

Collaborative Leadership in Sampson County

Heather Scarbrough

As part of documenting the experiences of communities in North Carolina facing numerous challenges and demands for change, we offer this case study of one rural county addressing education needs in the face of limited resources.—Editor

When governments decide to try to solve a problem, they often find themselves running more of a marathon than a sprint. Along the way, many drop out of the race or lose momentum. However, in Sampson County, North Carolina, a core group of visionary leaders recognized the importance of endurance and persevered when the tasks at hand seemed unattainable.

“We realized in 2002 that school construction was a priority in Sampson County,” said Kermit Williamson, former chair of the Sampson County Board of Commissioners.¹ Improving the quality of education in the community became the executive leadership’s focus, and the marathon began.

“We hit several different hurdles throughout,” said Scott Sauer, Sampson County manager. “It would have been really easy to be disheartened. We had to very quickly pull together commissioners and school boards, and there were times commissioners had to make hard decisions and bring bad news.” The commitment made by the leading officials and administrators in the city and the county would be challenged along the way, but this agricultural community rallied behind the executive leadership’s decision to construct and fund three new high schools simultaneously.

Starting the Race

Slightly smaller than Rhode Island, Sampson is the largest county in the state. Despite its size, it is home to only

The author will complete her Master of Public Administration at UNC at Chapel Hill in May 2008. Contact her at heatherscarbrough@gmail.com.



about 63,000 people.² It is one of the fifteen counties in North Carolina that continue to operate both a city and a county school system.³

As serious overcrowding worsened in the Clinton City and Sampson County school systems, Sampson County Superintendent L. Stewart Hobbs and the Sampson County Board of Education started the first leg of the race. Hobbs invited the county commissioners to visit Midway High School on a routine day and observe students changing classes.

“We got stampeded,” explained County Commissioner John Blanton.

“I’ve never been so startled in my entire life,” said former County Board Chair Williamson. “I couldn’t believe how many people were in that building. I immediately drove to Union High School and saw the same thing.”

Currently the Sampson County School System uses 119 mobile units. Some schools in the system have more

Too many school trailers, not enough money.

mobile units outside than classrooms inside.⁴ Furthermore, the county has more students attending classes in mobile units than the entire city

school system has.⁵

“When the commissioners saw [the overcrowding], they were bound and determined to help us,” said Superintendent Hobbs.

“We realized we couldn’t continue to say, ‘We’ll do it next year,’ and that helped pull us together,” said Clinton City Superintendent Gene Hales. “The schools need something now, and we can’t wait.”

As the need for new school buildings in the city and the county became a priority, a collaborative movement built among the core leadership at the city and county levels. This collaboration led to the current construction of two county high schools and one city high school, which will open their doors in fall 2008.

Preparing for the Challenge

Some local governments might have been overwhelmed by the need for new schools and the resources to finance them. However, community leaders in Sampson County developed a unique synergy and created a unified effort to get results.

The synergy was a result of the relationships that had developed among the executive leadership. Ten years ago, a select group of community leaders began



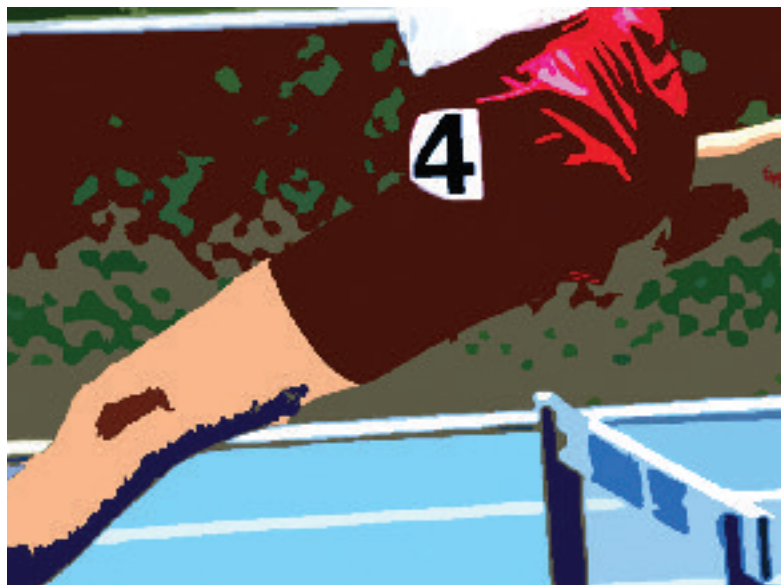
meeting quarterly.⁶ The meetings did not have an agenda. Instead, the goal was to build relationships, keep communication lines open, and talk in a nonthreatening environment about the issues at hand.⁷

Quarterly meetings eventually became monthly breakfast meetings that now are hosted at Sampson Community College. The leaders present each month include the Sampson County manager, the chair of the Sampson County Board of Commissioners, the chair of the Sampson County Board of Education, the chair of the Clinton City Board of Education, the chair of the Sampson Community College Trustees, the superintendent of Sampson County Schools, the superintendent of Clinton City Schools, and the president of Sampson Community College. The informal networking opportunity provides a safe place for these city and county officials and administrators to discuss ideas in an unusual forum.

In 2001 the theme of the executive leadership meetings became sharing a

vision and planning for the future of Sampson County.⁸ The theme soon focused on schools, particularly on how Clinton and Sampson County could have a shared vision for relieving overcrowding while planning for growth.

Having these relationships in place laid a foundation of trust and collaboration that would be necessary later for the success of school financing and construction.



Overcoming Hurdles

Once schools became a priority among the executive leadership, the monthly meetings

provided an environment that fostered collaborative discussions on ways to make the shared vision a reality. The group hired an independent demographer to examine the state's growth patterns and projections. The school systems already were seeing growing enrollments each year, and the demographer projected that the schools would see an increase of about 800 students from 2001 to 2010.⁹ This projection validated the school boards' priorities and showed the decision makers where the greatest needs lay.¹⁰ Following the study, the school boards determined that building three new high schools would have the greatest impact on the students.¹¹

A planning committee was formed to address how the community could fund

a project of this magnitude. "We had to come together as a committee to discuss the pros and cons of what we could and could not do," said Commissioner Blanton. "We began to discuss what we wanted to do, when we wanted to do it, and how we were going to get the funds."

"Initially, we just didn't have the money," said Superintendent Hobbs. There were funds to build one high school, but the concern was that build-

Informal networking lays the foundation for collaboration in financing new schools.

ing just one would be political suicide for some board members who served other attendance areas that needed new facilities.

"You were dealing with different communities wanting their school built first, and that's where the problem came," said Commissioner Blanton.

The county hired Doug Carter, a financial adviser who had helped the county with projects in the past. He talked with finance department personnel and the county commissioners to figure out a way to finance the three schools, explained Sylvia Blinson, finance officer for Sampson County. The finance department calculated that funding school construction completely for three high schools would require \$110 million. The commissioners determined that they could provide partial funding but the county would have to look for other ways to fund the projects.¹²

The commissioners had a difficult decision to make. Although they were fiscally conservative, they committed themselves to raise taxes by up to 30 cents over several years if necessary to fund school construction.¹³ “A 30-cent tax increase—that’s heresy in Sampson County,” explained former County Board Chair Williamson. “You have to understand: It’s a bipartisan board, but fairly conservative. But [the project] was so imperative that something had to be done.”

On March 3, 2005, the board of commissioners and the school boards held a public meeting at the civic center to present the school construction priorities and funding decisions to the citizens.

“I felt pretty confident that the boards would vote [for the project and commit to the tax increases],” said Jeff Wilson, current chair of the Sampson County Board of Commissioners. “As far as public input—you never know what the public input is going to be.”

“[It] was packed the night we voted on the whole thing,” recalled former County Board Chair Williamson. Hundreds of parents, teachers, interested citizens, and the press filled the civic center for the meeting.

“Dr. Hobbs asked me if the board of commissioners had the guts to do this, and I said, ‘Sometimes you just have to do the right thing,’” said current County Board Chair Wilson.

“At that point, we couldn’t back up,” said County Manager Sauer. “Kermit [Williamson] had to encourage his colleagues that now was the time to vote.”

The boards voted unanimously to move forward. Some parents and teachers were upset, but not for the reasons that might be expected in the face of a potential tax increase. “It wasn’t ‘Don’t build them, don’t tax us,’” said County Manager Sauer; “it was ‘My school first.’”

“[This] was a big undertaking by the county commissioners,” said Superintendent Hobbs. “We were surprised the county commissioners didn’t face more backlash,” said Hobbs.

“Nobody came in there and said anything negative. The ones that came in said, ‘We appreciate what you’re doing for the schools,’” reported Com-

missioner Blanton. This confirmed the perception that schools were a priority among the citizens.

Once the boards voted unanimously, they raised taxes 9 percent the next year. “[We wanted] to go ahead and start generating revenue before we even needed it, to show everyone we were serious about this project,” said former County Board Chair Williamson.



Following the meeting at the civic center, the boards, the finance department, and the planning committee continued to investigate where the remaining funds would come from.

“Public bonds have never been real big in this county,” said Superintendent Hobbs. To date, only a bond referendum for water has passed.

The planning committee assessed whether a countywide bond referendum would pass and decided that it might not. Instead, the county began examining a combination of funding sources. Unlike bonds, certificates of participation (COPs) do not require voter approval, so the board of commissioners decided to pursue this alternative. Further, Sampson County had a history of working with the Rural Development

program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to fund projects. However, it had never attempted such an approach to fund school construction.¹⁴ The board of commissioners decided that a blended strategy of COPs and Rural Development funds had more chance for success “because of the size of the proposed debt load for a rural county,” said Manager Sauer. “The security of federally financed loans over a forty-year amortization at 4.25 percent was an attractive mix for the financial bond markets and the rating agencies.”

Past successful relationships with USDA had helped the county develop a strong rapport with the Kinston office of the Rural Development program, explained County Manager Sauer. The county viewed the Kinston office “like an extension of county government that enhances our ability to manage.”

When school construction became a priority, this relationship with the Kinston office allowed commissioners to be open and honest about their need for funding. Ed Causey, area manager for the office, credited the county for its eventual success in obtaining funds: “You have to be ready to spring when the resources are ready.”

Continuing to pursue potential USDA money, the county leaders decided to take their strategy to the Local Government Commission (LGC) in Raleigh. The purpose of this meeting was to hear the LGC’s review of the proposed strategy and gain its informal buy-in before

taking the project much further.¹⁵

“When we went to the LGC, we were not sure they were going to okay this thing,” said former County Board Chair

Williamson.

For this preliminary review with the LGC, the board of commissioners, the county attorney, the county manager, the county finance officer, USDA representatives, bankers, and bond counsel attended. Their presence showed the LGC that everyone was on board and willing to work together to see this project through, explained Blinson.

As the county representatives shared their strategy with the LGC, the main

Commissioners explore a novel approach to funding school construction.

question raised was how a county so small in population was going to manage a project of this proportion. “The selling point was that the USDA was viewed as a partner and would be involved at every step of the process: negotiating with the architect, developing construction bids, verifying proposals, and attending monthly progress meetings,” said County Manager Sauer. In addition, the com-

for school construction. “If you develop a good relationship with your local office, when the money becomes available and there are projects ready to go, you have put yourself in a position to be ready at the right time,” said Finance Officer Blinson.

“We got the word [about available funding] in December 2005,” said Area Manager Causey. “When [developing]

was \$138 per square foot and within budget,” said County Manager Sauer. “A month later, the two county high schools were bid, and the result was a \$13 million budget shortfall due to the bid pricing at \$197 per square foot. The bids for the two county high schools were rejected, and the school board and county commissioners began exploring an alternative delivery method to construct these two projects.”

The bid for Clinton City High School was good for only sixty days, so the executive leadership had to move quickly.”¹⁶ One commissioner recommended using the construction management-at-risk approach.¹⁷ Taking this approach resulted in a complete shift in the bidding process for the two county high schools.¹⁸

“To be honest, some of our own people didn’t think it was possible,” said Superintendent Hales. “You run up against a wall trying to look at a vision and think about some of the things that you really want to do as a school system.”¹⁹



missioners’ commitment to raise taxes in anticipation of the project was viewed favorably. The board of commissioners took the minutes from the public meeting to the LGC. “They could see we didn’t have any opposition,” said former County Board Chair Williamson.

On receiving the LGC’s blessing, a delegation from the county traveled to New York City to pitch the capital project to bond rating companies. The delegation included the chair of the board of commissioners, the county manager, the county attorney, the county finance officer, a USDA representative, and the financial consultant. The group made presentations to various agencies to get bond insurance so that Sampson, as a rural county, could get a AAA rating for its COPs and thus obtain the lowest possible interest rate.

On receiving that rating, the county focused its efforts on gaining USDA loan funds. In all, it obtained \$49.5 million

an application, whoever gets one in first and the fastest has the most opportunity.” Several staff gave up their Christmas vacations to get the application through in time, said Finance Officer Blinson, and “we believe we were the first application in that year.”

Across the country, other local governments did not have the time for discussion if they wanted to act on this available money. Sampson County leaders, however, had been having proactive discussions all along about what they would do if and when an opportunity presented itself. “From our standing, it all came back down to the county. They were willing to adapt their system,” said Area Manager Causey. “What happened here could have happened anywhere in the country.”

In the meantime, Clinton City High School’s design was finished and went out for bidding. “The successful bid for the Clinton City High School project

The chair of the Sampson Community College Board of Trustees, Larry Barnes, described one breakfast meeting during the process when spirits were low. Superintendent Hales came with a book on visionary leadership, related Barnes. Hales said, “We cannot let this thing die,” when everyone had been about ready to give up.

This mentality was called on again following the bidding process, when construction prices rose after Hurricane Katrina. Now facing a \$1.4 million shortfall, Clinton City High School was going to have to cut portions of its building project. “Literally, storms would come up, and we still did not give up,” said Superintendent Hales. He kicked off a community effort called A March to a Million and raised more than \$2 million in six months for an auditorium and a gym at the new high school.

“It was just a gift of God for us to get this through, because there were so

many problems,” said Commissioner Blanton. “We just sat back and held on, and said, ‘What next?’”

“It all goes back to perseverance and looking for another way to make it happen,” said Superintendent Hales.

Reaching the Finish

Often local governments do not have the stamina for a strong finish. However, the executive leadership of Sampson County pulled together, building on the foundation established in the monthly breakfast meetings and overcoming the many obstacles along the way.

The culture of the executive leadership in the county is to be united and cooperative, encouraging free-flowing information. Officials and administrators are willing to set personal agendas and turf issues aside. “We try to find our common interest and lock arms with one another,” said County Manager Sauer. “Sampson County is blessed with elected leadership that would rather work together than fight together.”

This mentality has contributed to Sampson County’s many successes. USDA has invested more in Sampson County than in any other county in the United States, and Clinton City High School is the only school in the country completely funded with Rural Development dollars.²⁰ Furthermore, the county has “the distinction of being the first county in North Carolina to have certificates of participation executed and delivered for school construction.”²¹

Although many people were skeptical along the way, including the superintendent of the county schools, who still owes the board members a steak dinner, this project will bring tremendous benefits to the county.

Although the county school systems still have many needs, they will be able to discard about eighty mobile units by building the two high schools, and they plan to continue with school improve-

ments and capital construction projects.²² “I don’t think the public will ever fully realize what has been done here,” said Board of Trustees Chair Barnes. “There are a lot of challenges still ahead, and the job isn’t finished.”

Learning Lessons from the Race

Local governments could learn from Sampson County’s example. County Manager Sauer attributes much of the success to the elected officials, who could literally sit around a table each month and put differences aside.²³ “You have to build relationships first. That sort of initiated everything else,” said Superintendent Hales. “First you fight [for yours], but then you help others also. To me, that’s the biggest piece.”

“We had to have buy-in,” said Superintendent Hobbs. “We all have our battles; we’re like brothers. We like to fight together, but then we can still come together.”

Communication and involvement of stakeholders from the beginning were features that many of the elected and appointed leaders identified as important to the process.

With regard to elected officials and boards, former County Board Chair Williamson stressed the importance of unanimity: “If one of my commissioners had said, ‘No, I’m against this project,’ it would have never gone.”

“You need someone to shepherd the process, and Sampson County is lucky to have longevity in many positions,” said County Manager Sauer. “Unless vision and leadership are coming from the elected spot, it won’t happen. Ideally the elected officials have to come to the table with a vision, a spirit of cooperation, and a willingness to set priorities based on physical need.”

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations and attributions are from interviews by

Heather Scarbrough, in Clinton, N.C., August and September 2007, with Larry Barnes (chair, Sampson Community College Board of Trustees), John Blanton (commissioner, Sampson County Board of Commissioners), Sylvia Blinson (finance officer, Sampson County), Ed Causey (area manager, U.S. Department of Agriculture–Rural Development, Kinston Office), Dr. Gene Hales (superintendent, Clinton City Schools), Dr. L. Stewart Hobbs (superintendent, Sampson County Schools), E. R. Mason (former chair, Clinton City Board of Education), Scott Sauer (manager, Sampson County), Kermit Williamson (former chair, Sampson County Board of Commissioners), and Jeff Wilson (chair, Sampson County Board of Commissioners).

2. The North Carolina Office of State Planning estimated the population of Sampson County to be 63,566 in 2005.

3. Sauer, interview.

4. Hobbs, interview.

5. Interview by Heather Scarbrough, in Clinton, N.C., August 2007.

6. Williamson, interview.

7. Sauer, interview; Williamson, interview; interview by Heather Scarbrough, in Clinton, N.C., September 2007.

8. Hales, interview.

9. Ibid.

10. Sauer, interview.

11. Hobbs, interview.

12. Sauer, interview.

13. Ibid.

14. Sampson County has worked with USDA on a number of projects, including a water system infrastructure and a jail and law enforcement facility.

15. Sauer, interview.

16. Williamson, interview.

17. Construction management-at-risk involves interviewing qualified contractors and selecting one on the basis of qualifications and experience. There is a negotiated guaranteed maximum price, which eliminates surprises and ensures that a project can come in under budget.

18. Sauer, interview.

19. Hales, interview.

20. Causey, interview; Hales, interview.

21. Official Statement prepared by Sampson County, N.C., Certificates of Participation, Series 2006 Evidencing Proportionate Undivided Interests in Rights to Receive Certain Revenues Pursuant to an Installment Purchase Contract with the County of Sampson, North Carolina.

22. Hobbs, interview.

23. Sauer, interview.

The promise of a steak dinner if victorious.