

Opt-In Project Explores Uncharted Planning Territory in Southwestern NC

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“We’re closer to five other state capitals than we are to Raleigh.” That’s a phrase you’re likely to hear within the first five minutes of a conversation with leaders in the far western region of western North Carolina.

Although it may sound like a simple observation on geography, the obstacles our isolated location and rugged terrain create for regional planners and economic developers means that any attempt at a collaborative regional vision is likely to strain the limited capacities of existing governments and institutions. This is a difficult task, even in large metropolitan areas with plenty of leaders and resources to draw on. It is doubly so in a sparsely populated, rural region like ours.

These challenges are why the Opt-In SWNC visioning

initiative is so unique and so important. The initiative’s ambitions are to fill in research gaps, identify opportunities, and test alternative strategies to inform decision-making about economic development, transportation planning and the environment in the far western North Carolina counties.

Spawned from an impasse between federal agencies over the proposed east-west highway corridor through one of the most remote sections of the mountains, the Opt-In (short for Opportunity Initiative) effort encompasses Haywood, Jackson, Swain, Macon, Clay, Cherokee and Graham Counties and the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians.

The Initiative was managed by the Southwestern Commission Council of Governments on behalf of the region’s seven counties and 16 municipalities. A Leadership Council of elected officials, business professionals and nonprofit leaders from around the region acted as a steering committee.

Ultimately, though, this effort was run by the citizens and leaders of southwestern North Carolina, and the families, businesses and local governments in the seven westernmost counties and in the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians stand to reap its benefits.

Regional planning visions, in and of themselves, are nothing out of the ordinary and are increasingly relied upon to align development strategies with potential investment in an era of increased competition and diminished revenue sources. What makes this project distinctive is that it is the first of its kind, focused on an entirely rural region without a major metropolitan center. Depending on their location within the region, the counties and towns of the far west have connections with metro areas outside the region (i.e. Atlanta, Asheville and Chattanooga); however, there is no central job-generator, as with city-centered metro areas with rural exurbs. Adding to the Initiative’s uniqueness is the involvement of a sovereign nation - the Eastern Band of the Cherokee.

Project Scope

The purpose of the Opt-In initiative is to develop a long-term vision that guides policy-making decisions in the far west over the next 25 years. The Southwestern Commission established the foundation of the regional vision by working in active collaboration with citizens and leaders to identify and confirm broad goals and principles. Then – again in collaboration with those who live and work in the western counties -- the initiative tested the likelihood of achieving those goals through a broad range of strategies.

Whether counties or municipalities choose to implement all, some, or none of the vision’s components is up to them. This has been an opportunity exploration, not a legislative process, thus the name “Opt-In.” Local governments can determine how they want to use the information, directing the Southwestern Commission to incorporate elements of the vision into regional infrastructure planning. They can leverage the research for



Citizens of Southwestern North Carolina gathered to share ideas at community workshops in every jurisdiction within the Opt-In project area. *Images courtesy of the authors.*

their own purposes or they can choose not to do anything.

However, because the process is designed to incorporate the ideas and concerns of citizens and leaders through each phase, the effort is likely to produce decision-making tools that enjoy broad support.

The Team

The Opt-In project has been several years in the making. In the summer of 2012, the Southwestern Commission issued a Request for Proposals for a consulting team to assist in the process.

The commission chose a multiple-firm, 20-member team of experts led by the Atlanta-based Tunnell, Spangler & Walsh (TSW) to help coordinate the project. The team also featured two local consultants, Ben Brown of PlaceMakers and Stacy Guffey of Stacy J Guffey & Associates, both of Macon County.

Funding for the project came from a diverse mix of regional, state and national sources, including the Southwestern Commission, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) and the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC). Additional staff support has been provided by the North Carolina Appalachian Regional Commission Program.

The Process

Compounding the challenges regional planners face in the far west is the area's reputation for distrusting perceived government intrusion into private lives. Planning efforts are often met with a skeptical eye, regardless of their intentions to bolster the regional economy and improve the quality of life of residents.

Bearing this in mind, Opt-In utilized a public input process involving hundreds of one-on-one and small group meetings. The idea was to minimize as much as possible the number of meetings people were asked to attend, while still providing room for honest conversation in comfortable

settings to help allay citizens' fears that any changes would be forced upon them.

The outreach effort included public workshops in each county for development of the regional vision, as well as two charrettes – one in Cherokee County for a Comprehensive Plan, and one in Graham County for both a Comprehensive Plan and a Comprehensive Transportation Plan. "Transportation" as used here is not limited to just roads or highways, but the full range of mobility options, including rail, cycling, pedestrian, mass transit, county transit systems, etc.

The project team used the input from the initial rounds of one-on-one and small group meetings and combined it with statistical studies, mapping and other data to create a draft baseline vision. Then team members tested their observations in follow-up interviews and in the county-by-county public workshops. Out of the first round of workshops came a draft vision foundation supported by five "pillars":

- The Place We're Given (natural and cultural environment)
- The Places We Make (built environment)
- The Ways We Get Around (transportation)
- The Jobs We Need (economic policy-making)
- The Quality of Life We Expect (public health, education, small town life)

In round two of the workshops, participants explored scenarios that tested their appetite for making changes in decision-making approaches in order to achieve their goals. They provided their answers to key questions: What trade-offs might be necessary? Which trade-offs are acceptable? Which aren't?

By May 2014, the Opt-In team will deliver the complete package of deliverables: The regional vision, the two Comprehensive Plans for Graham and Cherokee Counties and the Comprehensive Transportation Plan for

Graham County. The deliverables will represent an historic collaboration in a complex region and – depending upon how local governments choose to apply them – guidelines for prioritizing choices and policies for decades to come.

Lessons Learned

The three strategies that worked well and made this process successful were:

- Bookending support from both the grassroots and regional leadership by developing a Leadership Council made up of area political, business and non-profit leaders.
- Taking the project to the participants by holding dozens of small group and one-on-one meetings where people live and work and by holding workshops in each of the jurisdictions.
- Using a multi stage process where the team checked in with stakeholders and the public and incorporated their input into the refinement of the regional vision.

The greatest challenge has been the one we recognized from the beginning – the complex geography of the region. Most communities are separated by mountain chains. Travelling between towns like Franklin and Robbinsville, in close proximity on a map, might take upwards of an hour, creating a psychological barrier as well as a physical one.

The Opt-In Initiative created a model that attempts to overcome historical obstacles to collaboration. Even if it achieves only modest advancements in the perspectives of regional leaders that we are “better together,” Opt-In’s efforts at collaboration are worth emulating.

For more information, including digital version of the draft regional vision, visit www.optinswnc.org.

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