2021-2025

Strength in Numbers

2024 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy Interim Report

CENTRAL PINES
REGIONAL COUNCIL

01 What is Strength in Numbers?

Central Pines Regional Council (CPRC) 2021-2025 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS), Strength in Numbers, has three main objectives:

- Build regional capacity;
- Guide economic prosperity & resiliency; and
- Encourage regional collaboration through partnerships & investments.

Due to rapid growth that spans across the region's communities, a coordinated economic strategy is essential to ensure sustainable and equitable growth for all communities in the Central Pines region. Strength in Numbers is strategy-driven and is critical to maintain a robust, regional economic ecosystem.

As the region's Economic Development District (EDD), CPRC is tasked with overseeing the strategy's maintenance and implementation. Strength in Numbers is an important prerequisite to receive recognition as an EDD and strengthens applications for funding and investments in the region. The strategy is updated on a five-year cycle with annual progress reports published during interim years. Strength in Numbers was created digitally on Arc GIS Story Map and may be viewed at CPRC 2021-2025 Strength in Numbers. The following interim report highlights key activities performed over the past federal fiscal year, extending from October 1, 2023 to September 30, 2024.

* Central Pines Regional Council was formerly Triangle J Council of Governments.

02 Framework

Strength in Numbers has five goals centered around one common theme – Fostering Economic Inclusion. All strategies and action plans are inclusive of equity and resiliency, amplifying the economic growth of the region, while being sensitive to areas experiencing disinvestment and their varying socioeconomic and geographic needs.

Goal 1: Business Retention, Expansion & Innovation

Goal 2: Robust Infrastructure

Goal 3: Workforce Development

Goal 4: Connected & Vibrant Places

Goal 5: Economic Resiliency

03 Economic Activity

The Central Pines region continues to be recognized as one of the fastest growing regions in the country. Rapid growth is experienced among urban, suburban, and rural areas alike, resulting in many economic successes. However, such growth also brings unique challenges, such as capacity constraints at the local government level, inadequate inventory of viable and updated infrastructure to meet demand, and scarcity of human services and essential basic needs.

Additionally, one of the region's greatest challenges continues to be our widening income, wealth, and health gap. This gap has been magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic and the welcoming of newcomers to the region, playing an influential role in raising the standard of living. Such population and economic growth are not projected to slow down in the region, and the CEDS can be used as a supplemental tool to help the region respond both intentionally and equitably.

04 2024 Implementation

Home Repair

CPRC continues to administer multiple grant awards to implement health and safety-related repairs in income qualified, senior, and disabled households. In FY2024 we began tracking data around the number and types of households supported. Since 2021, our programs have repaired 158 houses throughout Chatham, Durham, Lee, Wake, and Harnett counties. Of the 158 homes, 88 have identified at the 50% Area Median Income (AMI) level or below. Additionally, 107 of the households are Black, 24 White, 3 Hispanic, 4 Multiracial, and 18 provided no response. CPRC will continue to track our home repair efforts on an annual basis, to best determine if and how we can have broader outreach to various populations.

Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Lead Capacity Building Program

In partnership with Rebuilding Together of the Triangle (RTT), CPRC is leveraging our HUD Lead Capacity Building grant award to build upon our current home repair programs, educate community members on the negative health impacts that lead in homes can have, as well provide educational opportunities and resources for local contractors to receive the necessary credentials to abate lead in homes. Beginning in 2025, we will begin testing lead in more homes throughout this program, and will even deploy lead abatement practices in a handful of homes.

Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Youth Homelessness System Improvement Grant Award

CPRC received a $1,660,131 grant award from HUD to help build a regional infrastructure and prioritization process that best supports youth experiencing homelessness or at risk of experiencing homelessness. This collaborative effort will engage youth throughout the planning process to strengthen their leadership and decision making opportunities. Funding will also allow us to conduct an inventory in Chatham, Durham, Orange, and Wake counties, recognizing infrastructure and services available, and areas where greater investment is needed. This is a 30-month performance period.

04 2024 Implementation

Current and Long Range Planning Technical Assistance

Communities of all sizes throughout the CPRC region are experiencing capacity constraints around zoning administration, planning support, and implementation of planning studies - such as land use plans and housing studies. In 2024, CPRC expanded staff capacity to include another land use planner, tasked with seeking where the greatest needs exist and how CPRC can best support. As a result, we are currently helping two or our smaller towns, with a population of less than 1,000, to administer their Unified Devlepment Ordinance and land use plan. We are also providing technical assistance in various communities, serving as a reviewer and thought lead for comprehensive transportation plans and affordable housing studies. This has allowed has to create templates for certain processes that can be mirrored in smaller communities - which can streamline efficiencies and development approval processes.

04 2024 Implementation

Grant Assistance

Through CPRC's Grant Assistance Program, staff have been able to increase internal capabilities, in addition to external capacity. Roles include researching grants, strategic project development, partnership building, grant writing and reviewing, grant administration, and working with funding partners. The Grant Assistance program and its model have been nationally recognized, resulting in peers from across the country seeking feedback on how it was built and is maintained. In 2024, CPRC's Grant Assistance Program received an award from the National Association of Regional Councils (NARC), and staff presented at the National Association of Development Organizations (NADO). Additional 2024 successes include:

- Funding received in FY 2024 (July 1, 2023 to June 30, 2024): $19,151,904 awarded, with $12,566,652 awarded to disadvantaged communities. Examples include ~$390,000 for the Sanford Agricultural Marketplace, $250,000 in Rolesville for accessible park improvements, and $55,000 for the Town of Cameron to update their playground equipment.
- Current members off the program include 3 counties and 14 municipalities; spanning small, mid, and large-sized communities.
- Awarded applications split equally among small, mid, and large-sized communities.
- Multi-jurisdictional proposals were awarded addressing topics such as youth homelessness, digital inclusion, and resiliency hub planning.

04 2024 Implementation

Grant Administration

Through grant administrative services, CPRC continues to play an integral role in increasing capacity for member governments and regional partners. This includes administration of federal and state grant awards, local and regional projects, among other administrative-related services. Our support helps our members of all sizes to compliantly deploy state and federal dollars, while achieving proposed outcomes and diligently completing require reporting and financial processes.

Connected Triangle +

CPRC is a part of a regional collaborative, spearheaded by the City of Raleigh - with a focus on testing regional data sharing concepts and strategies. The group has identified various faucets within the sustainability spectrum as important, including topics such as air quality, stormwater practices, among others. The next phase is to partner with startups that address these sustainability topics, while allowing partners to share data. Participating communities are still working through signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), defining the importance and purpose, scope of work, and responsibilities of each party within the collaborative.

04 2024 Implementation

Connected Region Guide

CPRC is undergoing the development of a Connected Region Guide and process. The Connected Region Guide will build on successful regional plans developed across the country to create a shared vision, goals, and success mechanisms and metrics in the CPRC region - that can guide local implementation of transportation networks, housing investment, and land use practices more equitably and seamlessly. The Connected Region Guide will focus on issues of crucial importance while relying on critical inputs of expertise from world-class anchor institutions, the community voices, and lived experiences of those traditionally underrepresented in the challenges and choices of the region, all through a lens of equitable and sustainable engagement and investment.

Data Dashboard

CPRC has drafted a data dashboard that includes public facing data on a local and regional scale. The data dashboard includes maps, including interactive maps; local, regional, and statewide data and their sources; and blogs that can provide educational content around data quality, CPRC projects, among other topics. Once completed, the dashboard will serve as a valuable resource to CPRC staff and our external partners - further strengthening grant applications and guiding desicion makers.

Brownfields

CPRC continues to work with our environmental consultant to complete Phase I and Phase II assessments and brownfield-related planning projects under our Environmental Protection Act (EPA) grant award. In partnership with Piedmont Triad Regional Council and West Piedmont Planning District Commission, located in Virginia, the tri-county region began deploying funding for brownfield cleanup work, under a Revolving Loan Fund (RLF). The funding can be used as a financing gap tool, to help developers and local governments get projects across the finish line.

04 2024 Implementation

Tri-COG FEEDS

The Tri-COG FEEDS (Food Ecosystem Economic Development Strategy) is a partnership between Central Pines Regional Council, Upper Coastal Plain Council of Governments, and Kerr-Tar Council of Governments. The three COGs used the last couple of years to identify the infrastructure needed to shorten food supply chains, drive economic development, enhance resilient practices, foster equity, and increase rural-urban connectivity among the 17-county region. The partners have recently created an Implementation Strategy, which will serve as a guiding document to help secure future funding, achieve desired goals, and continue to improve efficiencies and supply changes across the larger region. Local and regional food system planning and support remains a strategy identified in Strength in Numbers.

Clean Energy and Green Sector Workforce Planning

In partnership with CPRC's Environment and Resilience Focus Area, in addition to other regional and statewide partners, CPRC is working to identify ways to leverage and build upon the work of others to create inclusive pathways to green economy jobs. This includes the education that comes with encouraging new and incumbent workers to enter related industries, recognizing that many of these careers offer family paying wages with opportunities for sustainability and economic mobility.

Digital Inclusion Planning

CPRC is supporting the development of a digital opportunity plan in three of our counties - Lee, Johnston, and Orange counties. Development of these plans will help to position these counties and their partners to be more competitive for future funding opportunities, while also creating a unified vision, strategies, and feasible ways to implement these strategies. Closing the digital divide aligns with Strength and Numbers, in addition to the State of North Carolina's Digital Inclusion Plan. Such access is important for one to advance in education and employment opportunities, and is necessary to receive essential information, services, and the ability to feel socially connected in a digital world.

05 Evaluation of Progress

The evaluation process allows CPRC and the region to reflect on implementation of the CEDS in FY 2024. Evaluation allows for adjustments to be made for improvement, and to continue to build momentum where able. CPRC leverages our partnership with EDA and other federal and local programs to build upon the five themes below.

Partnership Building:
Utilized to reduce duplication, leverage investment, and execute greater intentionality with implementation efforts.

Strategic Planning & Foresight:
Instilling proactivity can establish a more unified sense of direction and improve responses to changing environments.

Capacity Building:
Processes and implementation derived from the CEDS result in building internal and external capacity, strengthening local and regional communities and economies.

Member Government Support:
The CEDS aligns with the regional plans and the needs of our 48-member governments and regional partners, to define locally-driven, regional strategies.

Data-Informed:
Measurement of performance metrics helps to guide the CEDS process, focusing on quantitative data and impactful experiences uncovered through storytelling.

05 Evaluation of Progress

Within each interim report, CPRC identifies a list of areas within the CEDS, where improvements regarding planning and implementation could be made. The 2023 areas for improvement are outlined below, with a description of how each were or were not improved during 2024.

- Improvement Area #1: Update performance metrics to be more reflective of the region with quantitative measurements.
  - No real progress to date, so this will continue to remain on the Areas of Improvement list for the upcoming year.
- Improvement Area #2: Increase storytelling to highlight successes of CEDS implementation and local accomplishments.
  - Accomplished through the Connected Region Guide process and working with Capital B Broadcasting to illustrate the work that CPRC does in the region (through articles and visualization).
  - We have increased storytelling through our home repair programs, collecting quotes and pictures related to the impacts that our home repair programs are having on its beneficiaries.
- Improvement Area #3: Update county profiles to be utilized for grants, reports by CPRC, and member governments.
  - Staff have produced a first draft of a data dashboard, which includes municipal and county profiles, in addition to topic specific related data (i.e. data specific to broadband and digital inclusion).
- Improvement Area #4: Instill the CEDS more seamlessly within conversations and projects of other focus area leads at CPRC.
  - Staff who work within the EDD have met frequently with leads for other CPRC Focus Areas at CPRC, ensuring alignment with other projects and processes.
- Improvement Area #5: Increase resources and ability to provide additional support to member governments related to planning and zoning.
  - CPRC hired a new staff member who has the skillset and credentials to help expand CPRC's planning and zoning support services. Their expertise has been critical in us being able to support individual communities, while amplifying templates and educational materials that could be replicated and used more broadly across the region.

06 What's Next?

- Continue to acquire greater investment into the region by tapping into the influx of federal, local, and state dollars and technical assistance opportunities afforded by the American Rescue Plan Act, Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and Inflation Reduction Act.
- Align the work of the Community and Economic Development, Housing, Transportation, and Aging Focus Areas to meet the demands of the growing aging population and increased need for human and social services.
    - Increase home repair investment dollars and programs related to home modification efforts in homes of older adults and decrease energy-burdened households by implementing energy efficiency upgrades and weatherization.
- Develop and deploy a grant administration training for our member governments, focused on better preparing our members governments to receive and compliantly spend federal dollars.
- Produce quality data and performance metrics that illustrate the need for various shared-staff positions across the region. One example may include the support for a shared staff person related to digital inclusion planning.
- Complete the final version of the data dashboard for public viewing. We are still collecting feedback from staff and our member governments to improve the final product.

Areas of Improvement

- Update performance metrics to be more reflective of the region with quantitative and qualitative measurements.
- Develop and test regional housing solutions, to increase buy-in for regional strategies. One example includes the development of a regional revolving loan fund to bridge financial barriers for affordable developers.
- Leverage the Triangle Trends Report as a tool to be used throughout the region.
- Align clean energy and green workforce efforts with current projects across the region and state, ensuring that we are reducing duplication and leveraging resources and strengths.

07 Let's Stay Connected

For more information about CPRC's Economic Development District (EDD), scan the QR code to the right or visit our website HERE.

Want more information on Strength in Numbers or interested in becoming a partner? Want to host an engagement opportunity or have ideas on how we can broaden representation for our region's CEDS?

Contact Lindsay Whitson, Community & Economic Development Director

Development of Strength in Numbers would not be possible without participation from a broad range of stakeholders, elected officials, and members of the public. CPRC would like to thank all those involved and is excited to continue to create and maintain robust partnerships throughout the region to help build capacity, guide economic resilience and prosperity, and strengthen collaborative efforts as we plan for a more equitable regional economy. A special thank you to EDA for their investment in our partnership and region.