

# Strengths and Challenges in the Piedmont Triad

Piedmont Triad Sustainable Communities Project

Civic Forums held January through March 2012



This document serves as a summary of the first round of Civic Forums held by the Piedmont Triad Sustainable Communities Project Team. A total of 248 people attended the 13 forums held across the region. The forums were designed to accomplish three project goals: raise awareness, present regional data and validate regional strengths and challenges. There is no way to completely communicate the community spirit, concern and care for the Piedmont Triad, or the value of the information the forums generated.



PIEDMONT TRIAD  
REGIONAL COUNCIL

Ryan  
Harris  
Design · Planning · Participation



**Piedmont Triad Sustainable Communities  
Planning Project**

Choices Opportunities Solutions



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## Civic Engagement Summary

From late January to mid-March, 2012, the Piedmont Authority for Regional Transit (PART) and its partner organizations held the first round of public forums for the Piedmont Triad Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Project in the 12 counties that include and surround Greensboro, Winston-Salem and High Point. The goal of the meetings was to verify and expand upon challenges and opportunities that exist in the region, especially in regard to jobs, housing, and transportation.

To solicit citizen input in a consistent manner across the region, Ryan Harris trained local staff and citizen facilitators to lead the public forums. Following the initial organizational session, all the facilitators were given a PowerPoint presentation that summarized the challenges and opportunities in the region as first identified by project staff, an overview of the project and its timeline, the purpose of regional planning, and the opportunities for public input to use in the public meetings. Facilitators also received a folder of handouts to assist them in setting up the meeting room, improving their facilitation techniques, and reporting their findings back to the project team.



Davie County Civic Forum

The 90-minute forums were mostly held on weekday evenings at civic buildings. While one forum was held as a more informal “open house,” all the others began with the PowerPoint presentation. After its viewing, attendees were asked to rank the region’s strengths and challenges through an activity that used customized playing cards to solicit conversation. Seated at tables of six, participants played a rummy-like game to discover/build consensus as to the region’s strengths and challenges.

The activity began with each participant receiving a stack of 12+/- illustrated cards depicting strengths in the region such as big city excitement, small town charm, arts and culture, sporting events, access to healthcare, and scenic resources. Each person was then asked to choose the three strengths they felt were most important and place those cards in the center of their table. The group then looked for consensus by identifying sets of four or more like cards. If no consensus was clear, individuals were encouraged to lobby tablemates and find secondary



Davidson County Civic Forum

areas of agreement. Once reached, each table group posted their top strengths on the wall. The same exercise was then repeated to rank the region's challenges.

With each table's top strengths and challenges posted on the wall, participants were asked to identify areas of agreement across groups. They were also asked to add additional strengths and/or challenges if not yet mentioned in the discussions. The results of these all these deliberations were then posted on "Piedmont Voice," an online site to record ongoing public input.

## **Strength and Challenge Exercise Analysis**

Ryan Harris then compiled and analyzed the public input from each forum, divided it by category in a database, and ranked the Strengths and Challenges relative to the degree of consensus. What emerged from this analysis was a surprising agreement across the counties, whether predominantly urban or rural, on the most important opportunities and most significant challenges they face. Interestingly, five distinct considerations rose to the top in each. The attached database reveals that the top five categories in both Strengths and Challenges.

### Top Five Strengths

- Education – grades K-12 and higher education
- Farming and Viticulture
- Health Care
- Scenic and Recreational Resources
- Small Town Charm

### Top Five Challenges

- Transportation – both internal to their communities and regionally
- Participating in the "New" Economy – post-manufacturing, high tech companies
- Abandoned Mills and Employment Centers – especially unused manufacturing plants and strip shopping centers
- Capitalizing and Supporting on Existing Business Assets – especially small businesses
- Healthy Design – planning and building communities with more transportation options, improved public spaces, and better access to fresh food.

Strengths and Challenges in the Piedmont Triad

**Strengths**

suggested by project team												suggested by attendees		
County	Excellent Higher Education Opportunities	Productive Farmland / Viticultural	Access to Excellent Health Care	Scenic & Recreational Resources	Small Town Charm	Economic Opportunities	Abundant Cultural Events / Unique Arts and Crafts	Increasing Diversity	Rich History	Numerous Sports Events	Big City Excitement	Volunteer, Charity, Religion	Infrastructure / Water & Roads	Central Location
Alamance	27	20	6	9	15	4	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	1
Caswell	0	0	0	6	5	5	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Davidson	6	8	11	5	8	5	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	2
Davie	17	13	15	13	21	7	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	0
Forsyth	36	5	25	24	4	5	7	7	0	0	0	0	0	0
Guilford	38	21	22	11	4	4	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
Montgomery	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Randolph	3	7	4	8	6	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Rockingham	0	9	0	9	11	6	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Stokes	8	18	12	23	10	0	7	0	6	0	0	2	0	0
Surry	13	9	22	9	12	6	0	0	0	0	0	4	1	0
Yadkin	5	17	6	3	7	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	153	127	123	120	103	45	18	12	7	0	0	9	7	5
<b>Average</b>	13.91	11.55	11.18	10.91	9.36	4.09	1.64	1.09	0.64	0.00	0.00	0.82	0.64	0.45
<b>High</b>	38	21	25	24	21	7	7	7	6	0	0	4	2	2
<b>Low</b>	0	0	0	3	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Std. Deviation</b>	13.90	6.76	8.92	6.80	5.22	2.30	2.80	2.07	1.80	0.00	0.00	1.33	0.81	0.69

**Challenges**

suggested by project team											suggested by attendees		
County	Lack of Transportation Options	Living in the "New" Economy	Abandoned Job Centers	Capitalizing on Assets	Lack of Healthy Community Design	Loss of Farmland	Proximity of Housing to Job Centers	Increasing Diversity	Lack of Affordable Housing	Food	Lack of Sidewalks & Bike Lanes	Energy	
Alamance	24	14	12	3	14	0	0	4	7	0	1	0	
Caswell	5	5	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	
Davidson	9	7	12	4	0	5	2	6	2	0	0	0	
Davie	9	17	13	14	9	10	0	0	0	0	3	0	
Forsyth	26	6	14	5	29	5	12	5	0	3	2	0	
Guilford	21	13	11	12	20	14	17	0	5	0	0	3	
Montgomery	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Randolph	6	13	3	7	3	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	
Rockingham	0	9	4	11	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Stokes	7	13	5	19	3	4	12	0	0	0	0	0	
Surry	10	10	16	10	4	3	0	4	4	1	0	0	
Yadkin	2	10	8	4	0	7	1	0	0	0	0	0	
<b>Total</b>	119	117	98	90	82	55	44	22	19	4	6	3	
<b>Average</b>	9.92	9.75	8.17	7.50	6.83	4.58	3.67	1.83	1.58	0.33	0.50	0.25	
<b>High</b>	26	17	16	19	29	14	17	6	7	3	3	3	
<b>Low</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
<b>Std. Deviation</b>	8.99	4.69	5.59	5.74	9.49	4.32	6.18	2.37	2.43	0.89	1.00	0.87	

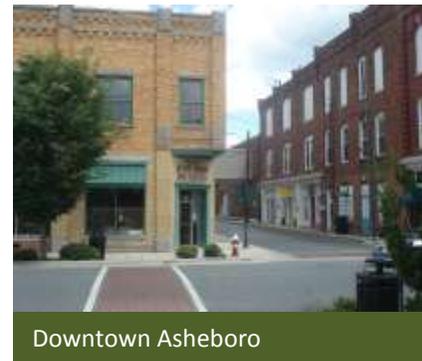
## Other Input

Many of these issues were foreshadowed in earlier studies. Prior to conducting the public forums, PART staff presented a traveling “Road Show” explaining the project and seeking input at civic gatherings across the region. In addition, they sent out a Grassroots Sustainability Survey via Survey Monkey to which approximately 200 local citizens responded. The project team’s goal was to learn if and how local residents use sustainable practices in the home and in their transportation choices.

Survey answers revealed that respondents were generally satisfied with their neighborhoods, but less so with public amenities, such as parks, community centers and sidewalks, were concerned about public safety, and depended largely on the automobile for their mode of transportation. They expressed an overall interest in sustainable practices relative to energy and water use. Most respondents stayed pretty close to home (less than five miles) to work and to shop, yet others reported that they would prefer to work closer to home, if given the option. Over half stated that they would use an alternative mode of transportation if it were available. Significantly, 64% of the respondents expressed that their household was struggling financially. Fewer than 10% of the respondents had a college degree.

## What does it all mean?

The input from the public forums, survey and road show suggest how local residents think the future of the Piedmont Triad should be shaped, and the importance of new jobs, transportation alternatives and development patterns in creating a regional vision. While recognizing the need for new solutions, participants in the planning process also emphasized a desire to value the region’s past and build on the Triad’s assets.



For over a century, Piedmont Triad communities have been dependent upon the crops that have been grown in the region, and the products that were created from their harvest: furniture, textiles and tobacco. These three economic engines led to a region characterized by dozens of self-sufficient small towns and the three cities that give the Triad its name. Stretched across the Piedmont, these municipalities shared many of the same characteristics: tight knit, affordable but charming communities surrounding one or two mills that provided the primary base of employment.

The Triad’s municipalities were loosely connected by rail and road, but they were separated by a scenic landscape of rolling farmland and abundant forests. Per the public forums, it became clear that those physical attributes were the ones still most valued by local residents. But they were also the characteristics that participants thought were most in danger of degradation.

Due in large part to the rise of the global economy, most of those mills in the Triad now sit empty, and their closings have had a devastating and multi-pronged impact on the region. Forum participants recognized that many of the area's small towns, and the farms that surround them are no longer self-sufficient. Due to a shift in the type and location of employment centers, residents cited an increase in commuting distances and their consequent cost of living. Many participants expressed concern over a lack of proximity between their home and their jobs, a lack of transportation options, and a desire to live a life less dependent on their personal automobiles.

In most cases, these **challenges will require solutions that are regional in nature because they depend on linking transportation and land-use.** This type of coordination is not new to the Piedmont, and sharing resources across municipal boundaries is already successful. Forum participants recognized there can be a qualitative increase in services when offered jointly, with residents citing their appreciation for the area's excellent quality of healthcare and higher education, both of which are due, at least in part, to regional if not statewide coordination.



Regional Transit, Downtown Winston-

Yet at the same time, **forum participants clearly valued the unique character of their own communities, and cited the importance of retaining small town charm.** Finding ways to connect these distinct municipalities to a regional network and a broader array of resources will not lessen their importance. Instead, it will help them endure as individually memorable places, but with a qualitative increase in services.

Addressing the need for improved public health is a case in point. **Forum participants cited the lack of healthy community design as a significant challenge in the Triad.** But, addressing that concern requires a coordinated approach to economic development, transportation alternatives and land use planning at both a local and regional level, and across agencies and disciplines. A healthy life requires economic stability and affordable access to employment, or support for building and maintaining local businesses. Educational institutions abound that can



Company Market, Burlington

provide workforce development for new industries. Access to them is more the challenge. Ideally, a healthy community supports an improved diet. That requires the preservation of local farmland, support for local farmers, and ready access to locally grown fresh food. Healthy communities provide opportunities for increased activity, and they encourage walking and biking with sidewalks and bike lanes. They provide a walkable mix of land uses with

transportation options between residential areas, shopping, and employment centers to reduce the pollution from increased traffic. Healthy community design also requires the design of public places, where communities can come together and residents can feel a sense of belonging. In short, **the health of the community is dependent on the provision of choice at a personal, municipal and regional level, and achieving that requires cooperation and coordination across boundaries.**

**While it was the mill-centered, self-sufficiency of the small towns and the three cities that historically defined the Triad, it is their connection to a larger network of services and opportunities that will characterize the region's future.** Global changes in free trade and the rise of technology have highlighted the need for a new model for economic prosperity in the region. Per the public input received from local residents, it is a change they are ready to embrace if it allows them to maintain, and even improve, their community-centered quality of life.