



NEUSE RIVER COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

(d/b/a Eastern Carolina Council)



Serving: Carteret, Craven, Duplin, Greene, Jones,
Lenoir, Onslow, Pamlico, and Wayne Counties

**2024 Annual Update to the
2023-27 Comprehensive Economic
Development Strategy**

Supported by the Economic Development Administration

Summary Background

The Neuse River Council of Governments (d/b/a Eastern Carolian Council, or ECC) is the Economic Development District (EDD) for the nine-county Eastern Carolina region of North Carolina, as designated by the U.S. Department of Commerce/Economic Development Administration (EDA). ECC was established in 1967 under NC General Statute 160A-47. It is headquartered in New Bern, North Carolina.

ECC is located in central eastern North Carolina and is comprised of nine counties (Carteret, Craven, Duplin, Green, Jones, Lenoir, Onslow, Pamlico, and Wayne) and 62 incorporated municipalities. ECC's region – Region P – has a land mass of 5,710 square miles and a population of over 652,000 (US Census, 2020) in the region's nine counties.

One of the functions of the Economic Development District is to prepare a five-year Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS), which sets forth goals and strategies that support the economic development of the Eastern NC region. Each year, ECC prepares an Annual Progress Report to identify the most important changes in the eastern NC economy and to assess the region's progress toward CEDS goals.

The priority areas for the ECC region for ECC's 2023-27 CEDS include:

PRIORITIES	
Priority Area 1	Cultivate and champion regional collaboration and partnership
Priority Area 2	Develop critical infrastructure to grow economic opportunities and support disaster resiliency
Priority Area 3	Grow and support skilled workforce and enhance educational attainment
Priority Area 4	Create healthy and connected communities and improve quality of life

This 2024 CEDS Annual Progress Update contains the following:

- Highlights of Economic Development Activities
- Highlights of Key Changes to the Regional Economy
- Evaluation of Action Plan and Goals / Adjustments of Priorities and Strategies of the CEDS
- Next Year's Goals

Highlights of Economic Development Activities

The following are some highlights of ECC's economic development activities in 2023-24:

- **Strategic Economic Development Planning with IEDC** – In 2023-2024, ECC developed a strategic Partnership with the International Economic Development Council (IEDC), which is a non-profit, membership organization serving economic developers. IEDC assisted the ECC region achieve economic resilience through the development of three strategies that

are incorporated into our 2023-2027 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) regional plan, including:

- Regional Military Retention Strategies/Action Plan
- Workforce Housing Strategies
- Talent Attraction and Retention Strategies

Over 120 people were engaged in these efforts.

- **Partnership with IEDC Assisted Individual Communities** – ECC also helped connect communities in our region with the International Economic Development Council (IEDC) for technical assistance visits to assist communities evaluate specific economic development/community development opportunities. The IEDC member volunteers help provide recommendations at no cost to the community (through funding from US EDA). Nine communities participated in the program, and the projects included:
 - Helping a community evaluate options for the highest and best use for a building.
 - Assisting a county with developing strategies for corridor beautification and promotion.
 - Assisting several communities with downtown redevelopment strategies.
 - Helping a city evaluate opportunities to redevelop two properties.
 - Assisting a town in developing an economic development vision.
- **Promotion of EDA Grant Programs and Administration of Ongoing and New EDA Projects** –
ECC performed the following:
 - Administered the NC Coastal Federation Aquaculture Hub Project, 04-01007877.
 - Promoted EDA programs and resources.
 - Continued ongoing conversation about potential EDA grant applications in the region.
- **Fostering Regional Collaboration** – through various means and organizations, including:
 - Regional workshops / convenings
 - Grant roundtables
 - Annual Networking Social and BBQ
 - Programs like our Regional Digital Inclusion Planning effort
 - Began an outreach effort with the Eastern Carolina Workforce Development Board Executive Director to County Economic Developers and Chamber Executives

Highlights of Key Changes to the Regional Economy

As mentioned above, ECC developed a strategic Partnership with the International Economic Development Council (IEDC), which is a non-profit, membership organization serving economic developers. IEDC assisted the ECC region achieve economic resilience through the development of three strategies that are incorporated into our 2023-2027 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) regional plan, including:

- Regional Military Retention Strategies/Action Plan
- Workforce Housing Strategies
- Talent Attraction and Retention Strategies

ECC received recommendations / reports from each of these efforts, and the Talent Attraction and Retention Strategies report included the following highlights about the changing region:

- The ECC region showed consistent employment growth over the last few years. The ECC region fully recovered all jobs lost during the COVID-19 pandemic by 2022, and as of 2024 Q1, total employment in the region stands at 237,546 (3.7% higher than pre-COVID peak). While great news for the regional economy, this change restricted the available labor supply for business expansions. In May 2024, the unemployment rate for the ECC region averaged 3.6%, 0.1% less than the nation.
- The cost of living and average wages in the region are below the state average (\$47,399 average annual salary for ECC vs. \$64,037 for the state). While lower wages may be a negative for talent attraction, the cost of living in the ECC is 10.4% and 5.0% lower than the nation and state, respectively and offers a more positive view.

ECC sought feedback from Economic Developers, Planners, and Industry, Education, and Workforce Development professionals for this annual update. Feedback from these stakeholders included the following:

- The biggest needs for industries to expand / develop in the region included:
 - (1) Skilled employees
 - (2) Housing opportunities
 - (3) Infrastructure enhancements
 - (4) Educational attainment
 - (5) Enhanced child care
 - (6) Quality of life enhancements
- The biggest needs for small businesses and entrepreneurs to expand and develop included:
 - (1) Access to capital
 - (2) Help with licenses/permits/regulations
 - (3) Business planning/counseling
- The following were seen as the region's infrastructure advantages:
 - Significant advantage – Drive time to work
 - Advantage – Road/highway system, water and sewer infrastructure, broadband

- The following were seen as the biggest threats to economic resiliency in the region:
 - (1) Inadequate housing supply
 - (2) Housing affordability
 - (3) Inability to attract and retain population
- The following factors were identified as the biggest factors that would influence the region's potential for economic growth:
 - (1) Availability of qualified workers
 - (2) Inadequate housing supply
 - (3) Availability of sites for development
- The following were identified as the region's top competitive strengths:
 - (1) Military – defense-related assets
 - (2) Cost of living
 - (3) Natural environment – geographic location
- The following were identified as the region's top weaknesses:
 - (1) Workforce and talent
 - (2) Business sites / real estate
 - (3) Career opportunities
- Emerging trends identified included:
 - How Artificial Intelligence can be utilized
 - Aviation is a rapidly growing sector
 - Growth in occupational trades education
 - Remote work is continually reshaping the economic development landscape
 - Growing need to engage a younger generation of workers, specifically those aged 18 to 24
 - Middle income workers increasingly cannot afford to rent or buy housing near their place of work, specifically those close to coastal and tourism-centric areas
- Opportunities identified included:
 - Regional meetings and working sessions where influencers and employers can work together to identify tactics.
 - Work with existing researchers, organizations, and marine sciences university programs to identify critical strategies for addressing sea level rise and infrastructure needs to reduce climate change vulnerabilities.
 - Continue work that is having results with regard to opioid abuse and mental health concerns that can result in depression or suicide.

ECC also sought feedback from its Executive Committee on this subject. Highlights of this feedback included:

- Challenges of rural communities providing services.
- Challenges of rural populations (including elderly) accessing services.

- We need to focus on connecting communities through better public transportation, bike trails, and other initiatives.
- Our region's access reasonably affordable housing is diminishing, which impacts our workforce, including essential personnel for public safety and services.

Additional Opportunities to Adjust the Priorities and Strategies of the CEDS

In addition to the feedback noted above, as previously noted, ECC developed a strategic Partnership with the International Economic Development Council (IEDC), which is a non-profit, membership organization serving economic developers. IEDC assisted the ECC region achieve economic resilience through the development of three strategies that are incorporated into our 2023-2027 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) regional plan, including:

- Regional Military Retention Strategies/Action Plan
- Workforce Housing Strategies
- Talent Attraction and Retention Strategies

ECC received recommendations / reports from each of these efforts, including:

- Regional Military Retention Strategies/Action Plan
 - Convene a smaller working group to determine the next steps and review quick actions that can continue the momentum of this topic.
 - Seek funding to contract with a consultant to write a detailed implementation plan for the region to coordinate and enhance military retention.
 - Host an annual military/civilian collaboration event highlighting successful partnerships in the region, including providing updates on key metrics.
 - Coordinate workforce development strategies to develop the needs in the ECC region for workforce (Federal and non-Federal) over the long term and partner with workforce development stakeholders.
- Workforce Housing Strategies
 - Work with local governments to preserve affordable supply through code enforcement compliance.
 - Seek funding to develop a regional housing needs assessment / study.
 - Work with local governments to audit local ordinances and collaborate on housing affordability.
 - Work with local governments to explore policies that can increase housing supply.
 - Work with regional partners to convene a regional housing symposium.
- Talent Attraction and Retention Strategies

- Collaborate on a regional marketing campaign focused on attracting new residents to the area and retaining current workers (especially military service members and staff). Consider starting small with sub-regional collaboration.
- Increase affordable opportunities for middle management opportunities.
- Work to develop cross-certification programs that match skills individuals learned during military service with skills and certifications demanded by employers.
- Amplify internship and apprenticeship programs.

Enhancement to the CEDS Action Plans and Goals

Priority Areas

Priority areas for the ECC region for ECC's 2023-27 CEDS include:

PRIORITIES	
Priority Area 1	Cultivate and champion regional collaboration and partnership
Priority Area 2	Develop critical infrastructure to grow economic opportunities and support disaster resiliency
Priority Area 3	Grow and support skilled workforce and enhance educational attainment
Priority Area 4	Create healthy and connected communities and improve quality of life

With this annual update, the priority areas remain the same.

The consistent themes provided in the feedback documented above included:

- Developing skilled employees
- Supporting / increasing affordable housing opportunities
- Maximizing the impact of military-related assets
- Expanding regional partnerships

Based on the feedback documented above, the various implementation strategies are amended as highlighted below (shown as underlined):

Priority Area 1: Cultivate and champion regional collaboration and partnership

Description: A regional economic development strategy is most effective when it considers and incorporates the interests and strengths of all jurisdictions in the region. By leveraging the strengths and capabilities of each county towards a wider economic strategy, the region can become more prosperous, resilient, and cohesive.

ECC's Role: As a regional coordinating body, ECC is well positioned to facilitate collaboration. Over the next five years, ECC will foster cross-regional relationships and seek to align efforts around regionally significant projects.

Approaches:

- Develop a stronger CEDS Committee that is representative of the region.
- Build relationships and collaboration through project-based regional initiatives.
- Integrate the priorities captured in the CEDS into existing local and regional-scale initiatives.
- Increase representation of currently underrepresented voices.

Implementation Ideas:

- In partnership with the Eastern Carolina Workforce Development Board Executive Director, continue an outreach effort to County Economic Development Directors and Chamber Presidents.
- Formalize an ECC CEDS Committee to meet quarterly.
- Convene economic development practitioners from across the region semi-annually to brainstorm, revise, and prioritize a list of regionally significant projects.
- Deliver an annual CEDS overview and update to elected officials and local economic development boards.
- Seek out new partnerships with workforce development, education, industry, and small business stakeholders.
- Seek out new partners that can communicate the perspectives of underrepresented communities.

Key Partners:

- Economic development staff across the region
- ECC Board
- Local government managers
- Eastern Carolina Workforce Development Board

Priority Area 2: Develop critical infrastructure to grow economic opportunities and support disaster resiliency

Description: Large infrastructure projects, particularly those of regional significance, often exceed the capacity and technical expertise of local municipalities. Further, they often involve multiple partners, public-private partnerships, complex regulatory systems, and strategic stakeholder engagement. In order to effectively achieve needed infrastructure improvements in the region, technical support will be required.

ECC's Role: ECC is uniquely positioned to support regional infrastructure projects. Over the next five years, ECC will provide technical assistance and connect specific projects with other resources (e.g., regional efforts, University-based programs, state and federal agency partners, etc.).

Approaches:

- Identify and prioritize projects of regional importance that will (1) improve quality of place for residents and (2) increase diversity and redundancy in the region's infrastructure (particularly critical infrastructure related to transportation, energy, communications, and fuel).
- Coordinate regional efforts to expand broadband availability in areas with the least access.
- Promote available services and funding sources that can be accessed via CWEDD to support infrastructure development.
- Increase the capacity and resources available to support grant writing and technical project development for infrastructure projects.

Implementation Ideas:

- Work with regional partners annually to ensure infrastructure projects support resilience and are coordinated across the region.
- Increase collaboration around broadband development by convening regional economic development practitioners to discuss efforts and share resources through ECC's Digital Inclusion Planning Project and Digital Navigator Program.
- Share information about current funding opportunities for local jurisdictions that includes grant deadlines, eligibility information, and connections to current and planned projects.
- Assist with preparation of funding applications and provide technical assistance on infrastructure project development.

Key Partners:

- Economic development staff across the region
- Local government managers
- Various state agencies
- Various federal agencies
- Various regional advocacy groups
- NC Rural Water Association

Priority Area 3: Grow and support skilled workforce and enhance educational attainment

Description: Many businesses in the region report that they are struggling to find qualified employees for a range of skilled, semiskilled, and unskilled positions, in part because of training, and in part because of livability factors like lack of affordable housing options. There is also an ongoing need to support existing workforce training efforts and to coordinate and align the efforts of workforce, economic development, and educational partners in the region.

ECC's Role: ECC will help link education, training, apprenticeships, and career planning to the employment needs of existing and emerging business sectors.

Approaches:

- Support deliberate coordination between businesses, the Eastern Carolina Workforce Development Board, economic developers, and educational institutions to help identify and provide for current employer needs.
- Educate the region's youth about the opportunities in the region.
- Attract and retain younger talent.
- Continue to develop regional conversation for support of the military assets and aviation-centric industries in the region.

Implementation Ideas:

- Partner with the Eastern Carolina Workforce Development Board and other partners to develop a collaborative vision and a coordinated plan to develop the workforce.
- Partner with the Eastern Carolina Workforce Development Board and other partners to increase participation of local businesses in apprenticeships, internships and On-The-Job-Training programs, in order to build pathways to employment for persons entering the workforce.
- Convene a small working group to determine the next steps and review quick actions that can continue the momentum on military retention.
- Seek funding to contract with a consultant to write a detailed implementation plan for the region to coordinate and enhance military retention.
- Work with a small working group to plan an annual military/civilian collaboration event highlighting successful partnerships in the region, including providing updates on key metrics.

Key Partners:

- Economic Development staff
- Eastern Carolina Workforce Development Board
- K-12 & higher education representatives
- myFutureNC staff

Priority Area 4: Create healthy and connected communities and improve quality of life

Description: Some of the contributing factors in attracting and retaining the needed talent pool involves livability factors like lack of affordable housing options, access to quality healthcare, recreation amenities, etc. Additionally, rural communities have unique economic strengths and challenges. A lack of basic services can make rural areas less attractive to prospective residents and employers. Therefore, ensuring equitable access to basic services for residents and businesses in rural areas is a critical strategic opportunity.

ECC's Role: ECC will advocate for policies and support initiatives that will help enhance workers' quality of life. As a regional body that can work with counties that cover unincorporated areas and smaller towns, ECC can play an important role in directing resources towards rural areas. ECC will advocate for high quality service provision to rural areas and support projects that enhance economic opportunity and resilience in rural communities.

Approaches:

- Attract and retain younger talent by promoting the region's livability and access to exceptional nature and outdoor recreation opportunities.
- Investigate and support policies and projects that will increase the availability of affordable housing, affordable transportation options, the quality and accessibility of recreation, access to broadband, access to healthcare, and other factors that enhance quality of life.
- Prioritize strategies that support the growth of tourism and value-added natural resource industries (including ecotourism, marine-related activities, sustainable farming, and local food and beverage production) to enhance economic opportunities in rural areas.
- Support efforts to increase health care and telehealth care access.

Implementation Ideas:

- Encourage practitioners to participate in discussions at the local and county levels related to affordable housing, transportation, recreation, and healthcare access – ask to have representation for economic development practitioners and business representatives on committees and working groups.
- Work with local governments to preserve affordable supply through code enforcement compliance.
- Seek funding to develop a regional housing needs assessment / study.
- Work with local governments to audit local ordinances and collaborate on housing affordability.
- Work with local governments to explore policies that can increase housing supply.
- Work with regional partners to plan / convene a regional housing symposium.
- Work with municipalities to identify and secure funding for downtown revitalization projects.
- Work with health care providers and public health officials to understand rural patients' needs and lend support to projects aimed at meeting these needs.
- Continue regional work to support efforts to address opioid abuse.

Key Partners:

- Local and county planning staff
- Tourism boards, chambers of commerce
- Local and county recreation staff
- Health care agencies

Next Year's Goals

Next year, ECC plans to focus on the following priorities and goals to support the 2023-27 CEDS and the economic development of the ECC region:

Priority Area 1: Cultivate and champion regional collaboration and partnership

Description: A regional economic development strategy is most effective when it considers and incorporates the interests and strengths of all jurisdictions in the region. By leveraging the strengths and capabilities of each county towards a wider economic strategy, the region can become more prosperous, resilient, and cohesive.

Implementation Ideas:

- In partnership with the Eastern Carolina Workforce Development Board Executive Director, continue an outreach effort to County Economic Development Directors and Chamber Presidents.
- Formalize an ECC CEDS Committee to meet semi-annually or quarterly.
- Convene economic development practitioners from across the region semi-annually to brainstorm, revise, and prioritize a list of regionally significant projects.
- Deliver an annual CEDS overview and update to elected officials and local economic development boards.
- Seek out new partnerships with workforce development, education, industry, and small business stakeholders.
- Seek out new partners that can communicate the perspectives of underrepresented communities.

Priority Area 2: Develop critical infrastructure to grow economic opportunities and support disaster resiliency

Description: Large infrastructure projects, particularly those of regional significance, often exceed the capacity and technical expertise of local municipalities. Further, they often involve multiple partners, public-private partnerships, complex regulatory systems, and strategic stakeholder engagement. In order to effectively achieve needed infrastructure improvements in the region, technical support will be required.

Implementation Ideas:

- Work with regional partners annually to ensure infrastructure projects support resilience and are coordinated across the region.
- Increase collaboration around broadband development by convening regional economic development practitioners to discuss efforts and share resources through ECC's Digital Inclusion Planning Project and Digital Navigator Program.
- Share information about current funding opportunities for local jurisdictions that includes grant deadlines, eligibility information, and connections to current and planned projects.

- Assist with preparation of funding applications and provide technical assistance on infrastructure project development.

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Description: Many businesses in the region report that they are struggling to find qualified employees for a range of skilled, semiskilled, and unskilled positions, in part because of training, and in part because of livability factors like lack of affordable housing options. There is also an ongoing need to support existing workforce training efforts and to coordinate and align the efforts of workforce, economic development, and educational partners in the region.

Implementation Ideas:

- Partner with the Eastern Carolina Workforce Development Board and other partners to develop a collaborative vision and a coordinated plan to develop the workforce.
- Partner with the Eastern Carolina Workforce Development Board and other partners to increase participation of local businesses in apprenticeships, internships and On-The-Job-Training programs, in order to build pathways to employment for persons entering the workforce.
- Convene a small working group to determine the next steps and review quick actions that can continue the momentum on military retention.
- Seek funding to contract with a consultant to write a detailed implementation plan for the region to coordinate and enhance military retention.
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Implementation Ideas:

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