



Scotland Neck, North Carolina

Strong mayoral leadership spurs this small town to implement new strategies for addressing old challenges. Scotland Neck helps its small businesses to attract tourists and attracts new industries that can employ the local workforce.

	Scotland Neck
Population (2000)	2,400
Municipal budget (2006)	\$5 million ⁵³
Per capita income (2000)	\$13,000
Median household income (2000)	\$21,000
Poverty rate (2000)	32%
Minority population (2000)	70%
Proximity to urban center	30 miles to Rocky Mount, N.C.
Proximity to interstate highway	25 miles
Strategic approach	Industrial development Business retention & expansion Tourism
Time frame	1998-2007

In 2005, Scotland Neck was recognized by the National League of Cities as a community that, through effective policies and thoughtful planning, has preserved and enriched a high quality of life. Not long ago, however, this small community in eastern North Carolina was nearly left behind. After decades of economic decimation, led by the mechanization of agricultural production and followed by manufacturing industry outsourcing, Scotland Neck decided to look to its own resources, skills and people for its long-term economic development. According to the mayor, Scotland Neck's strategy is rooted in the idea that the town is "making due with what we've got." The town is leveraging its natural resources to attract tourists, supporting small businesses with local initiatives and recruiting industrial employers with labor demands that match local skills.

The community and its history

Scotland Neck is a small community in eastern North Carolina that dubs itself "the hub of southern Halifax County." Without a single stoplight in town, it is the only town in North Carolina with parking in the middle of Main Street. The town is surrounded by thousands of acres of the state's most productive farmland. The Roanoke River, which defines much of the history and geography of Halifax County, flows just north of town.

⁵³ Interview with Nancy Jackson, Scotland Neck town administrator, February 5, 2007.

Outdoor enthusiasts flock to this region of eastern North Carolina to hunt, fish and bird-watch.

In addition to the abundance of outdoor attractions, Scotland Neck is home to the Sylvan Heights Waterfowl Park and Eco-Center. Sylvan Heights is the world's leading breeder of endangered waterfowl and home to the largest waterfowl collection in the world. The facility is currently tripling its size to provide more public access to its waterfowl collection. A visitors center with conference facilities opened in 2006.

Scots Highlanders settled this region of North Carolina 1722. The name Scotland Neck described the small communities that clustered around a "neck" in the Roanoke River. The town was incorporated in 1867, and shortly thereafter it began creating the spacious avenues and tree-lined median of Main Street. The first century of Scotland Neck's economic history was defined by agriculture and low-cost manufacturing. Workers at the local Halifax County Hosiery Mill started manufacturing hosiery and underwear in 1890. When the mill closed in 1996, it was the oldest continuously operated mill in the country.

Modern day Scotland Neck is home to a historic Main Street, two grocery stores, a dozen restaurants, a library with 16 public access Internet stations and a new hotel. There is a senior center and a modern hospital. The story of Scotland Neck's hospital is indicative of the community spirit and pride that characterize this small town. The hospital opened in 1948 with 20 beds and two doctors. In the early 1980s a financial crisis led the State Office of Rural Health to recommend that the hospital be closed. In response, local residents held bake sales and other fund-raisers that contributed over \$200,000 to the construction of a new facility. Local funds were leveraged with matching grants from philanthropic foundations and public agencies. In the end, Scotland Neck preserved the town's local hospital, and today the facility is a model for rural health care.

Throughout most of Scotland Neck's recent history, the mayor's office has been a prominent and active institution. Ferd Harrison (who became president of the National League of Cities in the early 1980s) was mayor for 38 years, from 1957 to 1995. In 1995, a newcomer to Scotland Neck was elected mayor in a contentious local election. According to several local residents, the new mayor divided the town along racial lines, instigated legal confrontations within the city government and stirred up controversy in all corners of town. Robert Partin, former school teacher, football coach and long-time town board member, was elected mayor in 1997 with a mandate to heal and reunite the community.

When Partin assumed office in 1998, he wanted to begin his term with a project that would pull the community together and generate some optimism about Scotland Neck. Renovating the local library seemed a fitting project. "Who's going to argue with a library?" he said later, in explanation. The original library was built in 1974 and was in dire need of an upgrade. A

local architect designed the expansion, and the plans were shared with local residents, which increased the town's enthusiasm about the project. In the end, the town raised \$600,000 in local funds over four years to finance the project. The expanded and renovated library, with an impressive collection of books and Internet capability, was completed in 2002.

In retrospect, the late 1990s in Scotland Neck was a tumultuous time, with political turmoil and shifting mayoral leadership. The closure (in 2000) of FulFlex, a local rubber manufacturing firm, and the sudden loss of 250 jobs rekindled the town's sense of being on the edge of economic ruin. The library project reinvigorated civic energy in Scotland Neck, but the town continued to struggle for a foothold.

The strategy

Scotland Neck's strategy is called the Developing Our Own Resources (DOOR) Initiative. It is a place-based economic development strategy that involves three main approaches: attracting tourists, supporting small businesses and downtown merchants, and recruiting industry. Initiated in 2002, the primary objective of the DOOR Initiative is to stimulate sustainable economic development and diversification by engaging in activities that are consistent with the town's existing assets and resources. DOOR was conceived of and is driven by local elected officials, the mayor and the mayor's office staff – with support from a cadre of local volunteers who are committed to seeing Scotland Neck prosper. In the face of layoffs and economic stagnation, Scotland Neck assessed its bountiful natural resources and decided to build its economy by providing support to the outdoor industry that was already (without the town's explicit support) attracting hundreds of hunting and fishing enthusiasts to town. Shortly thereafter, in an effort to diversify the economic development portfolio, organizers expanded the DOOR Initiative to include small business support and industrial development.

Tourism

Scotland Neck's first step was to remove the barriers that were inhibiting the growth and expansion of local fishing and hunting guide service businesses. To provide more and better access to the Roanoke River, the town partnered with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission to improve the local boat ramp on the river. In response to a request from local hunting guides, the town began providing marketing and advertising support to guide service businesses by branding the town as "an outdoor paradise." On a continuing basis, the town encourages hunting on nearby gamelands by distributing brochures for local guides and linking visitors to guides through the town's website. The town also takes out advertisements in local and regional media outlets, including magazines and television. Scotland Neck hosts a deer hunting contest, followed by a Hunter Appreciation Dinner and Banquet every January. All of this activity is aimed at improving the ability of local guide services to bring more tourists into town.

Further, recognizing the hidden value in the flat, rural back roads surrounding Scotland Neck, the town initiated an annual Country Roads Bike Tour to promote bicycle tourism. Also, each year the town hosts the Crepe Myrtle Festival, the Classic Car Show and Christmas on the Commons. In addition to building cohesiveness within the community, these events bring in hundreds of visitors, who spend thousands of dollars on food, shopping, lodging and entertainment.

Finally, Scotland Neck's tourism strategy is anchored by its promotion of the Sylvan Heights Waterfowl Park and Eco Center, internationally known for breeding and conserving rare species of waterfowl. According to Ali Lubbock, the assistant director of Sylvan Heights, "The mayor is our lead cheerleader." In addition to providing marketing support and grant writing assistance, the town provides in-kind electricity to the facility. The town partnered with the North Carolina Zoological Society to build an education center in Scotland Neck that will draw upon the resources of Sylvan Heights. The center will accommodate thousands of visitors annually who will spend money, pay sales tax and help boost the local economy.

Small Business and Downtown Merchant Support

The development of a tourism industry is fueling small business formation in downtown Scotland Neck and beyond. Local entrepreneurs are building small businesses to feed, outfit and entertain visitors. To further aid downtown merchants, the town put in place a program in which residents have the option to round up their utility bills to the nearest dollar. Revenues from this effort go into grants to help downtown merchants renovate building facades. "Round Up gives everybody in town the opportunity to contribute," Partin said. "We're telling everybody, 'if you want to assist the town in beautifying its downtown, here's an opportunity.'" The program awards grants on the basis of \$1 reimbursement for every \$2 invested by the owner, with a maximum grant of \$1,000 per project. Since 2000, the Round Up program has generated more than \$10,000 for cosmetic improvements to small businesses on Main Street.

In addition, the mayor regularly visits small business owners in Scotland Neck to explore ways to remove barriers to a firm's growth. "Being a familiar face to the small businesses in Scotland Neck creates opportunities for the town to help on an as-needed basis," Partin said. For example, Wiggins Design & Fabrication is a small business in Scotland Neck that designs and manufactures steel material handling products. Given Scotland Neck's strategic location – halfway between the Norfolk Shipyards and the military complex at Fort Bragg – the mayor is helping to facilitate contact between Wiggins and military supply contractors. "If it were up to the mayor, I would have expanded my business long ago," Wiggins said. "But we're almost ready and the mayor is helping to find the appropriate financing for our building expansion."

Industrial development

The third pillar of Scotland Neck's strategy is to recruit industrial employers into the community, specifically those that provide employment opportunities that match the skills and abilities of the town's existing labor force. Like the tourism and small business support efforts, industrial development is led by local officials, including the town board, the mayor and his staff.

Scotland Neck recruits on the basis of its hard-working labor force, its strategic location on the eastern seaboard and its quality of life factors. The mayor and town council work hard to tap into the state resources for business recruitment, but the town does not have an official incentive program.

When the FulFlex rubber manufacturing plant closed in 2000 the company donated its building to the town. Scotland Neck heard from several companies interested in moving into the facility, but the mayor and town council turned away industries that were not a good fit for Scotland Neck. Within a few years, AirBoss (a rubber manufacturer similar to FulFlex) indicated an interest in moving to Scotland Neck. To the mayor, this was a blessing because the labor force skills required for work at AirBoss were in line with those of the workers who were laid off by FulFlex.

When the president and CEO of AirBoss visited Scotland Neck, Mayor Partin took the executives to the town library. Partin recalled the visit: "After touring the library, this high-powered CEO looked me in the eye and said, 'Mayor, this is all I need to see. Any town that invests in itself like this is a town where we want to locate.'" AirBoss announced its intentions to locate in Scotland Neck in early 2005. The town's next step is to purchase land adjacent to the plant and work toward recruiting upstream suppliers in the rubber compounding business.

The outcomes

Outcomes that can be attributed to Scotland Neck's economic development strategy include:

- In 2005, several new small businesses opened on Main Street. Luigi's restaurant is packed on weekends. Piney Woods Bait & Tackle Shop took advantage of the increased flow of outdoor enthusiasts.
- From 2004 to 2005, local hunting guide revenues increased by 50 percent.
- In 2006, a Subway sandwich shop opened on Main Street, which, according to one resident, "offers a healthy alternative to some of the other options in town."
- In 2005, the Best Western Scotland Neck hotel, \$1.2 million investment, opened and created six jobs.
- In 2005, AirBoss announced a new facility in Scotland Neck, bringing 86 jobs and \$10.5 million over three years.

- In 2007, Carter & Mayes textile manufacturing announced a new facility in Scotland Neck, bringing 115 jobs and \$1 million over two years.
- According to Mark Bacon, a consultant who has been working in town for years, “between 2000 and 2006, the attitude of town has completely changed.”

How and why the strategy is working

Several factors help explain Scotland Neck’s apparent success with its place-based approach to small town economic development. First, the town has strong mayoral leadership. At the same time, the town aggressively works to promote its small-town quality of life factors and to pursue external resources. Finally, when Scotland Neck came upon hard times in the mid-1990s, local pride and a local sense of optimism in the face of despair overcame the tendency to give up.

Strong mayoral leadership. According to the mayor, “I’ve always been the type that if *you* have it, then I want Scotland Neck to have it.” And this mayor doesn’t stop at anything to get what he believes is good for Scotland Neck. As the president of the North Carolina League of Municipalities, Partin has connections to policy makers in the state capital that serve his community well. As a former high school football coach, teacher and principal, the mayor is widely respected in both the white and African-American communities. The mayor’s leadership motivates others to get involved and to lend a hand for the good of the community.

Aggressive promotion to attract tourist dollars and advertise the town’s quality of life. In 2005, Scotland Neck hired a marketing director to manage its branding efforts. “You never know what giving away a brochure or key chain will bring you,” the mayor said. “You’ve got to constantly promote your town.” The town invested in a billboard advertisement on Interstate 95 that promotes outdoor activities in Scotland Neck. Local events and celebrations are additional means for marketing the benefits of visiting and living in Scotland Neck. The aggressiveness of the town’s efforts in this area seems to be paying off, as seen in increased hunting guide revenues.

Aggressive pursuit of external resources: Scotland Neck also has taken an aggressive approach to attracting attention and support from foundations, nonprofits, corporate donors and public agencies. For example, recognizing the potential for Sylvan Heights to attract tourists to Scotland Neck, the town has worked vigorously to help the center acquire funding for an expansion. This includes writing letters to legislators, inviting corporate CEOs to tour the facility and facilitating meetings between Sylvan Heights and other potential partners. In addition to attracting tourist dollars, Scotland Neck works hard to attract larger-scale resources from a variety of funding agencies.

Tumultuous circumstances brought about opportunity. The late 1990s were difficult for the community. The long respected and prominent mayor, Ferd Harrison, was ousted from office. FulFlex left town and took with it 250 good jobs. Rather than roll over, new leaders came forward and the town stood up to these difficult conditions by re-examining local assets and figuring out innovative ways to leverage them for economic gains. The difficult circumstances of the late 1990s presented an opportunity for the town to look inward for new ideas and angles on old problems.

What are the lessons from this story?

Don't be shy about asking for support, and try, try and try again. "Small towns can't take no for an answer," the town administrator said. "With the library project, we wrote 100 grants and 99 said no. You have to keep hounding, and eventually something will turn out." Rarely does the first try work, and Scotland Neck demonstrates that persistence pays.

Start with low-hanging fruit to demonstrate success and build momentum. When Scotland Neck was charting its plans for the DOOR Initiative, officials decided to begin with actions that would demonstrate success quickly. They gave support to local hunting and fishing guides, to start bringing more tourists into town and to show local residents that there was reason to be optimistic. This initial success helped the town leaders build momentum before beginning to tackle more intractable challenges such as job and business development.

A local membership organization can be a tool for funding local economic development. In the absence of a Chamber of Commerce or other business membership organization, Scotland Neck created the Scotland Neck Marketing Booster Club. Similar to a Chamber of Commerce, the club is a voluntary organization of businesses, industries and professionals with the dedicated purpose of promoting Scotland Neck. Annual membership dues will fund marketing and economic development efforts. The goal is to create a self-sustaining financial structure to support the DOOR Initiative.

Provide a conduit between local business interests and policy makers. Scotland Neck demonstrates how local leaders can be a voice for local business interests. Meeting regularly with local business people, Mayor Partin linked the interests of his business community to policy makers in Raleigh and beyond. For example, in an effort to help AirBoss win defense department contracts for military gloves, boots and gas masks, the town worked with the offices of U.S. Sen. Richard Burr and Lt. Gov. Beverly Purdue. AirBoss received two large contracts and will be locating production for these items in the company's Scotland Neck facility.

Contact information

Boyce Lilley
Marketing Director
Scotland Neck, North Carolina
252-826-3152
marketing27874@earthlink.net