



# WARRENTON

## CREATING OUTDOOR RECREATION ECONOMIES

STRATEGIC PLAN

2024-2029





# Table of Contents

|   |                     |
|---|---------------------|
| Acknowledgements .....                                | 1                   |
| Executive Summary .....                               | 3                   |
| Background .....                                      | 4                   |
| Setting .....   | 5                   |
| Existing Plan Review .....                            | 8                   |
| Planning Process .....                                | 10                  |
| ○ Situational Analysis                                |                     |
| ○ Local Work Group Establishment and Involvement      |                     |
| ○ Asset Mapping                                       |                     |
| ○ Public Engagement                                   |                     |
| ○ Economic Positioning Statement & Development .....  | 13                  |
| ○ CORE Strategic Plan Adoption .....                  | 13                  |
| CORE Strategy and Implementation Plan .....           | 14                  |
| Plan Implementation, Monitoring, and Evaluation ..... | 21                  |
| Appendix .....  | (Separate Document) |

# Acknowledgments

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.



**NC DEPARTMENT  
of COMMERCE**  
RURAL ECONOMIC  
DEVELOPMENT

*Town of*  
**Warrenton**  
NORTH CAROLINA

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 is 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. The CORE strategic planning process for Warren County and the Town of Warrenton was combined for efficiency, although separate reports and implementation plans were developed.

## Warrenton Board of Commissioners

|  |               |
|--|---------------|
| Walter M. Gardner, Jr., <i>Mayor</i>       | Dian Sourelis |
| Mary Hunter, <i>Mayor Pro tem</i>          | Nat White     |
| Aaron Ayscue                               | Jason Young   |
| John Blalock                               |               |
| Michael Coffman                            |               |
| Robert Davie, Warrenton Town Administrator |               |

## **Warren County/Warrenton Outdoor Recreation Economy Planning Committee**

Dave Blodgett, *Lake Gaston Outfitters*

Kyle Burwell, *Vance-Granville Community College*

Mike Coffman, *Commissioner, Town of Warrenton*

Bonnie Fitz, *Director, Warren County Parks & Recreation*

Jereann King Blue, *Resident*

Leanne Patrick, *President, Lake Gaston Chamber of Commerce*

Robert Davie, *Administrator, Town of Warrenton*

Rose Ponton, *Community & Economic Developer, Warren County*

## **N.C. Department of Commerce, Rural Economic Development Division Staff:**

David McRae, *Appalachian Regional Commission Assistant Program Manager*

Karen C. Smith, *AICP, NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center, Rural Planning Program Manager*

Bruce Naegelen, *Community Economic Development, North Central Region*

Glen Locascio, *GIS Specialist*

Michael Dougherty, *Downtown development Specialist*

## **Plan Adoption**

Warrenton Board of Commissioners – February 12, 2024

# Executive Summary

Through CORE, the Town of Warrenton collaborated with N.C. Department of Commerce, Rural Economic Development Division staff members and local stakeholders through a strategic planning process to identify and develop outdoor recreation assets that present economic growth opportunities. Strategy development focused on leveraging outdoor recreation assets to increase tourism, encourage small business development, enhance quality of life for residents, plan for outdoor recreation asset and infrastructure development, and position communities to grow and attract outdoor gear manufacturing industries. The planning process was tailored to meet the specific needs, goals, and opportunities that local stakeholders identified.

The plan proposes strategies, goals, objectives, and actions that communities can take to increase economic vitality by leveraging outdoor recreation. For the purposes of this strategic planning program 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. Furthermore, other community assets and economic institutions that benefit from or complement the outdoor recreation economy are addressed in the plan.

The plan provides a total of 27 recommended strategies under 5 priority areas, or goals. These goals, identified by the local work group, include:

**Goal 1:** Increase Outdoor Recreation & Related Small Business Revenue by 5% Annually

**Goal 2:** Expand & Improve Publicly Owned Outdoor Recreation Amenities by Two Sites

**Goal 3:** Develop the Outdoor Recreation Goods-Producing Ecosystem

**Goal 4:** Build a Resilient & Passionate Outdoor Recreation Workforce

**Goal 5:** Develop Sustainability & Conservation Practices to Protect Natural Resources and Community Aesthetics

These recommendations will serve as guideposts for Warrenton as it considers future development efforts and will work in collaboration with other planning efforts undertaken by the county, municipalities, and related jurisdictions.

# Background

There is a long tradition of outdoor recreation in North Carolina. From the mountains to the coast and everywhere in between 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. Continued growth in participation leads to the opportunity for the increased economic impact of outdoor recreation, particularly in rural locations where many of the state's outdoor recreation assets are located. Also, there is 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 to have an opportunity to benefit economically from outdoor recreation. These factors, combined with other on-going outdoor recreation initiatives across the state, make it an ideal time to think critically about how this sector can continue to be leveraged to benefit local economies.

## Economic Impact

Outdoor recreation activity and associated expenditures generate a large economic impact. This is a broad economic sector that comprises a diverse range of industries including manufacturing, retail, arts, entertainment, and recreation, as well as many supporting activities such as construction, travel and tourism, accommodation, and food service and many more.

According to the U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of Economic Analysis' Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, nationwide, in 2022, the outdoor recreation economy represented \$563.7 billion in current-dollar gross domestic product (GDP), or 2.2 percent of the United States' total GDP. The outdoor recreation sector of the economy is growing at a faster rate than the overall economy. "Inflation-adjusted ("real") GDP for the outdoor recreation economy increased 4.8 percent in 2022, compared with a 1.9 percent increase for the overall U.S. economy, reflecting a deceleration from the increase in outdoor recreation of 22.7 percent in 2021. Real gross output for the outdoor recreation economy increased 7.5 percent, while outdoor recreation compensation increased 9.1 percent, and employment increased 7.4 percent (national table 9)." Employment in the outdoor recreation industry increased in all 50 states during 2022.

At the state level, outdoor recreation contributed \$14.5 billion in total value-added economic impact to North Carolina's GDP. North Carolina ranked as the 11<sup>th</sup> highest state in "Value-Added Outdoor Recreation in Total outdoor recreation activities" in 2022. This included employment for over 146,000 individuals that resulted in over \$6.8 billion in total compensation. Employment in key industries within the outdoor recreation sector includes

over 7,600 in manufacturing, 51,000 in retail, 27,000 in accommodation and food service, and over 29,000 in arts, entertainment, and recreation.<sup>1</sup>

## 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.”<sup>2</sup>

Studies show that approximately 56% of North Carolinians participate in some form of outdoor recreation each year<sup>3</sup>. 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.<sup>4 5</sup>

## Setting

The Town of Warrenton, located in the north-central part of North Carolina, serves as the county seat of Warren County. Though the area that is currently identified as Warren County was settled in the 1730's, it wasn't until 1779 that a state bill was passed dividing Bute County into Warren and Franklin Counties. This act of creating Warren County followed the creation of a town plan charted on the plantation of Thomas Christmas. The town plan consisted of a street grid centered on a site dedicated to the county courthouse square. The original plan is evident

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis. Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, U.S. and States, 2022. <https://www.bea.gov/data/special-topics/outdoor-recreation>

<sup>2</sup> Outdoor Industry Association. 2022 Outdoor Participation Trends Report. <https://outdoorindustry.org/resource/2022-outdoor-participation-trends-report/>

<sup>3</sup> 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/>

<sup>4</sup> Headwaters Economics. Recreation Counties Attracting New Residents and Higher Incomes. <https://headwaterseconomics.org/economic-development/trends-performance/recreation-counties-attract/>

<sup>5</sup> Outdoor Foundation. 2022 Outdoor Participation Trends Report. <https://outdoorindustry.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/2022-Outdoor-Participation-Trends-Report.pdf>

still today marked by Main Street, Front Street, Bragg Street and the cross streets of Macon, Church, and Franklin.<sup>6</sup>

Warren County was named in honor of an American Revolutionary War Patriot General Joseph Warren who lost his life in 1775 at the battle of Bunker Hill in Charlestown, Massachusetts.<sup>7</sup>

Founded in 1779 and one of the oldest municipalities in North Carolina, Warrenton was originally settled and developed for agricultural purposes. The Town covers approximately 0.9 square miles within its town limits and is centered around the intersection of Highways US 401 and US 158. While the presence of important natural resources in and around the Town is limited, Warrenton has an abundance of historic and cultural resources including numerous homes constructed in the 1800s and 1900s which are still in use today and lying within a nationally designated Historic District.<sup>8</sup>

Warrenton is a relatively small rural town, with a population of 851<sup>9</sup> in the 2020 Census. Between 2010 and 2020, Warrenton experienced a slight loss in population, but appears to be poised for a net increase over the next five years. The nearest large population center is the city of Henderson, about 17 miles to the southeast.

While urban development is concentrated in a few areas, Warrenton has begun to experience organic, commercial growth through improvements to the downtown district. There is a recognition that significant population growth in Raleigh and Durham will eventually spread to the north. Warrenton, Macon, and Norlina, as well as Warren County have begun to experience investment both in commercial and residential rehabilitation projects. Additionally, lake-related development in northern Warren County continues to expand despite the lack of municipal infrastructure such as sewer and water service.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Warrenton Downtown Streetscape Master Plan Report, Town History, Page 7, January 4, 2017

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> 2022 Certified Municipal Population Estimates, <https://www.osbm.nc.gov/facts-figures/population-demographics/state-demographer/municipal-population-estimates>

<sup>10</sup> Warren County Comprehensive Development Plan 2022



## Economic Impact – Visitor Spending Warren County

Warren County ranked third (\$63M) in the region for Visitor Spending<sup>11</sup> in 2021. That's behind Nash (\$301M) and Halifax (\$119) counties and ahead of Vance (\$59M) and Franklin (\$35M).

The breakdown includes Lodging: \$15.75M (*includes 2<sup>nd</sup> home spending*); Food & Beverage: \$18.52M; Recreation: \$9.41M; Retail: \$5.64M; and Transport: \$13.70M (*includes ground and air transportation*). Airbnb shared a breakdown of total Host income in rural NC counties, and in Warren County the approximate income was \$2,292,000.

## Demographics<sup>12</sup> – Warrenton

The population in this area is estimated to have changed from 851 to 892, resulting in a growth of 1.77% between 2020 and 2023. Over the next five years, the population is projected to contract by -0.34%. The median age is 48.3. Five years from now the median age is projected to be 50.7.

Of this area's current year estimated population, 62.4% are Black or African American, 27.0% are White, 1.5% are American Indian, 6.5% are Hispanic and 0.1% are Asian.

Currently, it's estimated that 48.4% of the population aged 25+ have a high school diploma or equivalent. 18.5% have some college, but no degree. 7.0% have an associate degree. 9.5% have earned a bachelor's degree and 3.3% have a graduate or professional degree.

Per capita income is \$32,706 and projected to increase to \$38,225 over the next five years. Median household income \$37,490 in the current year and projected to increase to \$42,847 over the next five years. Average household income is estimated to be \$65,948 in the current year and is projected to increase to \$75,617 over the next five years. Median disposable income for the current year is \$32,511 and Average disposable income is \$51,560.

Employment status for the civilian population age 16 and over is 91.8% with an unemployment rate of 8.2%.<sup>13</sup>

Retail Snapshot<sup>14</sup> shows a Total Retail Gap of \$37,876,506 within the 20-minute drive-time from downtown Warrenton. The retail gap shows potential category opportunities for Limited and Full-Service Restaurants, Home Centers, Family Clothing Stores, Gift, Novelty, and Souvenir Stores, and Furniture Stores. The complete Retail Analysis can be found in the Appendix.

<sup>11</sup> VisitNC Data 2021

<sup>12</sup> Esri Community Profile - Forecasts for 2023 and 2028 US Census Bureau 2000 and 2010 decennial Census data converted by Esri into 2020 geography

<sup>13</sup> Esri forecasts for 2023 and 2028. U.S. Census Bureau 2000 and 2010 decennial Census data converted by Esri into 2020 geography November 2023

<sup>14</sup> Claritas, LLC 2023 – 15-mile center from 206 Shaver Rd. Warrenton NC

## Existing Plans 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.

### Warrenton Comprehensive Plan 2022

Two of the four goals in the 2022 Warrenton Comprehensive Plan relate to Outdoor Recreation.

*Goal 1 – Greenways and Parks* – notes that hiking and biking trails are part of the Comprehensive Plan, and that collaboration is important when planning for greenways and parks to insure continuity. *Goal 3 – Retail/Economic Development* – Refers to one of Warrenton’s major attractions is its preservation of existing historic homes and other historic sites. The goal also notes that the downtown area is experiencing the revitalization and use of existing buildings for restaurants, breweries, and other retail establishments. Warrenton’s tree canopies were also referenced as important attributes in the town’s identity. While not directly related to Outdoor Recreation itself, these are some of the adjacent activities that help create the *economy* of Outdoor Recreation in a community.

### Warrenton Downtown Streetscape Master Plan 2017

The Downtown Master Plan identified nine goals,<sup>15</sup> one of which ties directly with Outdoor Recreation and three others that would have a direct impact on an improved economy.

*Goal 5 – Provide multiple forms of access through downtown for bicycles and pedestrians* – suggests development of an internal exercise biking loop and connecting it with the State Bike Route (4) currently running along Ridgeway Street (401) and continuing down North Main Street away from downtown.<sup>16</sup> Goals 2, 3 and 7 are important to provide a strong outdoor recreation economy in Warrenton. *Goal 2 – Create an interesting and inviting destination to attract regional visitors; Goal 3 – Create a space that will extend activity hours downtown; Goal 7 – Create a fabric of improvements that encourage redevelopment and expansion of the downtown.*

### Warrenton Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan 2020

The Town completed a Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan in 2020 to provide guidance in developing improvements to its bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure, programs, and policies. The plan was developed in consideration of the Town’s vision and goals for making Warrenton a more walkable and bicycle-friendly place that matched its friendly, diverse, charming, and

<sup>15</sup> *Downtown Streetscape Master Plan, 2017, Executive Summary, page 9*

<sup>16</sup> *Downtown Streetscape Master Plan, 2017, Executive Summary, page 5 and Analysis Process, page 23.*

economically vibrant character. Two of the plan’s Goals and Objectives<sup>17</sup> relate specifically to Outdoor Recreation: *Goal 1 – Plan for interconnected, safe, pedestrian and bicycle networks;* and *Goal 3 – Support the Town as a destination for bicycling and walking.*

### **Kerr-Tar Council of Governments Community Economic Development Strategy**

Warrenton is located within the Kerr Economic Development District (EDD). The Kerr-Tar Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) identified “Enhance Recreational Assets” as one of nine regional strategies. Recommendations include, creating a regional inventory of all recreational venues and activities; marketing identified opportunities to private developers who operate in the recreational sector; and identify funding sources to support public-led initiatives. The CEDS also identifies “Promoting Small Business/Entrepreneurial Development” as another strategy, which coincides with one of the goals of this plan.

### **Warren County 2021-2024 Strategic Plan**

Warren County’s vision is of “*a diverse, thriving, rural community known for our creative, sustainable economic revitalization.*” The Strategic Plan’s strategies provide a basis for developing Outdoor Recreation as an economic driver: Enhancing Warren’s County’s distinctive economic development assets; Building out the entrepreneur ecosystem; Capitalizing on opportunities to enhance downtown revitalization, and heritage tourism; Advancing agriculture through tourism, farmers markets and events; and complete 50% of Recreation Master Plan by 2024.

### **Warren County Recreation Master Plan (2018)**

The Parks & Recreation Department owns and maintains 179 acres of parkland throughout the County. The County recently acquired a 45-acre parcel adjacent to the Recreation Complex with the intention of developing it for recreational use. There are 3,235 acres of parkland in Warren County that is not owned by the County. Ownership of other park areas includes Town of Norlina, Town of Warrenton, and North Carolina State Parks. Kerr Lake and Lake Gaston are notable recreational features in Warren County. At Kerr Lake the reservoir is managed by the Army Corps of Engineers, and North Carolina State Parks manages campsites and boat access on the banks. Lake Gaston is maintained and owned by Dominion Energy, a private hydroelectric company that maintains the reservoir for energy generation and flood control. Warren County’s Buck Springs Park has a pier that provides fishing access to Lake Gaston, but there is no publicly maintained boat access to the lake in Warren County. There is recreational boat access to the lake through private marinas and private residences.

<sup>17</sup> *Town of Warrenton Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan 2020, Introduction 1.2 Project Goals and Objectives, page 3*

Recommendations in the 2018 Master Plan include Parkland Goal #3 “Plan for development of future parkland, trails and facilities,” and Programming Goal #3 is to “Expand programming to encourage recreational tourism in Warren County.”

### **Warren County Comprehensive Plan 2022**

Six of the eight goals identified in Warren County’s Comprehensive Plan relate to Outdoor Recreation. The goals call for building capacity for new economic opportunities including investment in infrastructure; Stimulating development of new housing with focus on affordable and workforce housing options; Providing equitable opportunities to enjoy an active lifestyle; Promoting the arts, cultural activities, and heritage tourism; and, prioritizing a safe and interconnected transportation system, including greenways and bicycle facilities. Specific recommendations are found in sections devoted to Economic Development & Agriculture; Cultural & Natural Resources; Parks, Recreation & Tourism; and Land Use & Housing.

## **Planning Process**

Under the REDD, MS&RP Center staff facilitates the CORE strategic planning process with participation from the local government and an established local work group. This work group is comprised of individuals who have a vested interest in leveraging outdoor recreation to enhance economic development. The planning process employs established planning methods, including presenting economic and associated data, asset mapping, economic driver identification, SWOT analysis, stakeholder interviews, business questionnaires, local work group discussions, and more. The planning process was tailored to meet the specific needs, goals, and opportunities that local stakeholders identified.

### **Situational Analysis**

REDD Staff met with Robert Davie, Warrenton’s Town Administrator following receipt of an initial application for participation in the *Creating Outdoor Recreation Economies (CORE)* on November 14, 2022. A Memorandum Of Understanding (MOU) and Resolution for the Warrenton CORE Strategic Plan was developed by REDD staff and adopted by the Warrenton Board of Commissioners at their meeting on February 14, 2023. REDD staff was given a guided tour of Warren County with driving tours of Macon, Norlina, and a self-guided walking tour of Warrenton.



## Local Work Group Establishment and Involvement

Community members with an interest in Outdoor Recreation were asked to participate in the local work group. Beginning in March 2023, the Rural Planning team met with the local work group for a series of four sessions to gather and share information and share ideas. The local work group was comprised of business owners, residents, staff from Vance-Granville Community College, Warren County Parks & Recreation, Warren County Economic Development, Warrenton's Town Administrator, and a Town Commissioner. During these sessions the work group reviewed data collected by REDD staff, completed a Work Group survey, SWOT analysis, economic positioning statement and established goals and strategies for the Implementation Plan.

The local work group will be encouraged to remain as a unit to assist the Town, County, and other municipalities to implement the strategic plan. The Town of Warrenton and the County are encouraged to adopt the work group as a standing or ad hoc committee of the Warren County Economic Development Commission.

## Asset Mapping

The Warrenton Outdoor Recreation Asset map highlights publicly controlled properties in Warrenton at the Federal, State, and local levels, as well as major trails and waterways.



## Public Engagement

We used an online survey to receive input from our CORE Work Group, described above, as well as four 2-hour meetings to develop the economic positioning statement and develop strategies. Additionally, a county-wide Stakeholder Breakfast event was held on September 26, 2023, at Buck Springs Plantation to receive feedback on recommended Strategies, Objectives and Actions. There were sixteen people in attendance. An online Stakeholder questionnaire was developed for all invitees with fifteen respondents. The results from the questionnaire will be helpful to EDC staff as they continue to work to strengthen existing businesses and to implement the recommendations. The results from the online stakeholder survey and notes from the Stakeholder Breakfast are included in the Appendix.

Two takeaways from the questionnaire and event include:

- 73% responded to the online questionnaire that local government should invest more local funding into building and supporting the outdoor recreation industry.
- “Vote with Your Dollars” at the Stakeholder Breakfast results



# Economic Positioning Statement

A community economic positioning/vision statement provides a forward-looking strategic framework to help guide local government and the community make disciplined, tactical, and incremental decisions on community issues as they arise. The local work group was led through an exercise to develop an Outdoor Recreation Economic Positioning Statement for Warren County.

The CORE work group met several times to develop the proposed economic positioning statement, first by creating individual statements, identifying key words, phrases, and developing a draft statement. A final statement was crafted by the group during its last working meeting, and the Warren County Board of Commissioners adopted the statement on January 8, 2024. This is the adopted statement:

**With nationally recognized year-round outdoor recreation opportunities, Warren County's scenic farmland, clear waters, and open skies have set the scene for generations of memory-making experiences for residents and visitors. Vibrant and welcoming, Warren County is a place for people of all backgrounds to stretch their legs and celebrate their connection to the landscape in a thriving, rural community.**

## Plan Review and Adoption

The Warrenton CORE Strategic & Implementation Plan was reviewed by work group members in late January 2024 and recommended for adoption. The Warrenton Board of Commissioners received the report and presentation by REDD staff during their regular meeting on February 12, 2024. By unanimous vote, the plan was adopted] by the Board of Commissioners.

# Warrenton CORE Implementation Plan

## Outdoor Recreation Economic Positioning Vision

*With nationally recognized year-round outdoor recreation opportunities, Warren County's scenic farmland, clear waters, and open skies have set the scene for generations of memory-making experiences for residents and visitors. Vibrant and welcoming, Warren County is a place for people of all backgrounds to stretch their legs and celebrate their connection to the landscape in a thriving, rural community.*

**Goal 1:** Increase outdoor recreation and related small business revenue by 5%

**Goal 2:** Expand publicly owned outdoor recreation amenities by two sites

**Goal 3:** Develop the county's outdoor goods-producing industry

**Goal 4:** Build a resilient and passionate outdoor recreation workforce

**Goal 5:** Develop sustainability and conservation practices to protect natural resources and community aesthetic

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## Goal 1: Increase outdoor recreation and related small business revenue by 5% annually

### Strategy 1.1: Extend the traditional outdoor recreation season beyond May-September

**Objective** - encourage new events during October-April "off-season"

Action - identify and gather current festival/event organizers to encourage and brainstorm expanded events calendar

Action - create events to take advantage of the upcoming 250th anniversary of the United States of America (2026) - i.e., historic tours, etc.

Action – Create events to celebrate Town of Warrenton's 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2029

### Strategy 1.2: Improve resident engagement and participation in outdoor activities

**Objective** - encourage civic groups, senior centers, etc. to promote & utilize county outdoor recreation opportunities in partnership with Warren County Parks and Recreation and local outdoor recreation-oriented businesses

Action - Form task force with local and regional partners to identify and increase youth outdoor recreation opportunities



Action – Research and engage with existing outdoor youth organizations such as NC Youth Outdoor Engagement Commission, Need More Outdoors, Great Outdoors University, Great Trails NC, North Carolina Interscholastic Cycling Club

**Strategy 1.3: Improve economic impacts of existing in-town and town-sponsored festivals, cultural & historical events, and tours by 5% annually; and incorporate elements of outdoor recreation as appropriate**

***Objective - Evaluate Current Economic Impacts***

Action - generate list of outdoor recreation opportunities to incorporate into festivals/events

Action - coordinate with organizers to inventory all county events/festivals & create master calendar

Action - establish baseline attendance & current economic impacts

***Objective - Improve Event Impacts***

Action - encourage organizers to develop growth strategies for each event/festival

Action - review impacts annually to determine which strategies are effective

**Strategy 1.4: Coordinate with the county's marketing plan to include outdoor recreation brand identity**

***Objective - Determine & promote outdoor recreation brand identity priorities***

Action – Work with and support County and participate in the Outdoor Recreation Work Group - with representation from across the county, municipalities, & outdoor recreation sectors - to draft request for qualifications (RFQ)

Action – Support County efforts with a marketing firm with experience in rural outdoor recreation to determine outdoor rec marketing strategy and build out digital content on website, social media

**Strategy 1.5: Support development of Warren County Tourism Development Authority (TDA)**

Action - craft framework

Action - establish mini-grant program for marketing and promotion of events

**Strategy 1.6: Increase travel-related expenditures revenue by 10% annually**

***Objective - Reimagine access to Warrenton's rich history through increased promotion, utilization, & protection***

Action – Promote Preservation Warrenton Walking Tour (self-guided/guided tours)

Action - Establish an annual Warrenton Homes Tour

Action - Establish baseline visitor count for each historical or cultural asset

Action - Create itineraries, activities, & tours to promote & expand reach of historic and cultural landmarks *Partner: VisitNC, VisitNC Farms App*

Action - Convert all existing walking and driving tour itineraries to online or app-based self-guided tours (with built-in user data gathering analytics)  
Resource: <https://pocketsights.com>

**Strategy 1.7: Increase short-term rental revenue by 3% annually**

**Objective** - Encourage & recruit short-term lodging

Action – Work with County TDA to promote B&B, Airbnb hosting

Action - Support and promote non-traditional short-term lodging opportunities such as RV campgrounds, and bed & breakfasts

**Strategy 1.8: Facilitate outdoor recreation activities in partnership among local businesses, the Warren County School system, and early childhood businesses**

**Goal 2: Expand & improve publicly owned outdoor recreation amenities by two sites**

**Strategy 2.1: Expand mountain biking and walking trails by 20+ miles**

**Objective:** Support county in identifying 250+ acres to develop 25+ miles mountain bike and/or hiking trails to become trail destination

Action - Establish relationships with state agencies, land trusts, and Homeowners Associations (HOAs) to determine opportunities for hiking and biking trail partnerships

Action - Develop relationship with trail building groups such as Triangle Off Road Cyclists (TORC) & partner to build out trails (e.g. Buck Spring Park, Medoc Mountain State Park)

Action – Support state grant (\$67M) for County Greenway & Trails Initiative linking Warrenton, Norlina, and Macon by trail/greenway – (see Strategy 2.3)

**Objective:** Support Expansion of Buck Spring Park facilities

Action - Create map of hiking & mountain bike trails for signage and website; edit as trail system expands

Action - Determine parcel & funding for pump/skills track

Action - Determine opportunities for bike and kayak rental kiosks through private/public partnership

**Strategy 2.2: Advocate for the expansion of allowable outdoor recreation activities within state game lands**

**Objective:** Determine best practice to encourage utilization of NC Wildlife Resources (WRC) game lands for outdoor recreation (i.e., hiking, mountain biking, birdwatching) particularly for game lands closest to Warrenton

Action - Engage with WRC to negotiate additional uses and user groups to assist with advocacy

Action - Partner with state agencies to improve signage and access to game lands to encourage multiple uses

Action - Encourage context sensitive design of development near game lands & habitat enhancement projects in game lands

### **Strategy 2.3: Develop Trails, Greenway, Park Space and Trail Opportunities in Town Limits**

Objective: Expansion of trails and greenways by 25% by 2028

Action - Identify existing locations throughout town

Action – Coordinate with County greenway / trail planning

Action – Acquire and develop approximately 11 acres for the Warrenton Nature Trail to include a half-mile walking trail, and bird-watching area in-town.

Action – Plan for expansion/improvement of existing parks (i.e., Hayley-Haywood Park)

Action – Identify preferred route of greenways in town to connect to existing/future county/state greenways

Action – Work with developers, homeowners, and other property owners to dedicate property for greenway easements/development<sup>18</sup>

Action - Identify & pursue funding opportunities (NC Cultural Resources/PARTF)

### **Strategy 2.4: Continue to grow Warren County Parks & Recreation outdoor recreation programming and facilities**

**Objective:** *Increase awareness and community use of Parks & Recreation facilities*

Action – Support County marketing to build awareness regarding benefits of and proximity to outdoor recreation & applicable programming for town residents

**Objective:** *Improve facilities to encourage use*

Action - Plan for development of future parkland, trails, and facilities

Action - Allocate budget for capital improvements

Action - Upgrade safety & access, amenities

Action - Engage in placemaking by unifying signage, site furnishings, and materials throughout park system

Action - Identify and budget for continued park system maintenance

### **Strategy 2.5: Support development of the county-owned community facility and farmers market at 429 W Ridgeway St in Warrenton**

**Objective:** *Increase walking and biking destinations for residents*

Action: Promote family-centered outdoor walking, biking, and playground activities with access to locally grown produce, arts, and crafts

Action: Plan local Fun Days, dances, and agricultural-themed activities

Action: Coordinate special events with County officials

<sup>18</sup> Warrenton Comprehensive Plan 2022, Goal 1- Greenways and Parks

### **Goal 3: Develop the outdoor recreation goods-producing ecosystem**

**Strategy 3.1: Increase outdoor recreation business development opportunities by 2 activities per year in partnership with RTP, VGCC Small Business Center and other entrepreneurial activities**

Action - Promote customized training and upskilling resources to local employers

Action - Encourage recruitment of restaurants, breweries/distilleries, outdoor recreation related retail and services

Action - Support and encourage expanded agribusiness opportunities such as hydroponics and aquaponics with programs and policies that center family farms, local food producers, & sustainability

**Strategy 3.2: Support and assist a Business Retention & Expansion (BRE) program for Warren County with a measurable focus on outdoor recreation-related businesses**

Action - Coordinate with local small business resource providers to educate business owners about outdoor recreation opportunities and coordinate product or service expansion that meets both existing and future outdoor recreation economy needs

**Strategy 3.3: Support conducting a county-wide industry cluster inventory and analysis, as well as a supply chain map for the outdoor recreation industry**

**Strategy 3.4: Support the expansion and attraction of outdoor recreation manufacturing companies**

**Strategy 3.5: Target outdoor recreation goods-producing industries in the local economic development incentive policy**

**Strategy 3.6: Explore alternative financing options and small business services and educational programming**

Action – Review Town’s existing revolving loan fund and encourage focus on Outdoor Recreation-related businesses

### **Goal 4: Build a resilient and passionate outdoor recreation workforce**

**Strategy 4.1: Partner with VGCC to support the expansion of industry-specific workforce development training programs (hard and soft skills)**

**Strategy 4.2: Market VGCC customized training and apprenticeship programs**

**Strategy 4.3: Work with local businesses to advocate for and support increased goods-producing average weekly wages by \$300**

**Strategy 4.4: Work with local businesses to advocate for and support increased service-producing average weekly wages by \$200**



**Strategy 4.5: Facilitate educational opportunities for K-12 students and workforce pipeline about outdoor recreation career and employment options in Warren County**

Action – Support and assist County strategies above as appropriate

**Goal 5: Develop sustainability and conservation practices to protect natural resources and community aesthetic**

**Strategy 5.1: Educate and promote land management practices that advance the dual purpose of environmental sustainability and recreational opportunities; with an aim to sustain peoples’ connection with nature and enhance human health outcomes. Coordinate efforts with the County as feasible**

Action: Identify strategic tracts of land that will advance conservation goals and can also be used for sustainable recreation opportunities.

Action: Incorporate/promote “Leave No Trace” principles and educate residents and visitors about these practices. This overall objective can also be connected to the idea of “preserving rural and working landscapes.” Also there could be a connection between this, farmland preservation, agritourism, etc.

Action: Quantify the economic benefit of greenspaces, forest, and working lands on the local economy

- Build data that promotes and illustrates link between recreation and conservation

Action: Increase education regarding conservation, sustainability, and Leave No Trace principles.

- Create messages for local schools, visitors, and outdoor recreation users

Action: Engage youth and other “non-traditional” participants to encourage more individuals/residents to understand the benefits of outdoor recreation and access to nature.

**Strategy 5.2: Examine land use policies and promote conservation-oriented development and sustainable best practices in recreational facility design and construction**

Action: Review development ordinances (zoning ordinance; subdivision ordinance) to ensure that they provide a regulatory structure that advances the recreational, sustainability, and resiliency goals of Warrenton

Action: Support implementation of recommendations of the Warren County Comprehensive Development Plan (2022) that promote sustainability and conservation.

Action: Utilize sustainable best practice guidelines when building and maintaining recreational infrastructure (trails, trailheads, water access, facilities, etc.).

- Ex. Required percentage of open space and/or recreational area/greenway easement dedication for all new major subdivisions. Conservation subdivision standards adopted.

Action: Encourage municipalities to seek designations such as “Tree City USA” to create formal/measurable objectives.

**Strategy 5.3: Work to identify challenges posed by severe weather to outdoor recreation destinations and the related business ecosystem, and formulate rapid-response business and facilities assistance framework**

Action - Research federal and state disaster resources and prepare readiness information for local businesses and parks and recreation facilities

# Plan Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation

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

## Plan Implementation

Maintaining a dedicated group to follow through after the planning process to begin addressing goals and objectives outlined in this plan is critical to attaining the potential economic impact of these strategies. This could be the same work group that helped develop this plan, or another similar group that is representative of the community and can advance the goals of this plan.

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 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. But this group should not 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 entirety of the plan.

## Monitoring and Evaluation

We recommend that six (6) months after the implementation Plan is adopted the Town Board receive a progress update from the Town Administrator.

If the Town would like the NC Commerce Rural Planning Center to aid or provide guidance in the implementation of any of the recommendations, the Town Administrator should direct that request in writing (e-mail) to the Community Economic Development Planner for the North Central Prosperity Zone or to the Main Street & Rural Planning Center.

After a specified period, 6 months to 1 year, the Planner and town will determine if the town might benefit from other asset-based, local economic development technical assistance. On the 1-year anniversary of adoption of the Assessment and Recommendations, the Planner will conduct a review of the Town’s progress and results.

If the Goals need revisions or adjustments the Plan should be amended by the Town. These amendments should also be adopted by the Town Commissioners.

We suggest that the easiest recommendations be addressed first and accomplished. The more difficult items will take some persistence, time, and working together by the person(s) or groups responsible identified in for each of the items.

# Appendix

*This is a separate document*