

Brevard, North Carolina



	Brevard
Population (2000)	6,643
Town budget (2006)	\$10 million ²⁰
Per capita income (2000)	\$18,260
Median household income (2000)	\$33,500
Poverty rate (2000)	11%
Minority population (2000)	15%
Proximity to urban center	34 miles to Asheville, N.C.
Proximity to interstate highway	30 miles
Strategic approach	Entrepreneurship
Time frame	2002-2007

Brevard is tapping into the business expertise within its retiree population as a tool for supporting local entrepreneurship. Over the past 10 years, Brevard has become a hot spot for baby-boomer retirees; over 60 percent of newcomers are retired. In 2002, this small mountain town's economy hit a wall, though, with numerous plant closures and 2,200 job layoffs. At that time, Transylvania County economic development director Mark Burrows turned to some of the retirees on his advisory board for help. Their suggestion: create a network of retirees to help new and existing businesses prosper and expand. The resulting Retiree Resource Network is a collection of over 65 retired businesspeople who provide top quality consulting and advising services to the businesses of Brevard and Transylvania County free of charge. In 2007, the network won the outstanding county program award from the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners and has served as a model for other rural areas with retirement communities.

Brevard capitalizes on the economic value of retirees, and not just as consumers. Local retirees assemble an award-winning network of "consultants," who support new and existing businesses with expertise from an array of business backgrounds.

The community and its history

Named for Dr. Ephraim Brevard, a Revolutionary War colonel, the city of Brevard is nestled in the mountains of western North Carolina. Transylvania County, of which Brevard is the county seat, is rich in scenic beauty with over 250 waterfalls. In 2005, tourism generated nearly \$70 million in revenue for Transylvania County, and many of these tourists are now retiring in Brevard.²¹ A recent article in *Modern Retirement* reported Brevard as one of the top 10 cities for retirement in 2005.

²⁰ Interview with Joe Albright, Brevard city manager, on May 15, 2007

²¹ Transylvania County Economic Development website: econdev.transylvaniacounty.org/Tourism.htm. Accessed on May 15, 2007.

While Brevard's tourism industry and population have been climbing, its economy bottomed out in 2002 when three large employers closed their doors. An x-ray film manufacturer owned by DuPont (600 employees), the Ecusta paper mill (1,200 employees) and a textile mill (300 employees) all closed in 2002, laying off a combined 2,200 workers. In the wake of the plant closures, Transylvania County economic development officials pondered how to go forward. After deliberating for several months, county economic development director Mark Burrows and his advisory board created an economic development strategic plan to begin rebuilding the economy. One component of the plan was to leverage the intellectual expertise and experience of the retirees coming to town. "Retirees bring both financial capital and intellectual capital to their new homes and communities," said David Guice, former chairman of the Transylvania County Board of Commissioners. "They can help existing companies to prosper and expand, foster new business start-ups and make contacts with companies from outside the area who may be interested in relocating to the County."²²

The strategy

The city of Brevard worked with Transylvania County to assemble a network of retirees who provide a range of services to entrepreneurs and local small business owners. Initially, the network was just a few businessmen who met informally. After receiving Community Development Block Grant funding, the county economic development office was able to hire a permanent network coordinator. In 2004, Burrows and Guice approached one of their volunteer board members, Bill Layton, himself a retiree with executive experience in three major corporations, to coordinate the Retiree Resource Network.

Layton accepted the offer and set to work getting out information about the new program. Tapping his own social networks and those of others, Layton began building a database of retired businesspeople. These personal invitations were critical to the growth of the network, now 68 people strong, and the list of consultants reads like a "Who's Who." "We have people with every kind of business experience you can imagine," said Layton, "from human resources to engineering to marketing, finance and accounting. Many have experience with top corporations and Fortune 500 companies."

With the database growing, Layton set up the consultation process for prospective clients. The process begins when a local entrepreneur or existing business owner contacts Layton at the county office. Layton schedules a visit and assesses the business issue at hand. Afterward, he uses this information to select the person with the most relevant experience from his pool of consultants. At this point, the business owner and consultant are introduced to each other and begin working together.

²² Burrows, Mark. "Innovative Program Spurs Economic Development When Three Major Manufacturers Close." Press Release, March 10, 2006.

Since forming in 2004, Retiree Resource Network members have met with over 25 local businesses, new start-ups and firms relocating into the county. Jim Leblow, CEO of Solid Surface Arts, was looking to expand his business when he contacted the network. “We needed someone to help with hiring issues,” he said. “Mr. Layton assigned me a former human resources manager from Motorola who rolled his sleeves up and shared his former company’s hiring and review techniques. Without his help, I would have had to pay top dollar for a consultant and never could have afforded it. The network is invaluable to every small business in this community.” The guidance seems to have worked out well. Leblow said his company has gone from four employees in 2006 to 15 employees currently. In the words of Layton, the Retiree Resource Network is a “terrific use of available resources” and is equipping new and existing business owners with the skills to flourish in the 21st century.

What are the lessons from this story?

Entrepreneurs need direct, customized assistance. This story demonstrates that small towns should seek innovative ways to provide individualized assistance to local entrepreneurs. General business training for entrepreneurs is a worthy first step in a local support strategy. Going beyond general issues into specific challenges facing a range of entrepreneurs is where small town leaders can add maximum value to their efforts. Every entrepreneur is different, and their needs vary enormously. Direct, customized assistance provided by Brevard’s Retiree Resource Network is one way to move local entrepreneurs toward being engines for job creation.

Retirees in small towns can be economic development assets. Brevard provides an excellent example of how retirees can be active in community life and economic development efforts. Often these retirees bring a professional expertise not common in small towns. In an era of global competition, such expertise is potentially invaluable to small town entrepreneurs. Small town leaders, especially those in towns receiving an influx of retirees, can look for ways to leverage the combined expertise of their new residents for community benefit. Brevard and Transylvania County have taken their local retiree network to the next level and are using the network as a differentiating service when marketing their community to new businesses.

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