



### **Meet Wesley Barker, ARC Community Development Planner, Northwest Region**

Wesley Barker began working with the NC Department of Commerce as an Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) Community Development Planner for the Northwest Prosperity Zone in the fall of 2017. The Northwest Prosperity Zone is comprised of twelve counties: Alleghany, Alexander, Ashe, Avery, Burke, Caldwell, Catawba, McDowell, Mitchell, Watauga, Wilkes, and Yancey. Wesley's office is in North Wilkesboro.

#### **How would you describe the Northwest Prosperity Zone?**

The Northwest Prosperity Zone of North Carolina has a diverse and beautiful landscape ranging from the steepest mountains in the Blue Ridge down to the rolling hills of the western piedmont region. Counties included in this zone are Alleghany, Alexander, Ashe, Avery, Burke, Caldwell, Catawba, McDowell, Mitchell, Watauga, Wilkes, and Yancey. On a typical summer day, Taylorsville can reach 95 degrees, while Beech Mountain sits at a cool 70 degrees. Similarly, on a winter day, it can be sunny in Hickory but, if one drives an hour up the mountain, snow may be four inches deep in Boone! The region offers a variety of natural assets, trip destinations, diverse small businesses, and some of the nicest people you will ever meet.

#### **What led you to become a Prosperity Zone planner?**

I was intrigued to apply for the position because, as a native of Ashe County, I felt like I understood the region, would be a good ambassador to assist the communities located here, and could help them prosper and thrive. While working for the Town of West Jefferson for seven years prior to my work at Commerce, I learned what community development truly is and how it involves not only cooperation among government agencies, but also cooperation and collaboration with community organizations, businesses, non-profits, and engaged citizens, all with the passion to make their community better than it has ever been. This inspired me to apply to be a Prosperity Zone Planner in order to further expand my knowledge and be a connector, of sorts, to resources for communities in the region.

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

Over the past few months, I have been working with the Town of Maiden on creating a five to seven-year economic development strategic plan for the community. Also, I have been part of the Appalachian Gateway Community team, a five-member group of Ashe County stakeholders who are creating a work plan to connect the natural resources and assets of their county with the arts community through a mural connectivity project. The team has been meeting periodically and was selected to attend a three-day regional workshop with The Conservation Fund and the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) to better formulate the project.

**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?**

Some communities in the Northwest Prosperity Zone are exploring options to further enhance their outdoor recreation offerings or to create opportunities as a result of the natural assets they have. Others are motivated to expand broadband service to the underserved. Recruiting small businesses and other development to occupy vacant buildings in downtowns is another opportunity some communities are exploring. The challenges of each of these include land acquisition work, obtaining easements, and working with the overall terrain of the natural landscape to create outdoor recreation offerings. With broadband, the rough topography of some mountain communities makes it difficult to serve certain areas due to the expensive cost to connect infrastructure. Also, identifying providers that would be willing to perform the broadband work is another challenge in some areas. Finally, with the desire to recruit small businesses into downtowns, issues have arisen in some communities regarding property owners being unwilling to upgrade buildings to meet codes or not wanting to sell or lease them for potential businesses. Lack of education on incentives available to such property owners is a challenge many communities face and some have included actions in their plans to try to address it. Of course, the need for funding is the biggest challenge communities face for any proposed project.

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

I have learned a lot of neat, unique facts about the Northwest Prosperity Zone that I did not know before and I seem to learn more and more each time I visit communities. Some that stick out are the following:

- Some of the largest emeralds ever discovered in North Carolina, and in the United States, have been found in Alexander County.
- In November of 1992, the United Nations added Grandfather Mountain in Avery County to its international network of Biosphere Reserves. Grandfather is unique because, within a space of fewer than 5,000 acres, there is habitat for 16 distinct ecological communities and 72 rare or endangered species.
- For more than 60 years, the Dr. Grabow Tobacco Pipe brand has crafted pipes in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina. Since 1943, the town of Sparta been home to what is today the largest quality pipe manufacturing operation in the world, producing over 200,000 a year!

**What aspects of your job do you enjoy the most?**

I enjoy the opportunity to travel within the region and meet with various community leaders and others to hear about ongoing and potential projects, to learn more about each community, and to share information about the services and assistance I can provide. I enjoy networking with community representatives and meeting new people. Each community in my region is unique, which makes the job intriguing.

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

If you have not visited parts of the Northwest Prosperity Zone, you are missing out! There are such diverse offerings in the region that you could plan a week-long vacation and still not experience everything! From the unique, small downtowns, outdoor recreation options, natural beauty, delicious eateries and breweries, arts, and culture, there is something for everyone and it is hard to pick one place over the other. I am a coffee fanatic and always enjoy going to coffee shops in the communities I visit. Some of my recommendations are Appalachian Java in Burnsville, Talia Espresso in North Wilkesboro, and Bohemia in West Jefferson. Please let me know if you plan to visit the region for more recommendations.

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

In late 2019, I participated in the Homegrown Leaders Program offered by the NC Rural Center, which supplemented my completion of the Rural Center's 2018 Rural Economic Development Institute. In November 2019, I attended the Appalachian Gateway Communities Regional Workshop as part of a team from Ashe County.

**What are some activities that you enjoy doing during non-work hours?**

I enjoy hiking, being outdoors, landscaping, and spending time with friends and family. I am also involved in the community as a volunteer and serve on the boards of the Ashe County Chamber of Commerce, the Ashe County Arts Council, and the Christmas in July Festival, which is a local summer festival in West Jefferson. I also enjoy creating things with my hands, such as craft items and art.

**What is the best way for communities to reach you?**

Communities can contact me via email ([wesley.barker@nccommerce.com](mailto:wesley.barker@nccommerce.com)) and by telephone (336-907-0284) and I will be glad to set up meetings with and assist them in the best way I can. I also look forward to continuing to work within the Northwest Prosperity Zone!

*January 2020*