



# China Grove, North Carolina

## Report of Economic Development Assessment

September 6, 2018



## Section 1. Introduction

On September 6, 2018, the NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center conducted an Economic Development Assessment for the Town of China Grove. The Economic Development Assessment is designed to provide a rapid and efficient assessment that will "jump start" a community's economic development efforts. For this project, the EDAP focused on the entire town, with an emphasis on the downtown area. This strategy was developed in preliminary meetings with NC Commerce staff, and officials from the Town of China Grove.

Preliminary activities also included meetings to; provide an overview of the EDAP process, discuss roles and expectations of NC Commerce staff and municipal officials/staff, format/agenda for the session, establishment of a local workgroup, and stakeholder identification. Town staff also provided a tour of the town prior to the assessment.

A staff team from the NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center, Rural Planning program, included:

**Jeff Emory, Project Manager** - Community Economic Development Planner, Southwest Prosperity Zone

**Darren Rhodes, Project Co-Manager** - Rural Planning Program Manager, NC Main Street, & Rural Planning Center

**Bruce Naegelen, Project Co-Manager** - Community Economic Development Planner, North Central Prosperity Zone

The Rural Planning Team members listed above would like to thank the **Local Work Group** members who generously gave up an entire day to work with us through this process. Work Group members consisted of: **Mayor Lee Withers, NC House of Representatives member Carl Ford, Town Council Member Rodney Phillips, Dave Morton, Natalie Morgan, Anne Corriher, Hope Oliphant, Chris Helms, Town Manager Ken Deal, and Assistant Town Manager Franklin Gover.** We would also like to thank **Andie Foley** of the Salisbury Post for her coverage of the assessment.

This report will serve as a summary of the activities that took place on September 6th, and recommendations based on the information gathered.

## Section 2. Asset Identification Exercise

The purpose of this exercise was to take an inventory or "map out" what is important to the community. Assets are broken into categories. Listed in this section are the assets identified by the Local Work Group.

**Economic Assets:** Hitachi, R&L Carriers, Altec Industries, Rowan County Schools, radio station, approximately 20 eating establishments, service-oriented downtown, strong culture of small businesses, low downtown vacancy rate, Goodman's Farm Supply, easy access to town, small town character, Roller Mill Museum

**Cultural Assets:** New addition to Hanna Park, Roller Mill Museum, downtown events including Christmas parade, churches, Main Street Mission, Community Park, recreational activities for youth, music store, Carson High School

**Natural/Recreational Assets:** Carolina Thread Trail, baseball/softball fields, urban archery ordinance, active Parks/Recreation Board, great farms which contribute to farmers market

**Institutional Assets:** Two hospitals, in town doctors, Catawba College, Hood Seminary, Rowan Community College, Livingstone, strong homeschool community, flexibility with Rowan County Schools, safe community

**Community/Human Resources Assets:** Main Street Museum, civic groups, churches/church activities, pre-schools, YMCA

**Governmental Assets:** Town hall, library, police station, airport, positive governmental leadership, NC House of Representatives member from area

### **Section 3. Presentation of Data Gathered**

The purpose of this exercise was to provide a local/regional economic snapshot of the town and provide an overview of other completed plans.

The town adopted a Land Use Plan in 2015. It was recommended at the time of adoption that the plan serve as a document to provide for the orderly growth of the town until the year 2040. Goals were established to guide China Grove into the future. A copy of the plan is available for public review.

Demographic and retail market data obtained by NC Main Street & Rural Planning staff provided a brief economic snapshot of the town. For purposes of the report, the trade area was defined as being within a one-mile radius from the China Grove town hall. The Environmental Systems Research Institute (ESRI), headquartered in Redlands, California, was the source for this information. A copy of the report is attached. Actual numbers are provided for the years 2010 and 2018. Projections for the year 2023 are also included.

Total retail trade potential for the year 2017 was \$45,254,964. Actual retail sales were \$31,406,110. This reflects a retail leakage of \$13,848,854 in sales. Total retail food and drink reflect a \$482,855 surplus in sales. Three areas that reflect retail leakage, or potential opportunities, are motor vehicles and parts dealers, building materials and garden supply, and general merchandise.

### **Section 4. SWOT Analysis**

A SWOT analysis is a process to identify a community's Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. Listed below is a breakdown of these areas for China Grove, as identified by the Local Work Group.

**Strengths:** Location, connectivity, number of restaurants, community support, pride of community, welcoming, positive downtown occupancy rate, new residential growth, positive image of town, available property, strong town leadership including staff, full time events coordinator, China Grove Textiles, safe

community, strong independent business owners, education/schools, local radio station, local newspapers, good synergy among business owners, access from interstate, residential neighborhoods, walkable downtown, two commercial areas, Main Street Mission, young volunteers, community unity, stable home ownership, strong agricultural base, downtown events, cross travel between I-85 and I-77

**Weaknesses:** Lack of retail, lack of available commercial buildings, lack of upscale restaurant, lack of investment in downtown, lack of parking and wayfinding signs downtown, limited downtown business hours, need for better streetscape downtown, need for public transportation, noise from railroad crossings, lack of community participation, underutilized buildings/property downtown, connectivity between two commercial areas, design guidelines for downtown

**Opportunities:** Business partnerships, 50,000 citizens within five miles of town, expanding corporate limits, China Grove economic development committee, re-alignment of I-85, Rowan County job training initiative, capturing retail leakage into Cabarrus County, affordable housing, new housing availability, temporary housing (apartments), upper level downtown housing, community participation/involvement, main street paving, greenways/parking, new community events, programs available through Rowan County Schools

**Threats:** Preparation for new housing developments, lack of involvement in county/state decisions regarding growth, China Grove postal addresses for those not in town limits

## **Section 5. Stakeholder Questions**

The Rural Planning Team conducted personal interviews with the Local Work Group and other members of the community. The questions asked, and responses received, are listed below.

**What are the town's strengths?** Sense of community, progressive and inclusive community, great location-small town feel but close to larger areas, support of local residents, great community events, new businesses opening, abundance of places to eat, low crime, strong leadership-elected and appointed officials, good workforce, strong business climate, progressive and attractive downtown, take care of our own mentality, welcoming of all classes of people

**What are the town's weaknesses?** The need for more diversity on town council, low test scores from school system, poverty in the area, old downtown buildings, parking issues, condition of sidewalks, lack of affordable housing, economic disparity, lack of retail, the need for more young families, distance from larger cities, lack of volunteers, road infrastructure, lack of community involvement, lack of communication between town and citizens, more upscale dining options, lack of progressive ideas, acceptance of divergent lifestyles, lack of downtown activities after 5:00 pm, variety of stores on main street, lack of developable land

**What are the opportunities for the town?** Take action to attract young families, encourage more volunteers, dress up downtown, develop strategies to empower others to become more involved, recruit industry and other jobs, more downtown events, manage interstate growth, improve streets and drainage, provide more adult opportunities such as bars, grants for business growth, better planning, more parks and recreational activities, take advantage of location, retail development

**What are threats, from outside of town, with little or no control of, by the town?** County has hindered growth, more jobs needed near town so as not to become a bedroom community, Charlotte/Concord threatens downtown, jobs coming to areas outside of town and area in general, crime from neighboring communities, low test scores from public schools, unfunded state mandates, lack of control over highway interchanges, drugs/crime in general, changes in annexation laws hinder growth, big box developments

**What changes do you feel could improve the quality of life in town over the next five years?** Diversity in businesses, affordable housing opportunities, diversity in jobs, completion of interchange, improve recreation and community appearance, more downtown events, greenway extension, better communication from town government, sidewalk expansion, more community green space

**What could the town do to improve its programs and services over the next five years?** Communication between town and residents, town related internships, citizen surveys as to what they need, be creative in increasing participation among all residents regardless of economic status, no downtown hotels, continue town events and add car shows, Christmas on the green, approve appearance of downtown, block party for kids, increase police patrol, give events coordinator more tools to do job, spend money to be a destination town, review town ordinances, review events that stifle business, create town newsletter

**The town is undergoing an economic development assessment. Do you have other comments or suggestions that will help its economic development and planning efforts?** Include all voices from all walks of life, speak to those that are less inclined to participate, support the Main Street Mission, address poverty as a whole, stay positive and aggressive, work with county, continue regionalism, prepare for growth, address housing needs, take hard look at interstate development, no more dollar general stores, create diversity in downtown, improve parking, extend greenway, move powerlines, downtown landscaping, better sidewalks, focus on town events that help businesses, use local resources, utilize media outlets, communicate with other town and county

## **Section 6. Recommendations**

Following the activities completed on September 6th, the Rural Planning Team members from the NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center worked together to make recommendations based on all information gathered. Some of the recommendations involve actions that may already be in the process of being completed by town staff. Some of the recommended actions may be completed with very minimal, or no, cost to the town. Other recommendations may involve some financial commitment from the town and may be more time consuming. Hopefully, most of the items on the attached page can be completed within the next 12 months. NC Main Street & Rural Planning Center staff is available to answer questions and provide assistance throughout the implementation process. It was a pleasure for the Rural Planning Team to work with the elected officials, staff, and citizens of the Town of China Grove.

## Recommendations for China Grove, NC

### **Strategic Goal: Improve Community Involvement and Communication**

- 1.) Develop a Communications Plan.
- 2.) Establish a committee to assist full-time Events Coordinator to, among other things, help attract and train volunteers from all sectors of town (the town has an active Parks and Recreation Advisory Board that could assist in this process).
- 3.) Work with civic groups, churches, Main Street Mission, and similar organizations to tap into all population groups in town.
- 4.) Update city website, create a formal newsletter, hand out flyers, in all appropriate languages to keeps citizens informed of city events, and to provide general updates on important city-related matters (the town recently launched a new website that addresses this item, and has a new quarterly newsletter).

### **Strategic Goal: Increase Downtown Retail and Dining Options**

- 1.) Complete business and building inventory using attached template
- 2.) Identify buildings that are move-in ready, need some cosmetic updates, and those that need significant work to be occupied.
- 3.) Utilizing retail market research, identify retail gaps and put together a business recruitment program that would include creative marketing/promotional strategies to promote China Grove.
- 4.) Research local incentives and identify those that may best assist in retail growth.
- 5.) Develop a guide/brochure to assist in the process of opening a business in China Grove (the town is in the process of developing such a document).

### **Strategic Goal: Improve the Appearance of Downtown Buildings**

- 1.) Research possibility of establishing a National Register Historic District. Actions may include inviting NC State Historic Preservation Office Specialist to determine the process and first steps.
- 2.) Consider developing Downtown Design Guidelines to differentiate the Town Center (downtown) from the rest of town.
- 3.) Consider and research ordinances/regulations based on best practices of successful downtown districts.
- 4.) Review state guidelines to determine if town may be interested in applying for Downtown Associate Community program, and arrange a meeting with NC Main Street Staff to learn more about the program.
- 5.) Create a wayfinding signage plan to inform visitors of community business centers, parks, etc. (staff has had preliminary discussions regarding this item).

**Strategic Goal: Orderly Growth of Key Intersections**

- 1.) Form a committee and consider acquiring services of professional firm to work with DOT on ensuring orderly growth of nearby intersections, and developing a bike and pedestrian plan.
- 2.) Work with county economic development group on potential marketing plan for intersections.