

Columbia, North Carolina



	Columbia
Population (2000)	820
Municipal budget (2006)	\$1.2 million ²⁹
Per capita income (2000)	\$12,220
Median household income (2000)	\$20,590
Poverty rate (2000)	34%
Minority population (2000)	61%
Proximity to urban center	78 miles to Greenville, N.C.
Proximity to interstate highway	98 miles
Strategic approach	Tourism
Time frame	1991-2007

Columbia’s strategy is to attract investment into the community through ecotourism. Before ecotourism was popular, Columbia’s leaders and residents decided to embrace their natural assets – many of which are federally protected – to create new jobs. In 1993, former town manager J.D. Brickhouse convinced local officials in the surrounding counties to join together in the Partnership for the Sounds, a nonprofit organization designed to facilitate regional collaboration around ecotourism and to prevent the counties and municipalities from competing over limited grant funding. Through this innovative partnership, Columbia has received funding for and built a downtown boardwalk, a visitors center and a 4-H environmental education center, each of which draws tourism. Today, Columbia is a destination for travelers seeking a pristine getaway on North Carolina’s coast.

The community and its history

The town of Columbia, located in the Albemarle-Pamlico region of eastern North Carolina, was founded in 1793. Throughout the 1800s and early 1900s, the timber industry prospered around Columbia from the rich, Scuppernong River-fed groves of cypress and juniper. The town’s economy also was buoyed by corn, rice and cotton plantations. But after reaching a peak population of 1,100 in 1950, Columbia began a slow, steady decline in both population and economic vitality. The 2000 census documented a poverty rate of more than 30 percent.

The ecotourism strategy in Columbia is characterized by an innovative approach to governance and dogged protection of natural resources. By collaborating with surrounding counties, the town has financed and built a downtown boardwalk, a 4-H environmental education center and a visitors center – each of which is attracting new tourist dollars.

²⁹ Interview with Rhett White, Columbia town manager, May 22, 2007.

In the late 1970s, local officials began to aggressively recruit new businesses. The town was negotiating with an international aircraft manufacturer to relocate to Tyrrell County when, in October 1988, Congress modified an obscure requirement relating to the interest rate on industrial revenue bonds. The project fell through, and the town's hopes for luring a manufacturer were dashed. "I was devastated," said Brickhouse, the former town manager. "Our community had so many high expectations, and it all fell through."

After this setback, the town manager received funding through the Coastal Area Management Act to develop a comprehensive community plan. The plan, which became known as *Columbia 2000*, relied on a combination of community meetings and household surveys. It was released in 1990. During the planning process, participating residents and survey respondents expressed a strong desire to focus on a few major projects: downtown renovation, construction of a visitors center and a riverfront boardwalk. Ecotourism, then a new concept, became the centerpiece of Columbia's economic development strategy. "Ecotourism meant a rejection of certain types of economic development," said Rhett White, the current town manager. "We rejected taking advantage of our natural environment and instead saw the potential to develop an economy around a pristine environment."

The strategy

Columbia's strategy is to join with its neighbors in the Albemarle-Pamlico region to promote a regional ecotourism economy. Shortly after the *Columbia 2000* planning process, Brickhouse met with representatives from various state agencies to explore funding options for local ecotourism projects. During a meeting with a former official with the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources, Brickhouse learned that other communities around Columbia were interested in pursuing a similar economic development approach. In fact, communities from across the Albemarle-Pamlico region were independently lobbying state legislators for ecotourism-related finance.

In 1991, Brickhouse initiated meetings with colleagues from Tyrrell, Hyde and Beaufort counties. Their idea, which developed over time, was to work together in promoting sustainable economic development. Ultimately, they decided to create a regional nonprofit organization, the Partnership for the Sounds, in 1993. Through the partnership, counties and towns throughout the Albemarle-Pamlico region would apply collectively for funding, instead of competing with each other for scarce grant dollars. The goal of the partnership was to develop ecotourism-related facilities that each community envisioned and then mold these facilities into a cooperative network.³⁰

The second part of Columbia's strategy is to use innovative land-transfer arrangements to preserve land around town. Obviously, the land and other natural assets around Columbia form the basis of its ecotourism strategy. Beginning in the early 1990s, Brickhouse initiated

³⁰ Partnership for the Sounds website, www.partnershipforthesounds.org/pdfs_mission.htm.

several partnerships with government agencies and nonprofit groups to purchase land around Columbia. Locking up land, however, also meant a loss of potential property tax revenues. In one case, the North Carolina Department of Transportation (N.C. DOT) wanted to purchase the 10,000-acre Palmetto Peartree Preserve near Columbia and turn it into a wetland bank.³¹ Since this would pull the land off the tax rolls, Brickhouse partnered with the Conservation Fund to explore the possibility of an alternative land ownership agreement. In an innovative arrangement, the fund purchased the property and allowed N.C. DOT to use some of the land as a wetland bank.³¹ In exchange, N.C. DOT and the Conservation Fund agreed to contribute toward a special endowment set up for the parcel. Revenue from N.C. DOT's use of the property and from the fund's sustainable harvesting of the property's forest is used to pay the local property taxes. The ownership agreement has been a win-win, giving Columbia additional protected land and tax revenue.

Columbia's next priority was to revisit the community's vision for a visitors center and boardwalk. Working through the Partnership for the Sounds, Columbia received a \$1 million grant from N.C. DOT to construct a new visitors center at the main entrance into town. While the center was under construction in 1994, Columbia set out to build an adjoining boardwalk along the Scuppernon River and into the cypress swamps near downtown. The Conservation Fund provided the lumber for the project by harvesting timber from the nearby Palmetto Preserve. With help from the local Youth Corps, Columbia's mile-long boardwalk and visitors center opened in 1995. On average, the visitors center welcomes 400,000 people a year, a significant jump from previous tourism figures. In 2001, Columbia also became home to a new \$10 million 4-H environmental education center, complete with a 250-seat meeting room, four dining areas and two hotel-style executive lodges.

Local officials estimate that more than 100 jobs have been created in Columbia as a result of the ecotourism strategy, a handsome figure in a town of fewer than 800 people. Since 1990, the town has generated over \$15 million in grant funding for ecotourism related projects.

What are the lessons from this story?

Economic development must be guided by a broadly held local vision. Columbia 2000 was a comprehensive planning process that relied on participation from the whole community. The result was a vision of what residents wanted to see their small town become. "Many economic development efforts fail because they do not come from local knowledge," said Mikki Sager of the Conservation Fund. "A lot of small communities end up with what they have because someone from outside tells them what they need. No local buy-in, or success, is going to happen with that."

³¹ A wetland bank is a system in which development impacts are mitigated by creating credits and selling them to third parties. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, "mitigation banking means the restoration, creation, enhancement and, in exceptional circumstances, preservation of wetlands and/or other aquatic resources expressly for the purpose of providing compensatory mitigation in advance of authorized impacts to similar resources."

Unique local assets can become economic drivers. Columbia's leaders and residents recognized that the natural beauty of the area was an asset that could drive an ecotourism strategy for economic development. Part of Columbia's success with ecotourism comes from the clear local mandate that residents wanted to see their natural surroundings protected.

Local economic development can be strengthened by forming regional partnerships. Through meetings with the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources, Columbia discovered that neighbors from Hyde and Beaufort counties were interested in pursuing similar ecotourism-related projects. Rather than see these counties as intra-regional competitors, Columbia sought regional collaboration. Small towns thus were able to pool resources and ideas. Moreover, ecotourism should – by nature – be a regional strategy because a collection of towns and counties has more to offer visitors than does a single municipality.

Innovative local governance can strengthen a community's economic development efforts. Columbia's ability to design an alternative arrangement for generating tax revenues on protected lands helped turn a potential obstacle to ecotourism into an example of innovative local governance.

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