CENTRAL PINES
REGIONAL COUNCIL

Strength in Numbers

2026 CEDS Interim Report

Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy
October 1, 2025 - September 30, 2026

Prepared by Central Pines Regional Council

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Section 1: What is Strength in Numbers?

Central Pines Regional Council's (CPRC) 2021–2026 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS), Strength in Numbers, has three main objectives:

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

Because rapid growth is occurring across the Central Pines region, a coordinated economic strategy is essential to ensure that development is sustainable and balanced for all communities. 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 ArcGIS Story Map and may be viewed at CPRC 2021-2026 Strength in Numbers. The following interim report highlights key activities performed over the past federal fiscal year, extending from October 1, 2025 to September 30, 2026.

Section 2: Framework

Strength in Numbers has five goals centered around one common theme – Fostering Economic Opportunity. All strategies and action plans include an emphasis on resilience, amplifying the economic growth of the region, while being sensitive to areas experiencing trends of disinvestment.

Table 1. Strength in Numbers goals

Goal	Focus area
Goal 1	Business Retention, Expansion & Innovation
Goal 2	Robust Infrastructure
Goal 3	Workforce Development
Goal 4	Connected & Vibrant Places
Goal 5	Economic Resilience

Section 3: 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 a widening income, wealth, and health gap. This gap was magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic and an influx of newcomers, which has played 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 responsibly.

Section 4: 2026 Implementation

CEDS implementation activities demonstrate CPRC's role in **building local capacity, coordinating regional solutions, and positioning communities for future investment**. The U.S. Economic Development Administration's (EDA) support allows CPRC to move beyond responding to individual funding opportunities and provide proactive project development assistance, particularly for smaller communities with limited internal capacity, while advancing EDA's five priority areas:

1. Critical Infrastructure
2. Workforce Development
3. Innovation and Entrepreneurship
4. Manufacturing
5. Economic Recovery and Resilience

Highlights of work conducted from October 1, 2025 through September 30, 2026, under CPRC's EDD, are summarized below. The summaries also acknowledge which EDA investment area(s) they represent.

Table 2. FY 2026 projects by EDA investment priority

Project	CI	WD	IE	MFG	ERR
Grant Development and Support for Smaller Communities	X	X	X	X	X
Regional Housing Strategy and Economic Competitiveness		X			X
Strategic Project Development and Local Capacity Building	X	X	X	X	X
Resilience and Hazard Mitigation Capacity	X	X			X
Utility Capacity and Financial Sustainability	X				X
Regional Water and Wastewater Coordination	X				X
Regional Solid Waste Planning	X	X			X
Alignment with CPRC's Updated Strategic Plan	X	X	X	X	X

CI = Critical Infrastructure; WD = Workforce Development; IE = Innovation and Entrepreneurship; MFG = Manufacturing; ERR = Economic Recovery and Resilience

Grant Development and Support for Smaller Communities

CPRC continued to provide technical assistance and grant development support to communities of all sizes. This included supporting the Town of Chapel Hill's EDA application, which is still under review by EDA. The application is seeking funding for an implementation-focused economic development plan designed to catalyze private investment, strengthen economic resilience, and generate high-quality jobs along one of the region's most strategic growth corridors (North-South Bus Rapid Transit Corridor). The proposed project responds directly to economic vulnerabilities highlighted by Tropical Storm Chantal. CPRC staff also assisted the Towns of Broadway and Princeton with grant applications designed to address local infrastructure and community development needs. CPRC's support led to Princeton receiving over $80,000 to revitalize a two-acre plot that will house the new Princeton Community Center. This list is not exhaustive of the last federal fiscal year.

Additionally, CPRC staff offered grant administrative services throughout the year, including an in-depth training on how to compliantly administer federal and state funded grant awards. This is an area that many local governments have identified as needing training opportunities for their staff, and EDA's investment in CPRC's EDD affords more capacity to be able to offer these types of training and technical assistance.

*****Grant Development and Support for Smaller Communities*** *relates to all five of EDA's investment priorities.*

Regional Housing Strategy and Economic Competitiveness

Housing affordability, supply, and preservation remain significant challenges across the region and are increasingly interconnected with economic and workforce development. Employers' ability to attract and retain workers depends, in part, on the availability of appropriate and affordable housing. In response, CPRC has begun analyzing existing local housing plans and strategies across the region to identify common needs, gaps, and opportunities for regional solutions that can strengthen housing stability while supporting economic and workforce outcomes. This review will be completed in fall 2026 and will help CPRC's members create shared priorities to develop a coordinated regional approach to housing that supports workforce attraction, retention, and long-term economic competitiveness.

CPRC continues to leverage other programs focused on housing rehabilitation and preservation to further support the EDD. CPRC administers and deploys home repair programs across Chatham, Durham, Lee, Wake, and Harnett counties, supporting efforts to preserve the region's existing housing stock and address critical repair needs. CPRC is also expanding its housing preservation portfolio to include Cumberland County, increasing the geographic reach of these services. These programs are important to the regional economy because they protect the existing housing stock, support workforce stability, and generate local spending and jobs. EDA's investment allows the EDD to have increased capacity to seek out different opportunities that allow staff and local governments to engage in additional private and public investments for home repair.

**__Regional Housing Strategy and Economic Competitiveness__ relates to the following EDA investment priorities: Workforce Development, and Economic Recovery and Resilience.*

Strategic Project Development and Local Capacity Building

CPRC continued to provide strategic project development, planning and zoning support, and grant assistance to member governments of all sizes. EDA's investment enhances CPRC's capacity to proactively help communities develop well-defined projects, advance planning initiatives, implement programs, and identify capital needs in alignment with community priorities. This assistance strengthens local capacity and positions communities to compete more effectively for additional public and private investment.

**__Strategic Project Development and Local Capacity Building__ relates to all five of EDA's investment priorities.*

Resilience and Hazard Mitigation Capacity

CPRC, in partnership with three Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) and Duke University, applied to the U.S. Department of Transportation's (USDOT) Promoting Resilient Operations for Transformative, Efficient, and Cost-saving Transportation (PROTECT) program. The proposed

initiative would develop a regional surface transportation resilience strategy focused on protecting critical infrastructure and strengthening the region's ability to anticipate and respond to transportation vulnerabilities. EDA's investment provided additional capacity for CPRC to coordinate across regional partners and develop a competitive, collaborative application.

Additionally, CPRC staff began assessing resilience and hazard mitigation needs among smaller local governments through targeted interviews. This work is intended to document existing local efforts, identify capacity and resource gaps, and determine where CPRC can provide technical assistance, coordination, planning support, or other regional resources. The assessment will help establish a clearer framework for strengthening resilience and hazard mitigation capacity among communities that may have limited internal staff or resources. This work is imperative because of the increased intensity and frequency of storms and flooding the region continues to experience, which has significant impacts on the workforce and local and regional economies.

*****Resilience and Hazard Mitigation Capacity*** *relates to the following EDA investment priorities: Critical Infrastructure, Workforce Development, and Economic Recovery and Resilience.*

Regional Water and Wastewater Coordination

Staff continued to support regional water and wastewater partnerships focused on projecting future infrastructure needs, evaluating demands on existing systems, and strengthening regional monitoring and coordination related to emerging contaminants. These efforts support more informed infrastructure planning and help communities prepare for future growth, regulatory requirements, and system demands. CPRC provides regional support for these programs, which allows for cost efficiency, multijurisdictional planning, and consistent data collection among participating communities. These projects are significantly important to the region since well-maintained water infrastructure and adequate system capacity supports sustainable economic development – especially as the region continues to grow.

*****Regional Water and Wastewater Coordination*** *relates to the following EDA investment priorities: Critical Infrastructure, and Economic Recovery and Resilience.*

Regional Solid Waste Planning

CPRC continued activities aligned with the goals and priorities established through the Regional Solid Waste Consortium. This included advancing a Request for Proposals (RFP) process to select a qualified vendor to conduct a regional solid waste needs assessment. Although the RFP is being paid for out of another funding source and not EDA, the assessment will examine current and future infrastructure needs as well as potential workforce challenges. The findings will help inform cross-jurisdictional planning, investment priorities, and implementation strategies for solid waste

management across the region. CPRC's EDD will help to advance some of the recommendations outlined in the assessment.

**__Regional Solid Waste Planning__ relates to the following EDA investment priorities: Critical Infrastructure, Workforce Development, and Economic Recovery and Resilience.*

Alignment with Central Pines Regional Council's Updated Strategic Plan

CPRC adopted a new Strategic Plan that went into effect on July 1, 2026. One of the new plan's goals is: *Support an increase in local and regional investment and capacity to expand assets that advance community development and economic opportunity.* This goal is in alignment with CPRC's CEDS and the technical support that CPRC's EDD provides. This alignment is recognized because the CEDS is a central document that helps to guide a lot of the work that CPRC conducts, so continuity between the two documents is imperative.

**__Alignment with Central Pines Regional Council's Updated Strategic Plan__ relates to all five of EDA's investment priorities.*

Section 5: Evaluation

The evaluation process allows CPRC and the region to reflect on implementation of the CEDS in FY 2026. Evaluation allows for adjustments to be made for improvement, and to continue to build momentum where able. CPRC leverages EDA's partnerships and other federal, state, and local programs to build upon the five themes below.

Table 3. Evaluation themes

Theme	Description
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 CPRC's 50 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.

Section 6: What's Next?

In January 2027, the full rewrite of the region's CEDS will start, ensuring its alignment with current regional plans already adopted, in addition to CPRC's Strategic Plan. Additionally, the updated CEDS will leverage CPRC's programs and resources mentioned throughout this report. With this full update, CPRC imagines some of the strategies looking different, and creating a process to track performance metrics in a more intentional and measurable way. CPRC will also continue to engage with local governments and regional partners to acquire greater public investment, which will undoubtedly spur additional private investment. Because of CPRC's partnership with EDA, CPRC can significantly expand capacity throughout the region, which is deemed critical support for smaller, rural communities.

Acknowledgements

CPRC extends its sincere gratitude to EDA for its continued partnership and guidance. EDA's support made the work highlighted in this report possible and strengthens CPRC's ability to expand economic opportunity across the seven-county region.