

THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF MAIN STREET & RURAL PLANNING IN NORTH CAROLINA

2025 ANNUAL REPORT

January-December 2025 Activity

The NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center works in regions, counties, cities, towns, downtown districts, and designated North Carolina Main Street communities to inspire placemaking through building asset-based economic development strategies that achieve measurable results such as investment, business growth, and jobs.

Lee Lilley, Secretary, North Carolina Department of Commerce
Reginald Speight, Assistant Secretary for Rural Economic Development
Elizabeth H. Parham, Director, NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center



ABOUT THE NC MAIN STREET & RURAL PLANNING CENTER

The NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center (the Center), part of the N.C. Department of Commerce’s Rural Economic Development Division, is responsible for administering the state’s Main Street and Rural Planning programs, guiding rural and downtown economic development, and delivering capacity-building programs that help communities implement asset-based strategies to strengthen local economies.



Main Street America™ is a program of the nonprofit National Main Street Center, a subsidiary of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Coordinating agencies such as the Center, locally designated communities in North Carolina, and more than 1,200 additional neighborhoods and communities nationwide work in partnership with the National Main Street Center to build stronger communities through asset-based economic development. North Carolina has 81 designated Main Street and Small Town Main Street communities, and hundreds of additional communities of all sizes apply Main Street® principles in their local revitalization efforts.

The Rural Planning program, part of the Center, provides local governments and partner organizations in rural areas with planning services and technical assistance to help them prepare for and respond to economic growth opportunities. Staff members are located across all eight of North Carolina’s Prosperity Zone regions: Western (Asheville), Northwest (West Jefferson), Piedmont-Triad (Mount Airy), Southwest (Lincolnton), North Central (Clayton), Sandhills (Fayetteville), Northeast (Washington), and Southeast (Wilmington).

THE PROGRAMS

The Center manages the NC Main Street programs, including Main Street, Small Town Main Street, and the Downtown Associate Community program; the NC Rural Planning program, including the Creating Outdoor Recreation Economies (CORE) initiative; the federally funded Rural Transformation Grant Fund - Downtown Revitalization category; the state funded Rural Downtown Economic Development Grant; and the NC Main to Main Trail initiative. Through the Center’s programming, staff provide North Carolina communities with strategic economic development planning, technical assistance, training and education, and grants for downtown revitalization. CORE and the Main to Main Trail are economic development initiatives that are supported in part by a U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) State Tourism Grant.



Main Street & Rural Planning Center Team, 2025

THE SERVICES

Strategic Economic Development Planning



The NC Main Street program team works with designated Main Street programs and their community leaders to develop market-driven, asset-based, five-year strategic economic development plans and one-to-two-year implementation/action plans for downtowns.

The Main Street Four-Point Approach® for downtown revitalization (*Economic Vitality, Design, Promotion, and Organization*), created by the National Main Street Center, is used to organize the actions and target transformational projects for implementation that increase economic impact in downtown.

In 2025, staff worked with 19 communities and completed 18 strategic economic development plans.

ON THE COVER clockwise:

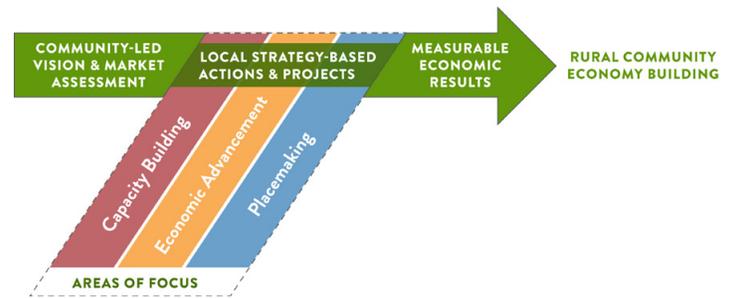
- Downtown Waxhaw, NC
- Tiger’s Department Store owners for *Main Street America Podcast*, Hayesville, NC
- Downtown Washington, NC
- Jon Schallert’s *Destination Creation Training*, Sanford, NC
- 2025 Main Street Award Winner for Best Space Improvement, Elm Street Pocket Park, Lumberton, NC
- River Landing Camping Platform, Martin County, NC
- NC Main Street staff presenters at the 2025 *Main Street Now Conference* in Philadelphia, PA

Strategic Economic Development Planning, *continued*

The NC Rural Planning program works with local units of government to develop asset-based strategic economic development plans. These plans help community leaders identify, prepare for, and respond to growth opportunities. In 2025, the Rural Planning team launched a dynamic economic development planning approach with three focus areas (*Capacity Building, Economic Advancement, and Placemaking*) designed to ignite long-term growth in rural communities. Using this approach,

Rural Planning staff worked with 35 communities on strategic planning projects and completed 14 community economic development assessments and strategic economic development plans in 2025. The program also continued to implement the CORE initiative it launched in 2023. In 2025, staff worked with 12 CORE communities to identify outdoor recreation assets that presented opportunities for economic growth and to develop strategies and projects to increase tourism, encourage small business development, enhance residents' quality of life, plan for asset and infrastructure development, and attract outdoor gear manufacturers. **The program completed 9 CORE strategic plans in 2025.**

THE NC RURAL PLANNING PROGRAM'S APPROACH TO COMMUNITY ECONOMY BUILDING



Technical Assistance

Providing high-quality technical assistance for North Carolina communities is a primary component of the day-to-day work of the NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center. The team provides communities with Main Street program, downtown revitalization, and rural economic development best practices, property redevelopment and small business guidance, information and resources for project funding opportunities, local government operations support, market analysis and mobile phone location data, Geographic Information System (GIS) analysis and mapping, and tools and templates to build local capacity.

Hurricane Helene Recovery



Hurricane Helene recovery continued to be a central focus for the entire NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center team. In February 2025, Main Street staff

led a site visit to Spruce Pine, where historic preservation professionals provided guidance to downtown property owners on NC building code issues on Locust Street, where properties were impacted by up to 9 feet of flooding. **In March 2025, the Center's Main to Main Recovery Initiative, in collaboration with Main Street America and its Give Lively fundraising platform, leveraged the power of the Main Street network and raised more than \$15,000 to support small businesses in Spruce Pine.** And in October 2025, working alongside the NC Appalachian Regional Commission program and the NC Outdoor Economy Office, the Center led a three-day Recovery Resource Team visit in Burnsville and Yancey County. The effort included tours of downtown Burnsville and hurricane-impacted areas, in-depth interviews with key public and private stakeholders, a community vision forum, and a culminating public presentation.



CORE Implementation Site Visit to Jonesville by NC State University

CORE Plan Implementation Assistance

After completing outdoor economy strategic plans, CORE communities can receive implementation support from UNC System partners, including UNC Greensboro's Center for Industry Research and Engagement, NCGrowth at UNC Chapel Hill, East Carolina University, and NC State's Initiative for Community Growth and Development. **In 2025, these partners completed six projects for five communities** and had five more underway, ranging from design studies and marketing plans to social media tools and feasibility studies. Their work is funded through the U.S. EDA grant that supports the CORE program.

Training & Education

Attendance for the NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center’s training and education programs reached 2,095 in 2025. To expand access in rural communities, **the Center delivered 19 statewide trainings across all eight prosperity zones.** It completed an educational series on small-scale development, historic tax credits, and creating destination businesses and communities, and coordinated a storytelling workshop held in five rural towns. The CORE initiative hosted a webinar and three workshops featuring speakers who shared strategies, tools, and resources for growing rural outdoor recreation economies. The Center also hosted Regional Meetings with downtown professionals in May, a Main Street Directors’ Meeting in Boone in August, and three sessions of Main Street Basic Training in January, May, and August. These courses provided Main Street and Small Town Main Street staff, board members, and volunteers with in-depth knowledge of three of the program’s core components: Economic Vitality, Promotion, and Organization.

Partnerships strengthened this work, with additional training offered through collaborations with Main Street America’s Main Street Academy, Understand, Plan, Link, Innovate, Finance, and Tell (UPLIFT), Appalachian State University, Recreation Resources Service at NC State University, and the Building Outdoor Communities program of the Made by Mountains Partnership. Community-specific trainings were provided to designated Main Street, Small Town Main Street, and Downtown Associate Community programs to build capacity at the local level on a variety of downtown revitalization topics.

The Center used its website, social media channels, and traditional communication tools to share resources, opportunities, and work that the team accomplished. The [NC Main Street Facebook page](#) experienced a 12% increase in individual followers, and the [NC Rural Planning Facebook page](#) experienced an 86% increase in followers. The Center also enhanced its [NC Main Street and Planning training website](#) with additional videos, tech sheets, and expanded training opportunities for communities across North Carolina.

NC Main Street Conference



Marking the 45th anniversary of the NC Main Street program, the 24th NC Main Street Conference, recognized as the largest statewide downtown revitalization conference in the nation, was held in March 2025 in Mooresville. The event set a **new attendance record with 824 participants representing 142 North Carolina communities and 14 states.** Governor Josh Stein opened the conference, emphasizing the statewide impact of downtown revitalization and small-business development. Keynote speakers Katherine Loflin and Jeff Siegler delivered compelling messages on community building and place stewardship, while plenary speaker Jon Schallert recognized **the first 25 graduates of the Certified NC Destination Business course**, launched by the NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center and The Schallert Group. **The 2025 Main Street Awards recognized 10 outstanding projects, and the Main Street Champions ceremony celebrated 47 individuals, organizations, and agencies for their significant contributions to local Main Street efforts.**

“Just when you think NC Main Street Directors’ Training can’t get any better, it does – year after year. The staff are always providing relevant content for the changing needs of our downtowns and even pivot during the meeting to address specific needs that the directors express. I came away with excitement and a list of attainable strategies that I can implement back home.”

BERNADETTE PETERS

Economic Development Director, Town of Sylva



Main Street Directors learn how to develop strategic plans.



NC Main Street Facebook Page
facebook.com/ncmainstreet



NC Rural Planning Facebook Page
facebook.com/ncruralplanning



NC Main Street & Rural Planning Training Website
ncmainstreetandplanning.com

Enhancing the Main to Main Trail



Funded in part by a U.S. EDA grant to enhance the Main to Main Trail and strengthen the economic vitality of designated NC Main Street communities, the NC Main Street team delivered two major training series in 2025. The Schallert Group offered advanced instruction on its 14-step “destination business” model, with **142 businesses participating in seven in-person sessions in 2025**, building on the 429 participants from eight sessions in 2024. To date, 75 small businesses have earned the Certified NC Destination Business designation. In addition, Phil Eich of Storyville led a statewide storytelling

training series to help Main Street Directors and local partners highlight the people who bring their communities to life. **Five in-person workshops drew 200 participants across North Carolina.**



Phil Eich conducting storytelling training.

Small-Scale Development and Historic Tax Credit Workshops

In 2025, the NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center, in partnership with the NC State Historic Preservation Office, hosted two workshops focused on small-scale development strategies for downtown commercial districts. The sessions equipped commercial property owners and local economic development staff with practical guidance on using the historic tax credit program to finance rehabilitation projects and strengthen local redevelopment efforts. **The 2025 workshops trained 60 participants from 32 communities. Since the series launched in 2024, eight workshops have been held, reaching a total of 306 participants from 144 communities** and building a stronger statewide understanding of how historic tax credits can support downtown revitalization.



Developer Gene Rees explaining historic preservation techniques.

“ Thank you to the CORE program for training funds that supported the Montgomery County visit to Brevard and Transylvania County to learn how they leverage outdoor assets for economic growth. The staff left with inspiration and ideas to implement Montgomery County’s CORE strategic plan.”

SAVANNAH HEATH

Economic Development Director, Montgomery County



CORE Workshop participants in Old Fort.

Sandhills Region Workshop

To respond to needs expressed by communities in the region, the NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center staff for the Sandhills Prosperity Zone held a small business and infrastructure workshop in November 2025. Speakers included staff from the Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina and the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality Water Infrastructure Authority. Robeson County hosted the workshop, which drew **15 participants from 10 local units of government.**

CORE Training

In 2025, CORE funding helped communities join conferences, workshops, and best practice site visits focused on strengthening their outdoor economies. Working with host communities and partners, **CORE delivered four training events**, including a webinar plus workshops in Old Fort, Williamston, and Troy. Speakers shared tools, resources, and best practices to support local outdoor recreation initiatives and encourage collaboration among participants.

Grants

In 2025, the NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center administered a portfolio of 92 federal and state-funded downtown revitalization grants, representing the largest public investment ever directed toward North Carolina’s central business districts.



Spencer Town Park Opening, June 2025. Photo Credit: Miller David Agency

Rural Downtown Economic Development Grant

The N.C. Department of Commerce’s Rural Downtown Economic Development (RDED) Grant continued to have a big impact on downtown revitalization. Launched in 2024 as a new category within the Rural Engagement and Investment portfolio, **12 grants were awarded in 2025, totaling \$6,183,605.** Intended to support job creation and retention in downtown districts through investment in publicly owned property, these projects support the retention of 846 jobs in the grant-funded project areas. Projects funded through the RDED Grant include public infrastructure, public buildings, and mixed-use development projects, including downtown streetscape improvement projects, community facilities and gathering places, commercial/residential redevelopment projects, and the rehabilitation/expansion of historic downtown buildings. RDED projects in Murphy and Spencer were completed in 2025.

Rural Transformation Grant Fund

The Rural Transformation Grant Fund (RTGF) continued in 2025 with project implementation. The fund was made available from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), and although no new grants were awarded in 2025, **43 grants were awarded in 2022 and 2023, totaling \$26,580,556, and were administered through the 2025 calendar year.** All projects will be completed by December 31, 2026, and **five projects were completed in 2025 in Newton, Spencer, Murphy, Spindale, and Rockingham.**



The Spencer Town Park and Multi-use Pavilion would not have been possible without funding from the Rural Transformation Grant Fund and the Rural Downtown Economic Development Fund. The grants helped leverage other funding sources and private contributions to build the \$2.4M facility and much-needed green space. The park has provided Spencer residents and visitors with a high-quality outdoor gathering space that accommodates community events and informal recreational activities while providing both an aesthetic and economic boost to downtown Spencer and a source of community pride.”

JOE MORRIS

Special Projects Planner, Town of Spencer



Left: 2025 Main Street Award for Best Historic Rehabilitation Project, Osage Mill, Bessemer City

Center: 2025 Main Street Award for Best Historic Rehabilitation Project, Holland Building, Statesville

54 YEARS OF STRENGTHENING LOCAL COMMUNITIES

THE IMPACT

2025 Calendar Year Services Delivered – 291 NC Communities Directly Served



TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

- 900 Community Assistance Consultations
- 24 Design Plans Completed
- 6 CORE Implementation Projects Completed
- 13 Statistical Data and Information Surveys Conducted
- 399 Mobile Location Data and Market Analysis Reports Completed
- 52 GIS Mapping and Analysis Reports Completed
- 81 Main Street Agreements Executed
- 81 Main Street Program Assessments Analyzed



TRAINING & EDUCATION

- 175 Trainings Provided
- 113 Presentations Delivered
- 57 Main Street & Champion Awards Presented
- 80,962 NC Main Street & Rural Planning Webpage Views
- 6,894 Facebook Followers
- 672,145 Facebook Pages Reach



STRATEGIC ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PLANNING

- 32 Strategic Economic Development Plans



GRANTS

- 12 Grants Awarded
- 92 Grants Administered

Main Street Program Community Statistics Fiscal Year 2024-25

In FY 24-25, NC Main Street and Small Town Main Street communities collectively saw more than half a billion dollar investment, and **an increase of more than \$140 million in public and private investment** over the previous year.

\$518,729,406
PUBLIC/PRIVATE INVESTMENT

293
BUILDINGS REHABILITATED

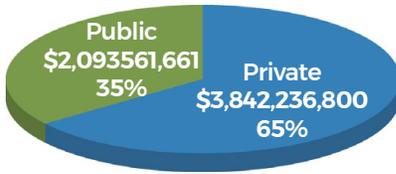
364
FAÇADE IMPROVEMENTS

288
NET GAIN BUSINESSES

1,925
NET GAIN FTE & PTE JOBS

127,805
VOLUNTEER HOURS
Valued at \$4,218,843

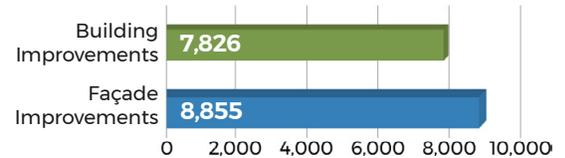
Total NC Main Street and Small Town Main Street Cumulative Data



NCMS Cumulative Investment, 1981-2025



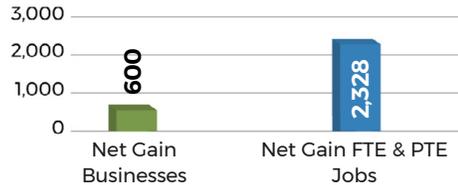
NCMS Cumulative Job Growth, 1981-2025



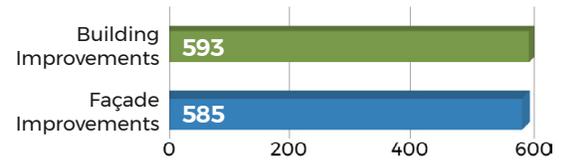
NCMS Cumulative Property Improvements, 1981-2025



STMS Cumulative Investment, 2004-2025



STMS Cumulative Job Growth, 2004-2025



STMS Cumulative Property Improvements, 2004-2025

STMS numbers reflect communities that moved up to NC Main Street designation.

NC MAIN STREET & RURAL PLANNING CENTER TEAM

The NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center team is comprised of Main Street and downtown revitalization specialists, rural and community economic development planners, grant administrators, and a Geographic Information System (GIS) analyst.

Elizabeth (Liz) Parham, CMSM
Director

Sherry Adams, CMSM
Program Manager, Main Street Program

Karen Smith, AICP
Program Manager, Rural Planning Program

Joy Almond
Main Street Program Specialist

Phil Boggan
ARC Community Development Planner, Northwest Region

Samantha Darlington
Community Economic Development Planner, Southeast Region

Mike Dougherty
Downtown Development Specialist

Jeff Emory
Community Economic Development Planner, Southwest Region

Charles Halsall, MSARP
Main Street Program Specialist

Susan Kellum
Main Street Project Manager

Grace Lawrence
Community Economic Development Planner, Sandhills Region

Glen Locascio
GIS Analyst

Lizzie Morrison
Community Economic Development Planner, Piedmont-Triad Region

Bruce Naegelen
Community Economic Development Planner, North Central Region

Naomi Riley
Main Street Education Coordinator

Lisa Rueh
Main Street Grants Administrator

Allison Smith
ARC Community Development Planner, Western Region

Sharon Smith
Community Economic Development Planner, Northeast Region

Amy Suggs, NCCED
Main Street Program Specialist

Taylor Vorbeck
Business Manager



To learn more about the NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center, visit [NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center | NC Commerce](#)

