



Meet Bruce Naegelen, North Central Prosperity Zone Planner

Bruce Naegelen joined the NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center as a Community Economic Development Planner for the Sandhills (South Central) Prosperity Zone in August of 2017. Seven months later, he transferred to the North Central Prosperity Zone, which consists of fifteen counties: Chatham, Durham, Edgecombe, Franklin, Granville, Harnett, Johnston, Lee, Orange, Person, Nash, Vance, Wake, Warren, and Wilson. The region includes twelve designated Main Street communities, four Small Town Main Street communities, and two towns with Downtown Associate Community programs. Although the presence of Raleigh, Durham, Cary, Rocky Mount, and Wilson make the North Central Prosperity Zone more urban than the Sandhills Prosperity Zone, it contains areas that are still very rural. Bruce's office is in the Town of Clayton in Johnston County.

How did you become a Prosperity Zone planner?

My background is downtown development and local Main Street program management, and this seemed like an opportunity to bring that experience, and more, to communities that do not usually have such resources.

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

I started off in the Sandhills Prosperity Zone and my first two projects, which took place within two weeks of each other, were Economic Development Assessments in Biscoe, in Montgomery County, and Hoffman, in Richmond County. They were the NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center's "inaugural" assessment projects and Jeff Emory, Southwest Prosperity Zone Planner, assisted me with them. I also worked on an Economic Development Strategic Plan for Clinton, with assistance from Main Street & Rural Planning Center planner Mark Zeigler, and completed a "Jobs Creation Plan for Distressed Communities in Columbus County." Chuck Halsall, of the NC Main Street program, and I are beginning a strategic planning process for Tarboro, which will include a plan for downtown. I also helped the Northeast Prosperity Zone Planner, Lee Padrick, with the final stages of a strategic planning process for Northeast Franklin County.

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?

In Northeast Franklin County, a group of about 10 unincorporated communities banded together to determine what they needed to do to attract residents and businesses to the area. The biggest concern is lack of broadband internet access. They want to transform their natural, cultural, and economic assets, which are mostly outdoor-based, into an invitation to draw young entrepreneurs, retirees, and families to the region to help it grow. The strategic plan identifies Broadband/Internet Access, Agritourism, and

Promotion as the three initial strategies to help achieve the vision: “Northeast Franklin County, just close enough to the Capital, offering rural pursuits and endless opportunities.”

The northern border counties (Person, Granville, Vance, and Warren) are looking for ways to elevate the attitudes of students to accept that they are worthy of and able to work in higher paying jobs in manufacturing and the trades. Presently, lower-income families seem to think those jobs are for someone else, rather than for them.

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?

I have found that there are significant economic and other disparities between counties in the region, and between communities within the same county. The communities vary greatly in population size, budgets, and capacity. For example, communities are often not aware of the resources that are available to them. It is not always about not having the funds to do a project; some communities just do not have human capacity to move forward without outside help.

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

I truly enjoy learning about different communities and people (what they are about, what challenges they have, etc.) and working with them to figure out how they can help themselves. The Prosperity Zone planners bring the Rural Economic Development Division into communities and we can find ways to help them at all levels. In the Sandhills Prosperity Zone, I visited with a mayor of a small town with a very small staff. As we talked, I learned that one of the town’s biggest issues was that its water system was at 85 percent capacity and that it needed to dig a well. The mayor did not know who to call. I said I would find out and then was able to provide the mayor with contact information for someone with the NC Department of Environmental Quality.

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

I enjoy the range of activities and events that go on in the region. Tarboro a neat place with an interesting history that goes back to colonial times. It even has a commons area like Boston. The Northeast Franklin County economic development strategic plan has been a cool project. With ten unincorporated communities working together to figure out how to bring economic development to Franklin County, it has been a community-driven, grassroots endeavor.

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

At Rural Day in Raleigh, held in May (2018), I learned about the challenges that rural electric membership cooperatives face in bringing broadband technology to areas that do not have it and how they are finding innovative ways to serve their customers.

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

I play guitar professionally at various venues and events. I also enjoy going to the coast and hanging out with my children and grandchildren.

What is the best way to contact you?

I can be reached by telephone at (252) 822-1859 or by email at bruce.naegelen@nccommerce.com.