

CASE STUDY UPDATE | DILLSBORO, NC

JULY 2018



According to the Jackson County Economic Officer, Jackson County Green Energy Park got to a point where “it didn’t know what to do next.”

In the original case study, Dillsboro was noted for transforming an environmental pollutant into an economic asset - converting landfill methane gas into energy – through the creation of Jackson County Green Energy Park. Ten years later, does the Energy Park still run? What other ways can one gauge the economic status of Dillsboro today?

According to the Jackson County Economic Officer, Jackson County Green Energy Park got to a point where “it didn’t know what to do next.” The Energy Park has shifted away from hosting local artists and focused on its relationship with Western Carolina University. WCU holds a few classes in the space and makes it possible for Jackson County to expand and renovate the space. This pivot has been successful for the Energy Park and they are looking to expand in the next few years.

Meanwhile near downtown, Dillsboro realized it needed to diversify its economic portfolio. Within the last five years, the Great Smoky Mountain Train moved

its starting point base from downtown Dillsboro, which had a negative economic consequences for the small businesses there. The train taking off in Dillsboro brought in tourists who would arrive early, shop around, eat, and even spend the night before boarding the train the next morning. The small change in starting location had an economic effect of thousands of dollars for downtown Dillsboro. When this change occurred, Dillsboro realized it had little to offer to bring in tourists who weren’t looking for arts and crafts or antiques.

Consequently, Dillsboro worked hard to bring other reasons into town to attract tourists. In the last few years, Dillsboro opened new restaurants and breweries, one of which was named Travel and Leisure top 25 barbeque joints in the nation. The new brewery, ‘Innovation Brewing’ was opened, and the ‘Innovation Station’, a sister restaurant to the brewery, is set to open in late 2018 summer. Opening the Innovation Station will create twenty full-time jobs and eighteen part-time jobs in Dillsboro. In addition, other businesses are also doing well. Currently, 90%

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of the commercial space downtown is occupied. The openings of new places to eat, drink, and shop, have brought larger hotels inside the city limits. All of these stores and openings have contributed to economic growth in Dillsboro since 2008.

But Dillsboro doesn't want to stop here, it has a plan for the future. It has aspirations to promote pedestrian connectivity. Since the river runs in close proximity to the downtown, it has plans to develop a river walk to promote pedestrians to spend time in Dillsboro. If more pedestrians walk the boardwalk, then more pedestrians will go downtown, and have a higher likelihood of spending money, bringing in revenue for the small businesses. It also wants to lean into the partnerships available to it, given its geographical location and size. Dillsboro sees value in working with the South County Commission, Southwestern NC Commission, Mountain West NC Partnership, and NC Department of Commerce in the future, whether it's for grants or other economic growth opportunities.

While Dillsboro is doing well overall, there are still some challenges. Broadband internet is not completely available, keeping the town behind the times to some extent. The town is also experiencing a housing shortage. As WCU grows as a university, students, faculty and staff will need more housing. Dillsboro is running out of vacant homes to help house faculty and students. The unemployment rate is also the lowest it has been in years – at roughly 4.5 – indicating employers have a hard time filling open positions, as majority of the capable and skilled workers are already employed.

In conclusion, Dillsboro has been adaptable to change, which has allowed it to grow. Jackson County Green Energy Park learned to shift its focus to where it could make money, which meant pivoting away from its original intentions and plans. Dillsboro also focused on the importance of partnerships; a reminder that small towns cannot do it alone, they have to learn how to work together. Dillsboro is a great example of what a growing and economically resilient small town can do to strategically improve its strengths and mitigate its weaknesses.

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