

Dillsboro/WCU Partnership Progress Update April 2010

Excellent progress is being made on the Dillsboro/WCU revitalization project.

To ensure that all interested individuals are aware of the work being done, the Dillsboro/WCU partnership committee has decided to provide periodic updates. The goal will be to provide highlights of the major initiatives.

Members of the Dillsboro/WCU partnership committee are (in alphabetical order): Carrie Blaskowski, assistant director of the Jackson County Green Energy Park; John Chinnners, president of Dillsboro Merchants Association and owner of Country Traditions; Walter Cook, owner of Smoky Mountain Dog Bakery; Betty Farmer, professor of communication and public relations and special assistant to the chancellor for Dillsboro; John Faulk, owner of Burger Shack and Applegate Inn; Mike Fitzgerald, mayor of Dillsboro and owner of Fitzgerald Shoe Repair; Jean Hartbarger, former mayor and co-owner of The Jarrett House and Kelly McKee, Dillsboro town clerk.

The focus since January has been to develop programming to support the initial, short-term objectives the group identified in December as the starting point. See

<http://thereporter.wcu.edu/2010/02/faculty-commit-to-helping-achieve-objectives-to-shore-up-dillsboro-economy/> for the complete list of objectives.

This update highlights progress on eight of the objectives:

Objective 1: To have 50 percent of Dillsboro merchants begin to work with WCU's Small Business and Technology Development Center (SBTDC).

Tom Fleckenstein, SBTDC counselor, reports that 18 clients have been counseled to date. Most are from the retail sector, but some are from the hospitality, non-profit and restaurant areas. Topics of interest include business planning/business plans, marketing, loan package preparation, and ProfitCents Financial Analyses. A one-day Strategy and Organization Development session for one client is scheduled for the end of April.

Two of the companies the SBTDC is counseling are new and are planning to open in Dillsboro in the near future.

Wendy Cagle, Director of the SBTDC coordinated with Julie Spiro, director of the Jackson County Chamber of Commerce, and Tammy Haskett, director of orientation programs at WCU, to include information about Dillsboro businesses in the WCU family guide book and to allow Dillsboro merchants to register for booths at the WCU student orientation sessions this summer.

Additionally, Cagle worked with Dr. Louis Buck, Wesley Elingburg Distinguished Professor of Business Innovation and director, Center for Entrepreneurship & Innovation, to obtain information regarding the Building Reuse and Restoration Grant Program available through the North Carolina Rural Center. Cagle, Buck and Farmer met with individuals possibly interested in applying for the grant at a special meeting with Mayor Mike Fitzgerald in March. Any applications for such a grant would need to be submitted by the town of Dillsboro.

Objective 2: To administer surveys to Dillsboro businesses, WCU faculty, staff, and students, and visitors.

Sandra Grunwell, associate professor of hospitality and tourism, and Dr. Steve Ha, associate professor of economics, have taken responsibility for the initial research phase of the project. Following is a summary of each survey project.

Dillsboro Merchants Survey

The team worked with the Dillsboro/WCU partnership committee in January and February to develop a questionnaire for the town of Dillsboro to determine needs of the merchants and find better ways to serve them.

Topics researched include merchants' interests in common and/or extended business hours, the top challenges facing Dillsboro businesses, which marketing strategies have been most effective, how WCU can best serve them, and more. The questionnaire was pilot tested for clarity of wording and minor revisions were made.

The first mailing, which included a cover letter, questionnaire and return stamped envelope, was sent out to the businesses on March 9th. A follow-up postcard reminder mailing was sent out two weeks later to the business owners who had not yet responded. A third mailing, which once again included the cover letter, questionnaire and return stamped envelope, was sent out two weeks after the postcard mailing for those who had not yet responded. The deadline for participating in the survey is April 30.

WCU Faculty/Staff/Student Online Survey

During March, a questionnaire for the WCU community was developed. Topics being researched include familiarity with and opinions of Dillsboro businesses. The questionnaire was pilot tested for minor revisions. The questionnaire was scheduled to be distributed to the WCU community mid-April through an email cover letter with the URL to complete the online survey.

Dillsboro/Community Meeting Scheduled for April 29 at 6 p.m.

A community meeting in Dillsboro has been scheduled for April 29 at the Jarrett Memorial Church, beginning at 6 p.m. WCU faculty, staff and students will present highlights of their projects and be on hand to answer questions from the community.

The main purpose of the meeting, however, will be to get feedback from residents and businesses about the next phase of the Dillsboro/WCU partnership.

Once the Dillsboro/WCU partnership committee hears from the community, the group will set its next round of immediate objectives, as well as begin developing a long-term strategic plan.

Attendees are invited to bring a covered dish to share with their neighbors.

For more information about the April 29 meeting or to share suggestions about the Dillsboro/WCU partnership, please contact Betty Farmer at Bfarmer@email.wcu.edu or call 828-227-3804.

There also will be two reminder emails to complete the survey, one and two weeks after the original email. The email cover letter that went out to the students included an incentive prize to encourage them to complete the questionnaire. Chancellor John Bardo also agreed to send an email the day before the survey was distributed to encourage the WCU community to take part in the survey.

Dillsboro Visitor/Customer Survey

A questionnaire for visitors to the town was created in April. The questionnaire was pilot tested for minor revisions. The questionnaire will be distributed to visitors over the 2010 summer months. Grunwell and Ha will analyze the results of each of the surveys and provide reports to the town of Dillsboro.

Objective 3: To create a comprehensive marketing strategy and/or branding approach for Dillsboro.

Dr. Steve Henson, graduate programs director and MBA director, is first focusing on the overall economy of the region. This semester, Henson and his MBA students are exploring ways to facilitate the creation of a vibrant economy in the region. They plan to develop a strategic plan for Dillsboro in the fall semester. Some of their preliminary findings/recommendations include:

- Any long-term improvement project for Dillsboro must begin with an understanding of how the community evaluates its own well-being. This is typically captured as “life satisfaction” and varies widely among individuals. We must understand what makes individuals in this community happy and what traits they share before we start recommending major changes.
- We should be careful not to default to retail shops and hospitality as a sole solution to Dillsboro’s problems. For example, a strong professional services segment adds an important piece to a community. Professionals earn higher than average incomes and become customers for shops and restaurants.
- As we’re developing plans to improve the retail and hospitality sectors, we must keep in mind Dillsboro’s position in the western North Carolina region. Right now, many of our problems exist because the area does not optimize opportunities and communications.

- Creating a sense of community that goes beyond very narrowly defined borders (city, county) is essential to the long-term health of western North Carolina. Short-term, we need to identify a work group of influential individuals to help structure the process by which we develop a regional identity, and longer term, we need to mobilize a significant portion of the community to support this process.

- We need to determine whether “our” community is western North Carolina, or “mountain country” encompassing portions of north Georgia, eastern Tennessee, northwest South Carolina, and southwestern Virginia.

Henson and the business students will continue working on the project through the fall semester.

Objective 4: To have 10 percent of WCU faculty and staff report making at least one purchase at a Dillsboro shop.

In an effort to increase awareness of Dillsboro businesses among the WCU community, Debie Connelly, visiting assistant professor of communication, and several public relations students hosted a very successful event, “Dillsboro on Display” on the University Center Lawn on April 12.

Western’s Quality Enhancement program provided \$600 to support the event.

Businesses of all types displayed information, provided samples, sold merchandise, and distributed coupons especially designed for WCU faculty, staff and students. Some businesses reported significant sales (a few hundred dollars).

Approximately 500 faculty, staff and students attended. Attendance was calculated using door prize sign-in sheets as well as the number of food samples provided. The Dillsboro Smokehouse and The Jarrett House reported serving approximately 300 and 200 people, respectively.

Vendor evaluations indicate that all enjoyed the opportunity to visit with the audiences at Western, especially the students. Most of the merchants agreed/strongly agreed that they expect more traffic from WCU as a result of the event.



Dillsboro Smokehouse owner C.B. Hart serves ribs, barbecue, beans, hushpuppies and cole slaw as part of Dillsboro on Display.



Walter Cook of Smoky Mountain Dog Bakery talks with Western Carolina University Chancellor John W. Bardo at Dillsboro on Display about the many treats that Bardo could get for Bob, the chancellor's dog



Buzz and Jean Hartbarger from the historic Jarrett House serve dumplings and cobbler to appreciative Catamounts.

Merchants will be tracking the number of coupons known as “Dillsboro Dollars” issued during the event that are redeemed in their stores. Several merchants have suggested doing another Dillsboro on Display in the fall. For pictures, go to (or Google) the Town of Dillsboro Facebook page.

Objective 5: To send the first quarterly email newsletter to at least 500 people.

Garrett Richardson, public relations intern for the Dillsboro/WCU partnership, has recommended that Dillsboro use the services of Constant Contact to distribute its email newsletter. The newsletter is in the design stages, and will be ready for distribution April 29. Approximately 85 people signed up for the newsletter during the Dillsboro on Display event.

Objective 6: To develop media kits for Dillsboro businesses.

Dr. Pam Harris, assistant professor of communication and public relations, reports that students in her COMM 303 Writing for Public Relations course have chosen the following businesses/organizations for the first round of media kits:

- Dillsboro Inn
- The Jarrett House
- Smoky Mountain Dog Bakery
- Oaks Gallery
- Country Traditions
- Claymates
- Dogwood Crafters
- The Kitchen Shop

These press kits will include fact sheets, newsletters, brochures, press releases, and PSA's (public service announcements for radio) in hard copy and a digital version of the items will be available for the client's Web site or Facebook page.

Objective 7: To increase the use of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, to promote Dillsboro.

Public relations students Lauren Gray, Garrett Richardson, and Ashley Funderburk hosted a Social Media Training Workshop at WCU for Dillsboro businesses. The training covered the following: how to register for Facebook and Twitter; what to post; how often to update; how to use these effectively;

and other general rules and advice. Approximately two dozen business owners attended. Check out the story at: <http://thereporter.wcu.edu/2010/04/student-s-teach-dillsboro-business-owners-basics-of-using-social-media-to-market/>

The number of fans on the Town of Dillsboro Facebook page has steadily increased since WCU became involved in the town's social media. The Town of Dillsboro Facebook page has 782 fans as of Thursday, April 15--up from zero on December 9, 2009. It is nowhere near its maximum growth potential and the page continues to grow everyday (by approximately 10-20 people per day). Items being posted to the page include: upcoming Dillsboro events, additional Dillsboro photos, and responses to every comment someone leaves on the page.

Here are the ratings for the week of April 12:
 +77 Fans this week (761 total Fans)
 43 Wall Posts, Comments, and Likes this week (23 last week)
 748 Visits to the page this week (530 Visits last week)

The DillsboroNC Twitter currently has 114 followers and has received many mentions, which means @DillsboroNC, and the topic Dillsboro has come up numerous times about town events, the town itself, and businesses within Dillsboro. It has been very exciting to see Dillsboro on several tweets on Twitter!

In addition, Dr. Harris's students are working on a Twitter project to use social media to promote Dillsboro in general and their Dillsboro clients in particular. This is just one more tool in the arsenal of available tools to promote Dillsboro and to suggest media coverage to targeted print and non-print media.

Objective 8: To review Dillsboro's web presence.

Dr. Frank Lockwood, associate professor of entrepreneurship and director of the Master of Entrepreneurship Program, and Dr. Bob Lahm, associate professor of entrepreneurship, have assigned their entrepreneurship students to work on a video for Dillsboro that will be posted on YouTube. Professors Lockwood and Lahm report that the project is on track to be completed by the end of the spring semester.

For more information about any of these initiatives, please contact Farmer at Bfarmer@email.wcu.edu.