

TOWN OF SANDYFIELD
TOWN HALL - FIRE DEPT.



SANDYFIELD

CREATING OUTDOOR RECREATION ECONOMIES

STRATEGIC PLAN

2025-2030



Contents

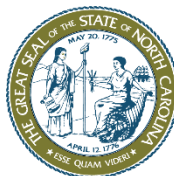
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Acknowledgements

The Creating Outdoor Recreation Economies (CORE) program is made possible by a U.S. Economic Development Administration State Tourism Grant which awarded \$6 Million to the State of North Carolina's Supporting and Strengthening Resiliency in North Carolina's Travel, Tourism, and Outdoor Recreation Sectors Initiative. As a component of this Initiative, the North Carolina Department of Commerce's Rural Economic Development Division (REDD) developed the CORE program. The CORE program offers strategic planning and technical assistance to help rural communities leverage North Carolina's abundant outdoor recreation assets to bolster local economic vitality.

The REDD announced the technical assistance program offering Outdoor Recreation Economy Strategic Planning and Asset Development services in late 2022. Communities from across the state applied to engage with strategic planning services and 34 local governments were accepted to participate. Main Street & Rural Planning (MS&RP) staff, who are responsible for facilitating strategic economic development planning and implementation services, worked with local government staff to communicate the goals of the program, identify local opportunities, and assemble a planning work group.

This project would not be possible without the support and participation of the Town of Sandyfield's Town Council, the work group members and the citizens of Sandyfield.



**NC DEPARTMENT
of COMMERCE**
**RURAL ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT**



Town of Sandyfield Town Council

Gary Keaton	Mayor
Joseph Brown	Mayor Pro Tempore
Randolph Keaton	Council Member
Perry Dixon	Council Member
Azalie Graham	Council Member
Leonard Hall	Council Member

Sandyfield CORE Work Group

Larry Webb	Planning Board
Perry Dixon	Council member
Claudia Bray	Town Clerk
Selma Keaton	Parks and Rec Committee
Reggie Munn	Planning Board
Randolph Keaton	Council Member
Styrus Daniels	Parks and Rec Committee
Greg Brown	Planning Board

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Executive Summary

Through CORE, the Town of Sandyfield collaborated with N.C. Department of Commerce, Rural Economic Development Division staff members and local stakeholders in a strategic planning process to identify and develop outdoor recreation assets that present economic growth opportunities. Strategy development focused on enhancement of quality of life for residents and plan for outdoor recreation asset and infrastructure development.

For the purposes of Sandyfield's CORE executive summary and strategic plan of work, outdoor recreation is defined as all recreational activities undertaken for leisure that occur outdoors, with an emphasis on those activities that involve some level of intentional physical exertion and occur in nature-based environments.

There is growing interest in outdoor recreation and Sandyfield has identified the town park as the focus of this project. The need for safe and accessible walking areas was noted by the work group. Sandyfield's CORE plan of work will concentrate on development of a walking tract around the town park.

The Sandyfield CORE work group developed its own vision statement to provide a focal point for the CORE plan:

Located a stone's throw away from the Cape Fear River, Sandyfield is a tranquil place to call home. In this safe, family-oriented community, you will find convenient and fun recreational opportunities to enhance the quality of your life.

Background

There is a long tradition of outdoor recreation in North Carolina. From the mountains to the coast, there are incredible landscapes and unique places to pursue a wide variety of outdoor recreation activities. Participation in these activities generates a large economic impact.

In recent years, statistics show that participation in outdoor recreation is increasing, particularly in the wake of COVID-19. This growth continues and can create increased economic impacts of outdoor recreation, particularly in rural locations where many of the state's outdoor recreation assets are located. There is also great potential to expose and engage people that have historically not participated in outdoor recreation activities at the same rate as others. It is important for all individuals to have the opportunity and access to enjoy recreational pursuits and benefit economically from outdoor recreation. These factors, combined with other on-going outdoor recreation initiatives across the state, make it an ideal time to critically examine how this sector can benefit local economies.

Outdoor Recreation Participation

According to the 2022 Outdoor Industry Association 'Outdoor Participation Trends Report', "outdoor participation continues to grow at record levels. More than half (54%) of Americans ages 6 and over participated in at least one outdoor activity in 2021, and the outdoor recreation participant base grew 2.2% in 2021 to 164.2M participants. This growing number of outdoor participants, however, did not fundamentally alter long-term declines in high frequency or 'core' outdoor participation."ⁱ

Studies show that approximately 56% of North Carolinians participate in some form of outdoor recreation each yearⁱⁱ. This includes more than 22.8 million visitors to North Carolina state parks in 2021 — three million more than any other year on record. Many parks, national forests, and other public recreation areas report increased visitation as well.

These numbers represent a solid base of individuals participating in outdoor recreation and contributing to associated economic activity. But there is still room to engage more individuals and continue to increase participation in outdoor recreation, particularly among populations that have not historically participated in outdoor recreation at levels comparable to others. Also, people increasingly want outdoor recreation opportunities that are convenient to where they live so they can participate on a regular basis without the need to travel long distances.^{iii iv}

Setting

Sandyfield is in Columbus County, 30 minutes east of Whiteville, the county seat, and 30 minutes west of Wilmington, the largest city in the region. The Town was incorporated in 1994 and lies right on the Bladen and Columbus County lines.

According to the US Census, Sandyfield had a population of 430 in 2020. The median age was 38.8 years of age and just over 50% of the population had a high school diploma or the equivalent in 2022^v. In 2023, 34% of the population was estimated to be employed in the civilian labor force.^{vi}

The median income in Sandyfield was estimated to be \$32,750 in 2023. It was estimated that 67% of the population had income levels below \$50,000 and almost 33% earned over \$50,000. The poverty rate was over 35% and over 57% were above the poverty rate^{vii}.

The town has a park next to the Town Hall that has playground equipment and a basketball court. The court was recently refurbished with funds from the NC Department of Commerce' Rural Community Capacity program. The work group identified a walking track around the park would be the best focus for the CORE program. Work group members viewed that a safe place to walk was important for the community, an increase in physical activity for citizens was needed, and the work group could give full attention to this need.

Existing Plan Review

To complement and build upon subsequent community planning efforts, staff assembled and reviewed other relevant plans and documents. This review provides valuable insight and helps avoid duplication or contradictions of past planning proposals. The following documents were reviewed and considered during the CORE planning process.

Southeast Economic Development Commission's Community Economic Development Strategy

Columbus County community is located within the Southeast Economic Development Commission's (SEDC) Economic Development District (EDD). The SEDC EDD's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) indicates that Outdoor Recreation is an industry cluster for growth and development. Tourism was specifically cited as "a vital component of the regional economy". SEDC's CEDS plan also encourages leverage of regional advantages around cultural and natural heritage tourism, creation of 'green infrastructure' plans and maps, and advocate for multi-modal transportation for healthy activities.^{viii}

Planning Process

Local Work Group Establishment and Involvement

The makeup of the work group was discussed with Town Administrator. Members of the work group represented a wide swath of the town from local citizens to members of the planning and parks and recreation committees. The work group actively participated in four meetings that were held from January 2025 to June 2025.

Some of the work group's responsibilities were to vet information presented, partake in activities such as SWOT analysis, and review the final Executive Summary and the Plan of Work. The work group provided sound guidance for the plan of work. The group also identified partners and resources to achieve the goals laid out in the plan of work.

SWOT Analysis

To develop a sound plan of work, the work group took a critical look at the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats in Sandyfield. Strengths and opportunities identified were:

- The town council, the planning committee and the parks and recreation committee work well together and have the town's best interests in mind.
- The town's location is within 30 minutes of Whiteville and Wilmington.
- Highway 83 and Highway 11 bridge/interchange – currently under construction.
- There is commercial/residential development potential in town.
- The East Columbus Residential Wastewater System is currently being developed.

Using the SWOT analysis, the work group began to amplify goals, strategies and actions to create a viable plan of work.

Economic Vision Statement Development

Over the course of work group meetings, the group developed an outdoor recreation vision statement. This vision statement will guide the work group, partners, and the plan of work in the incremental economic growth for outdoor recreation.

Located a stone's throw away from the Cape Fear River, Sandyfield is a tranquil place to call home. In this safe, family-oriented community, you will find convenient and fun recreational opportunities to enhance the quality of your life.

CORE Plan of Work Development

With the development of the vision statement, the work group created a strategic plan of work to pursue that vision over the next five years. This is an incremental economic development plan so that each success can build to the next success. The plan of work was created with the idea that this vision could be achieved by the work group, stakeholders and partners.

Specifically, the Plan of Work identified the following strategies and goals to pursue based on the vision statement:

Located a stone's throw away from the Cape Fear River, Sandyfield is a tranquil place to call home. In this safe, family-oriented community, you will find convenient and fun recreational opportunities to enhance the quality of your life.

- Strategy:** Sandyfield will develop convenient and fun recreational opportunities
Goal 1: Sandyfield will be known for its variety of outdoor recreation opportunities.
- Strategy:** Outdoor recreation in Sandyfield will enhance quality of life for citizens and visitors.
Goal 1: Outdoor recreation activities will sustain the quality of life in town.
- Strategy:** Outdoor recreation in Sandyfield will enhance quality of life for citizens and visitors.
Goal 1: Outdoor recreation activities will sustain the quality of life in town.

CORE Strategic Plan Adoption

Plan Review and Adoption

On August 19, 2025, the Sandyfield Creating Outdoor Recreation Economies Executive Summary and the Plan of Work were presented and adopted by the Sandyfield Town Council.

Plan Implementation, Monitoring, and Evaluation

Sandyfield will be responsible for monitoring, evaluation, and reporting accomplishments on the objectives of this plan to the Rural Economic Development Division.

Plan Implementation

A dedicated group is imperative for the success of this plan. A solid group can address the goals and objectives outlined in this plan as well as assist with attaining the potential economic impact of these strategies. The same work group that developed this plan can be tasked to advance the goals of this plan or another similar group that is representative of the community can be asked to take on this role.

The sustained presence of such a group builds ‘social capital’ within the group that improves their ability to work together and effectively address common goals. Furthermore, a dedicated group ensures continuity from the planning stage through implementation, provides accountability to ensure that objectives are being met, and allows the community to react and respond quickly when an opportunity is presented. This group should not, however, be the sole entity responsible for implementing all the goals of the plan. Instead, the group should function as a convener and point of contact to connect to other individuals, organizations, and resources to help the broader community achieve these goals. Maintaining a regular meeting schedule will also help increase the effectiveness of the group and the plan.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Regular monitoring and evaluation to review progress on the goals, objectives, and action steps in this plan will ensure it remains a viable, living document. This can be done via regular review sessions with the Town’s work group and other community stakeholders. REDD staff will periodically communicate and aid as needed to help advance the goals and document the outcomes of the plan. REDD will check back with the Town every six months to determine progress and identify needs and assistance.

Appendix

SWOT Analysis:

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Council works well together- have the town's best interests in mind	Park and Rec Committee is small – lack of resources such as staff and funding	Commercial/retail/residential	Public safety – physical safety
Park and Rec Committee – dedicated and involved Ditto for Planning Board	Lack of residents' involvement	East Columbus Residential Wastewater System – county program to serve eastern part of county	Reliance on county sheriff for policing
Location – central location – within 30 mins can get to Whiteville, Etown, Burgaw, Wilmington.	Location – have to travel to get to stores, banks, other town conveniences	Hwy 87/11 bypass	Flooding/Drainage
Hwy 87/Hwy 11 bridge/interchange is being built.	Infrastructure: Sewer Sidewalks Roads Drainage/flooding		Hog farm next to town – environmental
			Traffic – speeding through town
			Fire arm safety – shooting within town limits

ⁱ Outdoor Industry Association. 2022 Outdoor Participation Trends Report.

<https://outdoorindustry.org/resource/2022-outdoor-participation-trends-report/>

ⁱⁱ The Citizen-Times. North Carolina outdoor recreation is a \$28 billion industry, poised for further growth. October 11th, 2019. <https://www.citizen-times.com/story/news/2019/10/11/outdoor-economy-conference-asheville-highlights-28-billion-industry/3923846002/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Headwaters Economics. Recreation Counties Attracting New Residents and Higher Incomes.

<https://headwaterseconomics.org/economic-development/trends-performance/recreation-counties-attract/>

^{iv} Outdoor Foundation. 2022 Outdoor Participation Trends Report. <https://outdoorindustry.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/2022-Outdoor-Participation-Trends-Report.pdf>

^v US Census: https://data.census.gov/profile/Sandyfield_town,_North_Carolina?g=160XX00US3759135

^{vi} Ibid: <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDP5Y2023.DP03?g=160XX00US3759135>

^{vii} Ibid: [S0601: Selected Characteristics of ... - Census Bureau Table](#)

^{viii} Southeastern Economic Development Commission Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy 2022-2027: https://nmcdn.io/e186d21f8c7946a19faed23c3da2f0da/ae7e997d2b734c79be580e29ef3abfa6/files/SEDC-CEDS-2022-2027_final.pdf

Sandyfield CORE Plan of Work 2025-2030

Vision Statement

Located a stone's throw away from the Cape Fear River, Sandyfield is a tranquil place to call home. In this safe, family-oriented community, you will find convenient and fun recreational opportunities to enhance the quality of your life.

Strategy: Sandyfield will develop convenient and fun recreational opportunities

Goal 1: Sandyfield will be known for its variety of outdoor recreation opportunities.

Objective 1: Build interest and support for a variety of recreational opportunities that serve the needs of the community.

Action 1: Create a permanent work group to identify, research, implement, champion, and support outdoor recreation opportunities.

Tasks	Responsibility	In House- Outsource	Cost / Time	Partners / Assistance
1. Identify specific members of the Parks and Rec Committee and Planning Board to serve.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">CORE Work GroupTown Administrator	In house	None By August 2025	NC Rural Planning
2. Determine appropriate organizational and administrative structure for this group- how often to meet, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">CORE Work GroupTown Administrator	In House	None. By September 2025	NC Rural Planning
3. Outline roles, responsibilities, and administrative structure of group and members – how to research grants, provide data to support applications, review applications, assist town administrator to successfully submit applications that meet the needs for the community.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Permanent Work GroupTown Administrator	In House	None. By September 2025	NC Rural Planning

Strategy: Outdoor Recreation in Sandyfield will enhance quality of life for citizens and visitors.

Goal 1: Outdoor recreation activities will sustain the quality of life in town.

Objective 1: Quality of life will attract workforce and businesses to locate in Sandyfield as well as benefit local citizens.

Action 1: Cultivate private/public partnerships with shared missions/values for outdoor recreation in Sandyfield.

Tasks	Responsibility	In-House- Outsource	Cost / Time	Partners / Assistance
1. Identify potential public/private partnerships with share goals – regional businesses, local organizations, health care providers, local and county government officials.	Permanent work group	In House	None. Immediate and ongoing	Columbus County Parks and Recreation Columbus County Sheriff NC Rural Planning NC Cooperative Extension Columbus County Columbus Health Department Local civic and community groups
2. Create a presentation/pitch to outline importance of partnering with these groups and how it benefits the group as well as Sandyfield.	Permanent work group	In House	\$ Immediate and ongoing	NC Rural Planning
3. Attend meetings, events, give presentation where these potential partners attend.	Permanent work group	In House	\$ Immediate and ongoing	NC Rural Planning

Strategy: Sandyfield will develop convenient and fun recreational opportunities

Goal 1: Sandyfield will be known for its variety of outdoor recreation opportunities.

Objective 1: Build interest and support for a variety of recreational opportunities that serve the needs of the community.

Action 2: Research grant opportunities for specific outdoor recreation activities and submit applications.

Tasks	Responsibility	In House- Outsource	Cost / Time	Partners / Assistance
1. Identify and prioritize outdoor recreation activities to fund.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Permanent work committee	In House	No cost. By September 2025 and on going	NC Rural Planning Columbus County Parks and Recreation
2. Identify one grant to apply for one specific activity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Permanent work committee	In House	No cost. By January 2026 and ongoing	NC Rural Planning Columbus County Parks and Recreation

Strategy: Outdoor Recreation in Sandyfield will enhance quality of life for citizens and visitors.

Goal 1: Outdoor recreation activities will sustain the quality of life in town.

Objective 1: Quality of life will attract workforce and businesses to locate in Sandyfield as well as benefit local citizens.

Action 1: Specifically seek out outdoor recreation activities to fund and build that improve health outcomes and would be of interest to potential new residents.

Tasks	Responsibility	In-House- Outsource	Cost / Time	Partners / Assistance
1. Assign work group members (1-2) to review MSRP Funding Guide each month for appropriate funds.	Permanent work group	In House	No cost. Immediate and ongoing	Columbus County Parks and Recreation Columbus County Health Department Columbus Cooperative Extension NC Rural Planning
2. Assigned members report back to work group to determine support and start researching grant application, deadline, data needed, match requirements, other	Permanent work group	In House	No cost. Immediate and ongoing	Columbus County Parks and Recreation Columbus County Health Department Columbus Cooperative Extension NC Rural Planning
3. Create and submit application drafts to Town Administrator to update and send in on behalf of town.	Permanent work group	In House	No cost. Immediate and ongoing	Columbus County Parks and Recreation Columbus County Health Department Columbus Cooperative Extension NC Rural Planning