

Elkin, North Carolina



	Elkin
Population (2000)	4,109
Municipal budget (2006)	\$5 million ⁷⁷
Per capita income (2000)	\$21,120
Median household income (2000)	\$31,700
Poverty rate (2000)	13%
Minority population (2000)	16%
Proximity to urban center	43 miles to Winston-Salem, N.C.
Proximity to interstate highway	1 mile
Strategic approach	Entrepreneurship
Time frame	2004-2007

Elkin is channeling local artists' talents and energy into new entrepreneurial ventures. A study from 2003 revealed that Elkin and the Yadkin Valley region had a small but rapidly growing concentration of artists. As has been demonstrated throughout western North Carolina, small businesses in the arts and crafts sector – properly marketed and supported – can catalyze small business growth and attract tourist dollars into the local economy. In 2004, Wade Nichols from the Piedmont Council of Governments worked with three artists to form the Yadkin Valley Craft Guild. A year later, the guild partnered with the Town of Elkin on Growing Entrepreneurs, an apprenticeship program through which local artists receive education and training in their respective craft as well as assistance in starting their own businesses. Local art studios and heritage craft-based businesses, combined with the region's growing wine industry, are attracting tourist dollars into Elkin.

The community and its history

Settlers first came to what is now Elkin in 1740, attracted by fertile soils and the nearby Yadkin River and Big Elkin Creek. By the mid 1800s, two ambitious entrepreneurs established Chatham Manufacturing, a woolen mill, in Elkin. Chatham Manufacturing drove the town's growth through the rest of the century and into the 1900s. Along with Chatham, other textile mills and furniture plants formed the base of Elkin's economy.

In the 1980s and 1990s, however, most of the textile and furniture plants closed their doors. Elkin has since tried to figure out ways to replace the lost jobs. The wine industry has become an increasingly

Elkin builds on the local craft economy by investing in a craft guild and an apprenticeship program. The apprenticeship program provides crafts training, mentorship and small business classes to artist entrepreneurs.

⁷⁷ Town of Elkin website: www.elkinnc.org. Accessed May 31, 2007.

important player in the Yadkin Valley over the last 20 years. Many tobacco farmers have shifted into grape production to support the regional wine industry. New vineyards and wineries stretch along the Yadkin Valley Wine Trail, which includes bed and breakfasts, antique shops and restaurants.

In 2003, an economic development consultant completed a comprehensive study for north-west North Carolina. The study's findings were a wake-up-call to local officials in Elkin, who immediately recognized the potential for capturing more of the tourism traffic from nearby Interstate 77. The study urged that Elkin and the surrounding area work toward creating a vibrant and growing network of small businesses and that they focus on crafts and cultural tourism.

The strategy

Elkin's strategy is to support entrepreneurs in the local heritage craft economy through its Growing Entrepreneurs program. Growing Entrepreneurs is designed to match experienced craftspeople with new artists and provide them with training and support for starting and growing small businesses. Growing Entrepreneurs evolved in conjunction with a regional artists guild called the Yadkin Valley Craft Guild. The story of how these two organizations evolved is the story of how Elkin came to initiate an entrepreneurial support strategy for local economic development.

Within months of the release of the 2003 regional economic study, Wade Nichols from the Northwest Piedmont Council of Governments and three local artists hatched an idea to create a craft guild for the Yadkin Valley region. Part of Nichols's vision was to equip artists in the guild with entrepreneurial skills to start new businesses. According to the North Carolina Arts Council, the state ranks in the top three nationally in craft income. "More than 6,100 craft artists in the state generate \$538 million in revenue."⁷⁸ Nichols believed that a regional guild could give a voice to independent craftspeople and provide them with support to have a positive impact on local economic development.

Soon after its organization, the Yadkin Valley Craft Guild partnered with the Town of Elkin to develop a locally oriented manual on how to provide entrepreneurial support to local artisans. Together they applied for a demonstration grant from the Homegrown Jobs Program of the N.C. Rural Economic Development Center. Shortly after receiving seed funding, and during the process of putting together their local guide, the idea for Growing Entrepreneurs was hatched. The program would match master craftspeople from the Yadkin Valley Craft Guild with up-and-coming artists. The pairing would allow each apprentice to receive guidance and education from a mentor with experience in his or her craft. In addition, the guild and the Town of Elkin would provide free seminars in entrepreneurship and individual assistance when it came to starting businesses or studios to showcase work. One indicator of the relative

⁷⁸ "The CODA Survey: The Impact of Crafts on the National Economy," Craft Organization Directors Association, by Appalachian State University, 2001.

success of this program is the fact that several guild staff members were subsequently trained as intake professionals for the Rural Center's Microenterprise Loan Program. As intake professionals, local staff who understand local conditions and context provide up-start artisans with micro-loans from the Rural Center.

With support from the Golden LEAF foundation, Growing Entrepreneurs was rolled out in April 2007. An initial cohort of eight apprentices was enrolled under the direction of four mentors. Each apprentice was selected based on their aptitude, commitment and entrepreneurial spirit. Apprentices spend 20 hours per week receiving instruction from their mentors and 10 hours practicing their craft. Unique to the Growing Entrepreneurs program is that apprentices are able to keep and sell the items they make during their apprenticeship. "Apprentices are able to leave the apprenticeship with a number of items ready to put in a gallery or business," said Doris Petersham, guild president. "They are building their inventory." The guild estimates that by 2008 it will have enabled 150 craftspeople to become self-employed entrepreneurs. In addition, local officials in Elkin believe that small craft businesses will complement and enhance the region's wine industry and result in increased tourism traffic.

What are the lessons from this story?

The craft industry, particularly when tied to tourism promotion, is a potential economic engine. Across North Carolina, working craftsmen, most of whom are self-employed, are estimated to generate more than \$530 million in revenue annually. Leaders in Elkin recognized this fact and built an economic development strategy around craft-based businesses to help overcome employment losses in manufacturing and agriculture. "A lot of people don't realize the multiplier effect," said Jeff Sebens, a member of the Yadkin Valley Craft Guild. "With lodging, restaurants and other venues, every \$100 spent on supporting local craftsmen might bring in \$1,000 to the region."⁷⁹

It takes a comprehensive support environment to help a craftsman, or other entrepreneur, build a new business. Elkin is building a support system for artisans by creating the apprenticeship initiative, linking experienced crafters with new artisans. In addition to this mentoring/networking, the support environment includes training and the opportunity to access micro loans, all necessary to the development of self-employment and other entrepreneurial opportunities.

Contact information

Doris Petersham
President, Yadkin Valley Craft Guild
Elkin, North Carolina
336-527-1962
dpetersham@rivercto.net

Teresa Howell
Assistant Planning Director
Elkin, North Carolina
336-835-9800
thowell@elkinnc.org

⁷⁹ Sylvester, Ben. "Town Vies for Guild Gallery Location." Elkin Tribune, June 5, 2007.