinate with team members.** Hootsuite is a social media and marketing management tools that offers several plans including a free basic plan. Plans that allow multiple users will also help reduce the amount of time and energy needed to have an active social media presence.

The city can partner with businesses, residents, and regional stakeholders who have a large social media following by sponsoring their visit to Whiteville, especially during events. These partners will use applicable hashtags and post about Whiteville to their social media outlets, raising awareness of what Whiteville has to offer with the goal of attracting more people and businesses to the city.

Whiteville may improve search engine optimization by maximizing Yelp and Google digital reviews. Business owners can place laptops or tablet kiosks in their restaurants and stores to capture more online reviews and feedback on guest experiences.

Finally, the city may improve its main website by making it the central hub for information on events happening in the area, local businesses, and trip planning tools with places to visit, things to do, and places to stay. The website can also include a live newsfeed featuring current events and city initiatives. The city's website and social media pages should also include an updated community-wide activity log and events calendar to promote people, businesses, events, and organizations within the city.

#### Engage in Cross-promotion

Community organizations and businesses should seek to cross-promote and uplift one another. The City of Whiteville should collaborate with existing tourism-related sites to share information and create a better experience for the user. Cross-promotion of beach trips should exist with



other recreational activities such as walking trails, shopping, art exhibits, and other recreational opportunities. The city can market to beach goers as a day-trip and rainy day destination.

### Build Community Engagement through Internal Marketing

Residents can be a city's most valuable marketing asset as they share stories and experiences of the beautiful aspects of the city through word of mouth. Successful internal marketing campaigns can increase community engagement in volunteer opportunities, collaboration of local businesses, and event participation.

Internal marketing can be implemented through a variety of methods, but the strategic planning and leadership teams need to lead these efforts. Shuck and Shag is an excellent example of existing community engagement. By creating events that cater to the community and families, the community can build on its human capital to foster the connection between Whiteville and its residents. The Garden Club is another example of a community group eager to participate in the revitalization process. The club could sponsor or help maintain planters downtown. Additional community events could include programming for youth, community-building events, and outreach opportunities. These events should partner with local businesses such as breweries and restaurants when possible.

### Mitigate Flooding and Tap into Assets of Soules Swamp

While the nearby Soules Swamp presents challenges to downtown in terms of flooding and constrained development, the swamp also presents an opportunity for future recreation development and tourism. While on the tour of Whiteville, the CPNI team viewed the section of downtown closest to the swamp and learned of specific challenges that face the area.

Wetland restoration projects can help mitigate the effects of flooding events while improving the health of the ecosystem. A wetlands park could improve the quality of life for residents. The City of Whiteville could consider a wetlands park and greenway project to connect existing greenway projects in town. An additional use for this location includes a soccer field which could potentially draw in visitors and recreation leagues while providing a space that is more flood resilient. Because the swamp is mostly privately owned and there is no existing infrastructure, creating a blueway or investing in other recreation in the swamp is not recommended at this time.



Figure 5, 6, 7 City Tour: Lot near Soules Swamp

## Conduct Research on Incubators and Their Alternatives

Business incubators can be attractive options for small cities looking to diversify their economies and revitalize their downtowns. However, business incubators are not always the best fit for a community.

A feasibility study can help determine the viability of an incubator in Whiteville. NCGrowth is in the process of creating an incubator guide that can help communities determine the feasibility of business incubators in their area. A few general considerations are listed here.

First, incubators are typically only successful in communities where there is a scarcity of affordable leasable office space and few inter-related industries that drive wealth creation. Successful incubators also offer member businesses a variety of services and programming. Homegrown Tools for economic development is a web based tool managed by NCGrowth that provides strategies and case studies for economic development. Two successful cases of incubators are inStar and Siler City, NC. Star, NC focused their economic development strategy around STARworks Center for Creative Enterprises which acts as a business incubator, an

educational and training space, and a community space through the coffee shop and taproom. Siler City partnered with Central Carolina Community College to create a small business incubator focused on innovative and arts-based businesses.

If an incubator isn't right for a community, many of the desired impacts of incubators can be achieved through a package of other interventions including: downtown activation, placemaking initiatives, ensuring small-business friendly ordinances and codes, programs that meet the needs of small businesses, events that highlight local businesses and encourage networking, partnering with institutions of higher education, and collaborating regionally to support local businesses and entrepreneurs.



## NEXT STEPS

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### ☐ Focus on manageable projects:

- Focus on short-term and temporary activation techniques that can be easily implemented success.
  - Examples: pop-up shops, outdoor movie series, outdoor galleries, alley projects, music events

### ☐ Engage in Marketing and Placemaking:

- Create a Style and Branding Guide to inform wayfinding and signage choices.
- Engage in social media campaigns and encourage all local businesses and points of interest to have digital reviews, pictures, and online information.
- Engage in cross-promotion of local assets and businesses and encourage collaboration amongst downtown business owners and regional collaboration amongst local governments.
- Actively promote placemaking initiatives from public and private sector partners.

### ☐ Engage in Downtown Activation Strategies:

- Build in Equity
  - Foster economic opportunities for all
- Understand the community and activate one block at a time
- Infrastructure Activation
  - Regular programming
  - Streetscaping
  - Parks & Greenways
- Diversify Downtown Economy
  - Unique redevelopment projects
  - Mixed-use development

### ☐ Explore collaborative partnerships:

- Explore partnerships and opportunities to facilitate communication, outreach, and project completion. Collaborate with other organizations to improve information sharing, planning, and funding needs.

### ☐ Conduct a market study:

- Determine the need and potential for various businesses in the area

### ☐ Develop a Comprehensive Master Plan

## Resources

Name	Contact	Additional Information
<b>Professional Organizations</b>		
Urban Land Institute	<a href="https://uli.org/">https://uli.org/</a>	
American Institute of Architects	<a href="https://www.aia.org/">https://www.aia.org/</a>	
American Society of Landscape Architects	<a href="https://www.asla.org/">https://www.asla.org/</a>	
American Planning Association	<a href="https://www.planning.org/">https://www.planning.org/</a>	
American Institute of Certified Planners	<a href="https://www.planning.org/aicp/">https://www.planning.org/aicp/</a>	
American Society of Civil Engineers	<a href="https://www.asce.org/">https://www.asce.org/</a>	
American Council of Engineering Companies of North Carolina	<a href="https://www.acecnc.org/">https://www.acecnc.org/</a>	

Name	Contact	Additional Information
<b>Non-Profit, State, and University Organizations</b>		
North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office	<a href="http://www.hpo.ncdcr.gov/">http://www.hpo.ncdcr.gov/</a>	
League of Historic American Theatres	<a href="http://www.lhat.org">www.lhat.org</a>	
UNCG Center for Community-Engaged Design	<a href="https://iarc.uncg.edu/cc-ed/nc-main-street/">https://iarc.uncg.edu/cc-ed/nc-main-street/</a>	
Project for Public Spaces	<a href="https://www.pps.org/">https://www.pps.org/</a>	A nonprofit organization dedicated to helping people create and sustain public spaces that build strong communities. They have extensive web resources as well as examples of successful placemaking projects that can serve as inspiration.
Development Finance Initiative	<a href="https://dfi.sog.unc.edu/">https://dfi.sog.unc.edu/</a>	DFI partners with local governments to attract private investment for transformative projects by providing specialized finance and development expertise. They are a good organization to engage in transforming sites that are owned by the city. They charge

		a fee for service and offer pro-bono assistance through classes.
NC State University College of Design	Meg Calkins, FASLA <a href="mailto:mecalkin@ncsu.edu">mecalkin@ncsu.edu</a> , 919-515-8342	Professor and Head of the Department of Landscape Architecture
UNCC College of Arts & Architecture	Deborah Ryan, ASLA <a href="mailto:deryan@uncc.edu">deryan@uncc.edu</a> , 704-687-0123	Professor of Architecture and Urban Design, Director of the Master of Urban Design Program

Name	Contact	Additional Comments
<b>Potential Funding Sources</b>		
Parks and Recreation Trust Fund (PARTF) Grants	<a href="https://www.ncparks.gov/more-about-us/parks-recreation-trust-fund/parks-and-recreation-trust-fund">https://www.ncparks.gov/more-about-us/parks-recreation-trust-fund/parks-and-recreation-trust-fund</a>	-Funding Cycle: Applications due in May, granted in August -Award Amount: Maximum \$500,000, the applicant must match 50% of the total cost of the project -Project Types Funded: Local governments can apply to acquire land for parks and build recreational facilities for use by the public.
Resourceful Communities	<a href="https://www.conservationfund.org/our-work/resourceful-communities/our-approach">https://www.conservationfund.org/our-work/resourceful-communities/our-approach</a>	Creating New Economies Fund (CNEF) provides small grants for innovative triple bottom line projects. Grants average \$8,000-\$12,000, with a maximum award of \$15,000. Funding has supported a variety of projects, including: eco-tourism, sustainable agriculture, youth leadership development, alternative energy, and more.
EPA Grants for Recreation Economy for Rural Communities	<a href="https://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/recreation-economy-rural-communities">https://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/recreation-economy-rural-communities</a>	Assistance program to help rural communities revitalize Main Streets through outdoor recreation
American Trails Resource Directory	<a href="https://www.americantrails.org/resource-library/directory">https://www.americantrails.org/resource-library/directory</a>	Information and resources on all aspects of trail development, education, and outreach
Rural Development Assistance Grant	<a href="https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services">https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services</a>	Program assistance is provided in many ways, including direct or guaranteed loans, grants, technical assistance, research, and educational materials.

Department of Transportation (DoT) Planning Grant Initiative	<a href="https://connect.ncdot.gov/municipalities/PlanningGrants/Pages/Planning-Grant-Initiative.aspx">https://connect.ncdot.gov/municipalities/PlanningGrants/Pages/Planning-Grant-Initiative.aspx</a>	Funding Cycle: Call for Proposals in August; Deadline in November; Decisions in February Project Types: Annual matching grant program to encourage municipalities to develop comprehensive bicycle plans and pedestrian plans.
Transportation Alternatives (TA) Funds	<a href="https://trade.railstotrails.org/index">https://trade.railstotrails.org/index</a> ; State DoT TA Coordinator, Johanna I. Cockburn (919) 707-2601; <a href="mailto:jcockburn@ncdot.gov">jcockburn@ncdot.gov</a>	Federal government funds for projects that expand travel choice, strengthen the local economy, improve the quality of life, and protect the environment. Eligible projects include pedestrian and bicycle facilities, safe routes for non-drivers, and historic preservation.

Name	Contact	Additional Comments
<b>Community Projects</b>		
Z. Smith Reynolds (ZSR) Community Progress Fund	<a href="https://www.zsr.org/community-progress">https://www.zsr.org/community-progress</a>	- Funding Cycle: Letters of Intent accepted starting Oct. 1; Selected proposals receive an invitation to submit a full application in February; Grant decisions made in May - Award Amount: \$20,000 - \$30,000 per year for one or two years -Project Types: Short-term funding for projects with community momentum; primarily for organizations serving people of color that are in areas of NC with limited philanthropic resources
Historic Preservation Fund Grants	<a href="https://www.nps.gov/preservation-grants/index.html">https://www.nps.gov/preservation-grants/index.html</a>	Provides information on competitive grants related to historic preservation

Name	Contact	Additional Comments
<b>Economic Development</b>		
NC Department of Commerce – Downtown Development and Site Development funds – Main Street Solutions Fund	<a href="https://www.nccommerce.com/grants-incentives/downtown-development-funds">https://www.nccommerce.com/grants-incentives/downtown-development-funds</a>	-Funding Cycle: Announced in May -Award Amount: Up to \$200,000



		<p>-Project Types: Economic development planning assistance to designated micropolitans in Tier 2 and 3 counties to activate North Carolina Main Street communities; retaining and creating jobs in association with small business</p>
Main Street Solutions Fund	<p>DRAFT</p> <p>Dan Becker, Main Street Grants Administrator,  <a href="mailto:dan.becker@nccommerce.com">dan.becker@nccommerce.com</a>,  919-814-4668</p>	<p>-Economic development planning assistance available for Main Street Communities and micropolitans located in Tier 2 and 3 counties</p> <p>-Funding Cycle: Announced in May</p> <p>-Program goals are to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide direct financial benefits to small businesses.</li> <li>Spur local investment in association with small business.</li> <li>Retain and create jobs in association with small business.</li> </ul> <p>-Awards up to \$200,000 to local government</p>
Economic Development Assistance Program	<p><a href="https://www.grants.gov/web/grants/view-opportunity.html?opId=306735">https://www.grants.gov/web/grants/view-opportunity.html?opId=306735</a></p>	<p>-Funding Cycle: Ongoing</p> <p>-Not eligible for non-profits with a 501 (c)(3) status</p> <p>-Requirements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A feasibility study establishing the presence of a critical mass of support factors, entrepreneurial demand for use, and community support for the facility;</li> <li>A Pro-forma demonstrating financial capacity to operate the facility and reach a positive cash flow within a reasonable period; and</li> <li>A management plan for the operation of the facility that at a minimum address:</li> </ul> <p>-Tenant selection policy;</p>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Tenant lease agreement terms;</li> <li>-Business assistance policy (identify sources of assistance);</li> <li>-Tenant records review policy;</li> <li>-Tenant graduation policy; and</li> <li>-Management oversight of incubator operations.</li> </ul>
Bank of America Community Reinvestment Grant	<a href="https://about.bankofamerica.com/en-us/global-impact/charitable-foundation-funding.html#fbid=rITIB8jBKxj">https://about.bankofamerica.com/en-us/global-impact/charitable-foundation-funding.html#fbid=rITIB8jBKxj</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Provides grants related to the needs of individuals and families and grants related to the needs of the community by addressing economic development and social progress</li> <li>-Applications accepted 6/1/2020-6/26/2020</li> </ul>
NCGrowth's Incubator Guide	Jess Wilkinson, Economic Development Manager <a href="mailto:Jessica_Wilkinson@kenan-flagler.unc.edu">Jessica_Wilkinson@kenan-flagler.unc.edu</a> 919-843-3282	NCGrowth is developing a comprehensive incubator guide to help communities determine the feasibility of business incubators in their communities. This guide provides case studies, resources, and examples of alternatives to incubators.

Name	Contact	Additional Comments
<b>Real Estate Development</b>		
North Carolina Department of Commerce Building Reuse Program	<a href="https://www.nccommerce.com/grants-incentives/building-or-site-funds/building-reuse">https://www.nccommerce.com/grants-incentives/building-or-site-funds/building-reuse</a> Hazel Edmond, Building Reuse Program, 919-814-4659, <a href="mailto:hazel.edmond@nccommerce.com">hazel.edmond@nccommerce.com</a>	Available for renovating vacant buildings or renovating and expanding buildings occupied by companies operating in NC for at least the last 12 months
Economic Development Partnerships of NC	<a href="https://edpnc.com/">https://edpnc.com/</a>	