

DELIVERING OUTCOMES FOR COMMUNITIES

CASE STUDY: BUILDING TRUST WITH LOCAL PARTNERS IN RURAL AMERICA

ROCKY MOUNT, NORTH CAROLINA

THE CHALLENGE

Founded as a mill town at the first falls on the Tar River, Rocky Mount grew prosperous on the cotton and tobacco grown on North Carolina's Coastal Plain. With its growing manufacturing base, the town attracted the railroad away from the older county seats of nearby Tarboro and Nashville. For a century, having the railroad tracks down the middle of Main Street serve as the county line gave the city leverage with two counties dependent upon the its success as a regional transportation hub and banking center.

Local industries supported solid wages for residents without high levels of education until national consolidation in the banking sector and the decline of tobacco and American textiles. As these industries rapidly shed jobs in the 1990s, many leaders in Rocky Mount held out hope they would return and did not meaningfully move to restructure the economy to take advantage of its position as a commodities light manufacturing and transportation center or to capitalize on the young technology companies being founded in North Carolina's nearby Tech Triangle. For decades Rocky Mount was also the corporate home of an international fast food giant, Hardees, until the devastation of Hurricane Floyd and a merger pulled the headquarter west to St Louis.

In addition to job losses, Rocky Mount's infrastructure has suffered. Hurricane Floyd destroyed more than 25 percent of the housing stock and many businesses in the city's historic neighborhoods along the river, dislocating families, traditions and driving jobs toward Raleigh and other cities. Declining revenues and state policy changes are seen to have exacerbated serious public health problems in many neighborhoods, including high rates of infant mortality, heart disease and diabetes.

Despite being surrounded by an area-rich in agricultural production, many neighborhoods are food deserts or food swamps where residents lack access to fresh, healthy foods but often have an abundance of unhealthy fast food. While the average age of farmers in the area is increasing, younger African American and Latino residents who are interested in farming face barriers to accessing land and capital.

As with many southern cities, the legacy of historical racial injustices from slavery, sharecropping and segregation had created a deep divide between the African American and White citizens. In 2013 the poverty rate among Rocky Mount's White residents was about 10 percent, while it exceeded 30 percent for African American and Latino residents.

Rocky Mount remains the largest city in the region but the state legislature has seriously curbed the ability of cities to grow, and the smaller county seats of predominantly African American Edgecombe, and predominantly White Nash Counties feel less bound to its fortunes. Each county government has its own priorities, challenges, and tax rates, and sees a different way forward in the new economy. In planning for the future, older members of African Americans community tend to view the region's challenges as stemming from issues of "social justice", while White community members tend to prioritize "economic development".

PARTNERS

- Nash/UNC Health Care
- Edgecombe Community College and Nash Community College
- Rocky Mount/Edgecombe Community Development Corporation
- Edgecombe and Nash Counties Health Departments
- Down East Partnership for Children
- Boys and Girls Club
- Golden Leaf Foundation
- Opportunity Investment Council (OIC)
- STEP Partnership (privately funded pre-k-12 improvement working group)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
- Department of Transportation (DOT)
- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)
- United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)

EXERCISE

When Rocky Mount was designated an SC2 city in 2014, the federal team focused on the potential to leverage the region's history in agricultural production and manufacturing to help grow the local food economy. However, distrust between community leaders in Rocky Mount's two counties had grown so deep that many continually found excuses not to even meet with each other. In your assigned small groups, please discuss:

- What is the first thing you would do to understand the community's needs?
- What are the current challenges and anticipated barriers? What approach can you take to overcome them?
- What federal agencies and resources should come into play?
- What would be important to support long-term sustainability of the project outcomes? What could be recommended as broader policy or program changes across the government?

ACTUAL STEPS TAKEN

1. When the SC2 team first engaged, they identified a potential opportunity to develop the region's agricultural and food economy, but underlying racial tensions kept African American and White community leaders from meeting with each other. In separate conversations, leaders identified different issues and parts of town to prioritize for investment, but all agreed upon improving walking and biking options. A city worker then mentioned a long-held desire for a small "rails to trails" project that would turn an abandoned portion of the railroad track into a walking trail from the original textile mill to Main Street. Although the trail crossed through four poor and predominantly African American neighborhoods, it was considered by many to be on the historically "White" side of the railroad tracks that had divided the community. Because of this, the project was seen as pulling investment from other neighborhoods and was met with resistance.

2. The SC2 team worked with each set of community leaders to help them clearly articulate their priorities. After taking time to build trust establish themselves as a neutral party, they were successful in bringing leaders from several groups together for a first meeting at a neutral nonprofit organization's space. Despite having initially created a longer agenda, the SC2 team simply allowed each person time to introduce themselves and their organization and speak to what they

were already doing in the community. This resulted mutual recognition of the value that each was bringing to their shared community, and agreement for a second meeting.

3. At the second meeting, the two groups began to interact more meaningfully. They discussed the proposed rails to trails project using a map that left off some of the traditionally-perceived dividing lines in the community. The discussion led to a fortuitous discovery. By extending the proposed trail a few feet further, it would connect across the tracks to the “Thelonious Monk Plaza,” which pays homage to one of the city’s most famous citizens— a cultural icon that unites people of all races. With one end now anchored by a site celebrating the city’s African American music heritage and the other at the mill that started the city on the banks of the river, the group found common cause in the “Monk to Mill Trail.” This resulted in agreement for a third meeting.

4. At the third meeting, the group began to engage in broader conversations about why connections were important between neighborhoods and how the tracks could be less of a barrier. Many began to agree that if done mindfully, “economic development” could have “social justice” benefits, and vice versa. Members of the group began to form plans for deeper transformation by cooperating in new ways and identified a small grant from the EPA Office of Sustainable Communities that could support the launch of the trail project. Together they started developing ideas about how to extend the value of the trail—all pivoting around Main Street revitalization for jobs, higher education, healthcare and housing. Next, the group applied for a Local Foods Local Places grant to help use the new trail as a connector to facilitate access to local foods and health care facilities, the farmers market, parks and other arts and culture related institutions.

UNIQUE OUTCOMES

- The initially planned Monk to Mill Trail is growing and connecting the traditionally separate halves of the Rocky Mount community—both literally and figuratively. A second phase of the trail will ultimately extend through downtown with interactive arts installations, connecting the city’s rich African American cultural heritage even more fully into the economic development plans for the community.
- Community leaders collectively agreed to reach out more proactively to younger members of their community to engage youth in visions and plans for the future.
- Rocky Mount applied for and received a Local Foods Local Places award from EPA and is using the Monk to Mill Trail project to develop a modern mixed-use community that connects families to healthy food, healthcare, recreation, education, housing, culture and jobs. The local foods effort is also exploring how to help younger and new potential farmers address barriers to entry region-wide—a step that could reestablish Rocky Mount as the region’s hub for the agricultural-based economy.
- Main Street redevelopment is now also moving forward. Redevelopment opportunities are increasing thanks in part to grants from EPA to assess cleanup needs and multiple brownfield sites opening up. There is also continued revitalization of the historic African American business district, including a new regional sports center.
- Rocky Mount is now engaging with other communities along the Tar River from the historic falls to the sea, creating common interest in regional economic development that pools the resources of cities, towns and rural communities.

UNIFYING THEMES

The legacy of historical racial injustice is not easily overcome. Mistrust among potential partners at the local level requires intentional and thoughtful navigation:

- Build relationships as a neutral third party to begin to create trust separately with each community
- Start by bringing people together to hear about each other's contributions to the community in order to build mutual respect
- Identify common assets within the community and areas of shared history/heritage to unify different groups
- Find low-hanging fruit—a small project that brings people together can have huge dividends for future collaboration

FEATURED HIGH-VALUE RESOURCES FOR COMMUNITIES

- Local foods local places; USDA/EPA/CDC/DOT local and regional food programs
- DOT resources, like TIGER, that finance transportation options including bike and walking trails. Also, pedestrian improvements around rail transportation in the downtown corridor
- NEA Our Town grants use the arts to help communities advance local vision for economic growth