



WHITE HOUSE COUNCIL ON  
STRONG CITIES, STRONG COMMUNITIES

# ROCKY MOUNT, NORTH CAROLINA

## SC2 ACCOMPLISHMENTS

### **The Strong Cities, Strong Communities Initiative (SC2)**

is an innovative approach for supporting cities experiencing population and job loss, persistent poverty, capacity constraints, and similar challenges in an era of dwindling resources. Each SC2 city shares a common narrative: despite having faced tremendous economic and demographic challenges for the last few decades, local leaders and stakeholders have a strong vision for change and seek a better federal partner.

Under SC2, communities including Rocky Mount, NC, received intensive technical assistance from federal interagency Community Solutions Teams that work in city hall to support the city's vision for economic development.

Through a cooperative partnership of more than 20 federal partners, and more than 40 state, regional and local partners, community leaders and local residents, the City of Rocky Mount and SC2 were able to make great progress on each of their three identified goals.

### MAJOR SC2 ACCOMPLISHMENTS IN ROCKY MOUNT

- Improving quality of life in underserved communities
- Growing the regional food economy
- Increasing job creation and talent development opportunities

## IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF LIFE IN UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES

### Monk-To-Mill Trail

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) provided technical assistance and funding for a rails-to-trails project that connects downtown residential neighborhoods to commercial districts, job opportunities, and the city's extensive park and greenway system. The trail system is named the Monk-to-Mill Trail in honor of Thelonious Monk, a famous jazz musician and Rocky Mount native. Because of the collaborative planning process, which included city staff and local stakeholders, project plans were expanded to include bike and pedestrian improvements on nearby streets, a new plaza honoring Thelonious Monk, and direct connections among the Imperial Centre for the Arts and Sciences, the library, the farmers market, and a mixed-use redevelopment called Rocky Mount Mills.

### Tar River Trek Project

Through SC2, USDA helped establish a coalition of regional stakeholders along 100 miles of the Tar River, from Rocky Mount to the coast, to develop a dual river sports and biking trail called the Tar River Trek. The coalition, which includes paddle trail associations, East Carolina University, the Cities of Rocky Mount, Tarboro, Greenville, and Washington, and several counties, plan to develop the Tar River Trek as a regional marketing partnership to grow small businesses and job opportunities in the multi-county region.

### EDA Technical Assistance for Business Development

The Economic Development Administration (EDA) and the USDA SC2 team members provided technical assistance to Rocky Mount to engage stakeholders around business development opportunities, including

a revolving loan fund initiative to provide gap-funding for companies creating jobs in the core business district. The SC2 team facilitated a regional tech-manufacturing summit to highlight the region's strength in logistics, education resources, skilled labor, and available facilities for tech businesses growing in the nearby Research Triangle.

### Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Technical Assistance

SC2 team members from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) provided technical training to increase city staff capacity to manage federal CDBG funds. This technical assistance resulted in funding for affordable housing developments in underserved neighborhoods and improved coordination with nonprofit partners working on privately funded affordable housing redevelopment projects. SC2 also worked closely with the city and HUD to facilitate the final stages of one of the largest housing redevelopment projects in the city. The \$9.1 million development of the Beal Street Square Apartments creates 80 units of affordable housing on lots purchased with HUD HOME and CDBG funding. When the one- and two-bedroom apartments are fully leased, they will more than double the number of residents occupying the Beal Street area.

### Curbside Community Improvement Project through Tactical Urbanism

The City of Rocky Mount partnering with AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC) to implement their plan. Through NCCC, a team of volunteers from the NCCC will work in three neighborhoods with a high concentration of vacant and blighted properties to deal with issues like overgrown shrubbery and unsightly plywood boards on vacant properties. The NCCC team will do a wide range of activities to clean up and enliven these neighborhoods, including activating the street by painting the plywood window and door coverings to look like windows and doors; painting street numbers on the curb; pressure washing sidewalks and walking

paths; cutting back out-of-hand vegetation; painting light fixtures and performing general maintenance such as debris and graffiti removal.

## Brownfield Assessments and Natural Remediation

SC2 team members from EPA assisted city staff to identify opportunities and funding for brownfields assessments on the city's inventory of former mill sites and dry cleaners. This work helped move forward development of the Monk-to-Mill Trail project, which connects poor urban neighborhoods to commercial areas and the city's park and greenway system. The clarity that brownfield assessments provide to potential developers have helped move along the redevelopment process for historic buildings in the downtown business districts of Rocky Mount and nearby Pinetops. Furthermore, these brownfield assessments have led to stronger relationships with EPA, USDA, and agricultural industry businesses to develop a plan to use natural remediation at the Planters Oil Mill site using trees and pollinator habitat. Increased pollinator habitat will help support growing honey bee production in the area.

## Community Health Roundtable and Workshops

The SC2 team convened a community health roundtable and workshop, bringing together 32 local, state, and federal partners to explore strategies and develop partnerships to improve health and wellness in the region. Participants included healthcare providers, educators, early childhood development advocates, wellness initiatives, foundations, and the faith community, along with five federal agencies including HUD, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and USDA's Food and Nutrition Service, Rural Development, and Farm Service Agency.

## Summer Meal Challenge

SC2 team members worked with local stakeholders to set goals and develop plans to drastically increase the number of children that have access to meals and learning opportunities during the summer. The SC2 team partnered with the faith community, city staff, nonprofits, school systems, state agencies to bring

together an informal coalition that increased the number of meal sites from 26 to 57 in one year. A more formal coalition formed in 2016 improve coordination and mutual support for additional meal sites in the Twin Counties.

## Health and Cancer Screening Initiative

SC2 team members from USDA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provided technical assistance to doctors at NASH/UNC Health Care to explore ways to increase access to screenings for cancer and other critical health concerns in rural areas of Rocky Mount. Additionally, the SC2 team city staff, OIC Family Medical Center, and the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) are working through DOD's Innovative Readiness Training program to bring a free dental and vision screening to Rocky Mount residents who would otherwise go without them.

## GROWING THE REGIONAL FOOD ECONOMY

### Technical Assistance to Support a Local Healthy Food System

SC2 team members from EPA and USDA helped city staff and local partners create a regional healthy foods coalition to better coordinate the work of nonprofits, faith-based organizations, educational institutions, and health care providers working on healthy food access issues. As a result of their strong collaboration, Rocky Mount was selected as one of 27 cities for the Local Foods, Local Places initiative, which included Federal support for 11 months of local partnership building, research, and planning to develop a Local Foods, Local Places plan. The plan outlines regional goals to explore specific opportunities and establish partners to grow local agriculture-based jobs, support agriculture-related intergenerational/youth empowerment, and increase access to healthy foods in at risk neighborhoods.



As an action specified in the Local Foods, Local Places Plan, SC2 team members from USDA provided technical assistance to the Down East Partnership for Children, an early childhood development nonprofit, to expand nutrition and healthy living education to at-risk families in Nash and Edgecombe Counties. Through this partnership effort, the number of sites where children can get free, healthy meals during the summer have increased. Also as a result of the plan, USDA SC2 team members facilitated three workshops for farmers, farmers' market managers, and regional food-related nonprofits to increase access to federal programs for minority women and veteran farmers. The workshops aimed to increase the use of electronic benefits transfers (EBT) so families receiving SNAP and WIC benefits have greater access to healthy foods and farmers can serve a wider local market.

Another key accomplishment from SC2's Local Foods, Local Places work is the creation of a local farm school from a partnership among the city of Rocky Mount, USDA, and Conetoe Family Life Center. The goal of the Farm School is to provide the training for students to become agricultural producers, owners, and operators. The school, established on site with Conetoe offers annual training for free to students and teaches not only agricultural productions, but also, farm, land and business, marketing, planning and sales and production.

## Community Garden Network

SC2 also helped the city engage local partners to establish a network of community gardens and educational opportunities around farm-to-table concepts, and promoting active healthy eating lifestyles. The community garden network has led to state and federal partners from USDA to develop a community and economic development strategy to offer similar assistance to other economically distressed communities in Nash and Edgecombe Counties.

# INCREASE JOB CREATION AND TALENT DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

## Colleges Building Capacity

SC2 and EPA's College/Underserved Community Partnership Program (CUPP) developed a network of six colleges and universities to provide ongoing technical assistance to the City of Rocky Mount and other Eastern North Carolina towns on a range of issues, from general management to specific policy priorities. SC2, Rocky Mount, and EPA also worked together to assist two local colleges, Nash Community College and North Carolina Wesleyan College, to develop a local coding program to help stimulate and foster tech-job opportunities, and to develop strategies for a community arts program and council.

## Arts and Rural Economies

SC2 team members from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and USDA identified the Art + Agriculture Conference hosted by Art-Force, a national nonprofit, as an opportunity for staff from the city's Imperial Centre for the Arts and Sciences. As a result of their participation, the city hosted Art-Force's Arts +Leadership: Powering Rural Economies conference.

## Rocky Mount Opportunities and Capacity SC2 Team

In Rocky Mount, the SC2 team lead helped the city develop the Rocky Mount Capacity and Opportunities Team, comprised of seven city employees and one local advisor. This team will identify ways to grow local and regional capacity on an ongoing basis, building a legacy of Federal institutional knowledge, and sustain the cooperative partnership built under SC2. The team has been organized so that after SC2, the City of Rocky Mount can continue to work on their locally established goals and priorities in a strategic manner.