

CASE STUDY UPDATE | BAKERSVILLE, NC

2019



Bakersville's ongoing cultivation of the arts community and the resulting galleries and shops has helped to keep the tax base from declining.

For Bakersville, NC, the original case study from 2008 focused on the town's development of a creek walk—a move designed to revive the new floodplain, draw the community together, support an artist-based downtown economy, and attract tourists to the area. The project was piloted by the Bakersville Improvement Group (BIG), a year-round volunteer group that works to revitalize downtown through various projects. BIG's partnership with multiple organizations (including the now-closed nonprofit, Handmade in America) helped the community gain the necessary funding for the Bakersville Creek Walk. Since then, BIG continues to channel efforts into maintenance of original projects such as the creek walk, as well as sponsor new ideas.

While tourism remains an important sector in Bakersville's economy, the overall employment in the county has suffered over the last 20 years due to plant closings, which serves to exacerbate the decline in population growth. BIG's secretary, Bob Hensley, shares that the town has been static for the last two census counts and young folks are leaving the area for work.

However, the town continues to seek opportunity in adversity. For example, although the tax base was decimated by the flooding of 1998, Bakersville's ongoing cultivation of the arts community and the resulting galleries and shops has helped to keep the base from declining.¹

The town's creek walk has witnessed several updates in the last ten years, such as the inclusion of a rhododendron garden. The biggest additions are a restroom facility added near the pavilion in 2013, and a children's playground that opened in 2014. The town also received an \$8,000 "Kids in Parks TRACK Trail" grant for the Bakersville Creek Walk in 2018; the creek walk was outfitted with free nature activity guides for children and families to encourage engagement on the one-mile paved walkway along Cane Creek.

In addition, the creek walk is home to multiple events throughout the year, including the Rhododendron Craft Fair which is held during the town's Rhododendron

¹ Email interview with Bob Hensley on August 14th, 2019.

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Festival. The crafts portion of the creek walk is “a local favorite with artists and visitors alike; many returning year after year,”² and changes are annually made to further increase the viability of the event. According to Hensley, the town’s Rhododendron Festival mostly continues to grow each year with best estimates at 3500+ visitors attending the 2-day event. As the nightly street dances grow, space is now becoming an issue, but Hensley points out that is a good issue to have.

The original case study details Bakersville’s strategy to attract and retain Main Street retailers, including artist studios, to draw tourist dollars into the local economy. Although art studios have not materialized as originally envisioned, the number of art galleries has increased. Four are now open—a significant amount for a town of 450 people—with one being a studio/gallery. Hensley says, “The art community has used its networking power to attract and sustain those there and include newcomers as well.” In addition, the town’s website supports its artist base with a directory that includes contact information for the dozens of professional working artists in the community.³

Bakersville’s downtown area has also seen changes. According to Hensley, a new café/sandwich shop has opened and prospered in the past year, as well as an antiques/frame shop. A food truck is doing well adjacent to the post office, two clothing shops have opened, and the laundromat has been refurbished and reopened. There are currently two vacant structures in the downtown area which are for sale, and Hensley adds that “time will tell on these.”

Before the flooding in 1998, Bakersville was beginning to work with Handmade in America representatives to draft a community plan which included the renovation of the historic courthouse on Main Street. In 2010, the town’s original plan was realized after the Mitchell County Historic Courthouse Foundation helped to secure \$1.2 million “with less than 1% from local tax funds. Funders include[d] the State Employees Credit Union, the North Carolina Rural Center [...] and many contributions from the people of Mitchell County.”⁴

For advice to other practitioners, Hensley suggests “using the Handmade in America model for first employing an independent assessment of the community and following that to create a work plan broken down into achievable steps. Then create the necessary group structures to plan and implement the plans. Also, at least every 2-3 years, re-visit the assessment and plans and take stock of where you are.” Although recent and future planned school consolidations have and will impact the area in an undetermined way, the town’s festivals and ongoing events continue to support the local economy while bringing the community together—a further example of community development projects which can lead to economic outcomes.

² <http://www.ncrhododendronfestival.org/craft-fair.html>

³ <http://www.bakersville.com/artist-directory.html>

⁴ https://bakersville.typepad.com/bakersville_nc/2010/05/mitchell-county-historic-courthouse-grand-opening-celebration.html

CASE STUDY UPDATE | HAYESVILLE, NC

2019



Hayesville has leveraged its cultural heritage and natural assets to promote tourism, which in turn has allowed a number of local businesses to flourish.

For a town of fewer than 400 people, Hayesville has launched a number of economic development initiatives. Since 2006, their economic development strategy has focused on its connection to the Cherokee Indians and highlighted its built and natural assets. Rob Tiger, small business owner, community leader, and longtime member of the Clay County Community Revitalization Association (CCRA), spoke to the changes Hayesville has undergone in the last ten years, since the original case study about the rural western North Carolina town was published.

In 2006, the CCRA launched several community development projects. Originally, the CCRA wanted to move several historical buildings into one location to recreate an older version of Hayesville for tourists to easily “step back in time.” However, upon closer inspection, the buildings were more distressed and less historic than originally anticipated and moving them proved too costly. Instead, the organization focused its efforts on constructing an outdoor exhibit highlighting the communities’ rich cultural ties with the Cherokee

Indians. Using grant money and assistance from a DesignCorps architectural intern, site preparation and design started in 2007 to build two summer structures and a storage structure from the 1650-1750 time period. It opened in 2009, and has since hosted over 10,000 grade school students as well as college students from three different universities.¹ Programming includes guided tours and cultural activities. A two-mile trail loop connects the Homestead Exhibit to another Cherokee heritage site, Spikebuck Mound. In addition to the outdoor sites, the Clay County Historical and Arts Museum is home to a collection of Cherokee artifacts including baskets, quilts, masks and carvings. The town is also in the process of renovating the historic Clay County Jail. Built in 1912, the building is now home to the Old Jail Museum and the arts council. With a grant from Preservation North Carolina, the CCRA will be able to complete the building renovation, adding event space and meeting rooms upstairs to support community events and private parties.

¹ <https://www.blueridgeheritage.com/destinations/choerokee-home-stead-exhibit/>

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In addition to its cultural assets, Hayesville boasts proximity to federally protected forests and miles of hiking and biking trails. The Jackrabbit Mountain Bike and Hiking Trails System currently has 15 miles of trail with plans to expand. The project was developed through a collaboration between CCRA and Southern Appalachian Bicycling Association but construction was a community effort involving government entities, community-based organizations and local businesses. The trail systems serves not only to support tourism and environmental conservation, but also to promote recreation and fitness among Clay County residents. To that effect, Eat Smart Move More North Carolina recently awarded grant funding to Clay County to promote increased physical activity through mountain biking.²

Visitors to the cultural sites and trail systems can also find a number of restaurants downtown. Within the past few years, five establishments have opened including a brewery, tavern and three “farm-to-table” restaurants. These businesses are renovating storefronts and properties downtown including an old gas station. One of the most successful restaurants is The Copperdoor, which was established in 2006. Hayesville has leveraged its cultural heritage and natural assets to promote tourism, which in turn has allowed a number of local businesses to flourish.

² <https://sabacycling.com/bicycling/jackrabbit-mountain-bike-hiking-trail-system>