



Meet Ann Bass, ARC Community Economic Development Planner, Western Region

Ann M. L. Bass began working with the NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center as an ARC Community Economic Development Planner for the Western Prosperity Zone in March of 2017. The Western Prosperity Zone includes thirteen counties in the far western mountains of North Carolina - from Rutherford, Buncombe, and Madison Counties on its eastern boundary, west to Cherokee County. The mountains are rugged, with sharper ridge lines than those farther north. Major rivers in the region include the Hiawassee, Nantahala, Tuckaseegee, Tennessee, Little Tennessee, Green, Broad, and French Broad. Ann's office is in Jackson County.

What led you to become a Prosperity Zone planner?

I enjoy working with rural community leaders to identify a town or county's unique potential and develop projects that will build place, wealth, and an economy around it. I also believe in regional economic cooperation and sector development. Economic sectors require larger, diverse areas and resources, and pay less attention political boundaries.

What are some of your current projects in the Prosperity Zone?

Over the past year, I have worked with colleagues Karen Smith and Glen Locascio on an economic development strategic plan for Madison County. We have been exploring with a steering committee the economic sectors identified in the County's Comprehensive Plan and the regional Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy.

In January, Graham County launched an Outdoor Recreation Economy Strategic Plan project that will build on the work done by various sport and recreation groups active in the development of the Nantahala Forest Management Plan. We will identify a unique niche for Graham County in the wider mountain region and generate a strategy for building all levels of the nature-based recreation economy, from gear-building and testing to events, education, workforce development, hospitality, and sustainable tourism.

Downtown Robbinsville, in Graham County, has also begun an economic development strategic planning process. The REVVED-UP group that has been focused on Robbinsville's downtown revitalization will be reviewing data, preparing surveys, and hosting public meetings to identify the role of downtown in the county. This work will benefit all properties on Main Street in Robbinsville, including the former Snider's Department Store that is being rehabilitated as a museum, visitor center, and downtown activity generator by the Graham County Historical Association.

In terms of rural economic development, what are some of the opportunities that are being explored by communities in the Prosperity Zone? What challenges do they face?

Franklin and Waynesville are defining redevelopment projects near the heart of their downtowns. Both anticipate making infrastructure investments to encourage private development anchored by publicly-owned property. More affordable workforce housing is a critical need throughout the entire region and

both projects will include it. These efforts will address not only the quantity, but also the quality, of housing in both communities. Staffing and funding are issues for such proactive work.

Lake Lure has exciting plans for developing a new mixed use (traditional) downtown just off the lake. A new Chimney Rock State Park entrance will serve the downtown area, strengthening the visitor connection. Ironically, the very lake that makes the community such a regional attraction is threatened by needed dam repairs and funds for such work are elusive.

The scenic far western counties are developing information systems to help visitors find lodging, food, and shopping, as well as additional activities and attractions. They face serious infrastructure challenges, not only with limited broadband and wifi connections, but also with basic mobile telephone service. This is especially critical in remote areas where accidents can be very serious and access to medical treatment is often provided by helicopter. Local medical services for an aging population are also limited by the lack of infrastructure for telemedicine.

What is one thing you have learned about or discovered in the Prosperity Zone that you did not know before and that is worth sharing?

With a lack of flat land and infrastructure suitable for larger-scale companies, outdoor recreation and sustainable tourism are becoming primary industries (in addition to education and health care services) for many communities. These jobs are often seasonal and may not pay a sustaining wage. Mountain residents long ago learned that it is not only smart, but also necessary, to develop multiple income streams. Supplemental income opportunities are critical for the building of wealth in this region.

What aspect(s) of your position/role do you enjoy the most?

I enjoy working with local government staff and community leaders to identify opportunities and turn them into funded projects.

Is there anything else you would like readers to know about the Western Prosperity Zone?

One of the incredible perks of my work is enjoying scenic views between meetings - layers of blue mountains, picturesque lakes, and clouds or fog hanging over the valleys. Also, in my short tenure I have only glimpsed the incredible sophistication of the Cherokee traditions. One day I hope to see traditional Cherokee housing gracing our communities.

Have you celebrated any recent professional achievements and/or attended any interesting workshops, courses, etc., in the past year?

In November, the City of Asheville hosted a workshop that gave ordinary people the basic tools to become small-scale “developers.” I am hoping that this incremental, homegrown, and wealth-building approach will also take hold in the rural parts of the region. It is how our communities grew originally and will keep them unique and their pace of change manageable.

What are some activities that you enjoy doing during non-work hours (family, friends, hobbies, volunteer work, etc.)?

I am enjoying “hiking the balds” with my Peterson field guides to birds and wildflowers. Spectacular! This region is also rich in craft and I am a novice weaver. Fortunately, it is easy to find schools and yarn shops with amazing experts to answer my basic questions. I have been weaving fabric from hand painted cotton warps. Someday I may have the nerve to cut into one and make a nice vest or jacket.

What is the best way to contact you?

I can be reached by telephone (call or text) at 828-508-0107 or by email at ann.bass@ncommerce.com.