BUILDING CONNECTION AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY THROUGH COMMUNITY FORESTRY

Upper Coastal Plain Council of Governments Community Forestry Program

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As towns and regions across the country confront increasingly complex and interconnected problems, community forestry offers a nature-based approach to various social, economic, and environmental challenges. The benefits of community forestry vary by local context, as projects and goals differ because community forestry is a tool to be used, rather than a guaranteed rule book to be followed. For instance, one community might utilize the principles of community forestry to improve shade in their downtowns while another might develop a community forestry program with the goal of sustainably harvesting timber. On the surface, these programs have different motivations, goals, and anticipated benefits, but at their core they are two variations of cooperative approaches to forest resource management.

Community forestry can expand economic opportunities and foster connectedness through collaborative work in natural environments. Community forests are designated forested areas that positively impact communities and are directly managed by members in the community, sometimes in the form of voluntary councils or local governments. Benefits such as relationship development, economic stimulation, and conservation can occur directly through forest product creation, recreational programs, and/or educational opportunities. These programs can have substantial economic impacts, especially in rural regions. Urban and Community Forestry in the southern United States was estimated to contribute $23.2 billion in value added and support 349,200 jobs in 2019 alone.

As regional organizations that engage with a variety of local parters on multiple issues, Economic Developments Districts (EDDs) are well-positioned to support community forestry programs in their regions. Upper Coastal Plain Council of Governments (UCPCOG), an EDD in Eastern North Carolina, spans 5 counties composed of 40 municipalities, for a total of 45 member governments. UCPCOG supports its members by providing programs, services, and resources tailored to meet the needs of their member communities. In 2023, UCPCOG launched its Community Forestry Program in partnership with AmeriCorps and the Conservation Trust for North Carolina. The program expanded the COG's services provided to member governments by hiring a new staff member focused on providing forestry technical assistance and program support. Throughout the program, member governments bolstered their commitment to expanding forest resources by increasing tree inventory, building public support, and improving capacity to prepare for and manage new forestry projects.

Building a "Coalition of the Willing"

UCPCOG provides its members with services including wastewater grant management support, affordable workforce housing development, and disaster preparedness and planning. In an effort to expand UCPCOG's resilience planning expertise, Ben Farmer, Planning and Development Services Director, brought on John Sugg, a Wilson, North Carolina native and certified arborist, to serve as a Resilience Program Coordinator and establish the UCPCOG Community Forestry Program.

Shortly after starting the position, Sugg sent a survey to all members gauging interest in community forestry services. Towns mentioned they had been working on these issues for some time and were happy to have the support of the COG in this area. Expanding the region's urban canopy was identified as both a need and desired investment from survey results, member conversations, and local expertise. An expanded tree canopy in this region will improve resilience to extreme heat, liveability, walkability, and opportunities for economic development.

Recognizing that most of the COG's member governments are in economically distressed areas, Sugg noted that communities would benefit from pursuing a Tree City USA designation via the Arbor Day Foundation. According to Sugg, "When you become a Tree City USA, and you meet the requirements, it shows you are at a level to be able to manage your community forest," thereby strengthening applications for funding in the future. Tree City USA requires that communities meet four standards annually: identifying a body responsible for tree care and maintenance, creation of a public tree ordinance, guarantee of a $2 per capita expenditure on tree care, and a designated commitment to occasions for Arbor Day observance. Meeting these requirements makes towns more eligible for grants on national and state levels by demonstrating that the social infrastructure is in place to sustainably manage forestry activities.

Recognizing that resources for programs like this are finite, John Sugg and Ben Farmer decided to approach the program with a "Coalition of the Willing" framework. This meant that the services provided by the Resilience Program Coordinator would be open to all members of the COG and that participation was completely voluntary depending on each

municipality's needs and readiness to pursue community forestry initiatives. UCPCOG staff knew enough about urban forestry and the member towns to know that interest was there, but previously "there wasn't really any regional coordination on the topic, so it was a good opportunity," says Farmer.

Meeting Varying Needs

Over a period of two 11-month terms, the Resilience Project Coordinator supported projects across all five counties served by UCPCOG. The program was active across six towns: Hobgood, Wilson, Castalia, Conetoe, Rich Square, and Roanoke Rapids. Across these areas the goals looked very different. In Wilson, the community needed support to maintain and expand designations from the Arbor Day Foundation. In Hobgood, the downtown needed support with revitalization and street shading. In Castalia, the town's park was lacking in shade and required support in developing a tree planting plan. These projects had varying deliverables based on individual needs, including tree planting plan development, tree maintenance needs review, grant acquisition support, coordination and convening of service providers, tree education programming, and tree inventory development.

The COG assisted with these goals in various ways. Sugg's role was particularly valuable for tree planting plans, tree education programming, and tree inventory in the forms of direct walk throughs and advising based on Sugg's history as an arborist in the region. Advocates in both Castalia and Wilson also identified the COG as integral to funding acquisition. According to Randy Lyon, a local farmer and program volunteer in Castalia, "You don't know what you don't know," and UCPCOG was invaluable at pointing town leaders in the right direction when it came to grant applications and preparation.

The following sections provide a closer look at the projects underway in two communities that were supported by the UCPCOG Community Forestry Program, Castalia and Wilson:

Castalia Community Park Tree Plan

The Castalia Community Park is an important recreational and gathering space for residents of the town of Castalia (population 250). The park and events held there are integral to residents and the greater community. Because of its importance to the town's residents and surrounding communities, the Castalia local government felt investing in the park would be the best way to invest into building community connectedness.

One of the key challenges in the park is its lack of shade. Limited canopy coverage can significantly increase heat levels during warm months and significantly decrease the aesthetic value of natural spaces. These concerns have been exacerbated in Castalia due to the clear-cutting of trees directly across from the park in the pursuit of a housing development that could double the town's population in the coming years. Volunteer Randy Lyon walked the park with John Sugg of UCPCOG on numerous occasions, planning out tree borders, tree species types, and future Arbor Day events. The UCPCOG Community Forestry Program provided the Town of Castalia with the expertise and guidance to develop a plan and plant trees; now with that plan in place, the town can apply for further funding and keep this community space thriving.

Due to its small tax base and limited staff, services provided by the COG have been fundamental to the town's ability to support park development and programming. "When you only have two people actively working for the municipality, you're lost trying to find opportunities for money and you don't know what's out there," says Lyon. "Learning about the COG and being a member has opened all sorts of doors for Castalia."

Wilson's Downtown Trees and Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) Technology Training

The City of Wilson is another member community that has participated in the UCPCOG Community Forestry Program. With a population of approximately 50,000 people, a 1,000-student liberal-arts college, and a minor league baseball team, Wilson's opportunities for economic development look very different from Castalia's.

Even with numerous directions for investment, Wilson still looks toward forestry as an important mechanism for its economic development, in part due to the town's long-standing identity as "The City of Beautiful Trees." In a 1930's travel brochure, the town's identity revolved around its downtown canopy, drawing in industry by beautifying the urban landscape with trees. In fact, Wilson has boasted its recognition as a "Tree City USA" since 1977. This designation is maintained in part by hosting an annual Arbor Day celebration, an event that all participants in UCPCOG's community forestry program are committed to hosting.

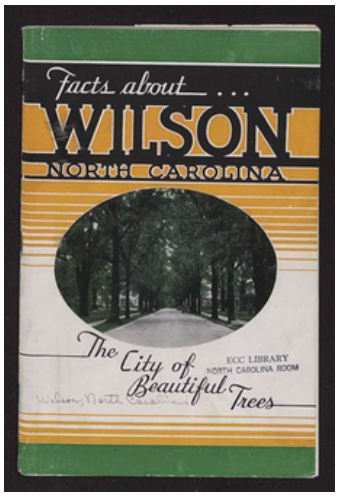
Maintaining designation as a Tree City USA is only one part of Wilson's mission, and the city hopes to become the first with a "trifecta" distinction as a Tree City USA, Tree Line USA, and Tree Campus Higher Education. (Tree City USA is a designation for towns with notable forestry efforts, Tree Line USA recognizes communities with notable coordination between forest services and utility maintenance bodies, and Tree Campus Higher Education provides recognitions for schools with distinct consideration for tree lines on college campuses).

The UCPCOG Community Forestry Program has assisted Wilson with the process of acquiring and maintaining these recognitions, requiring up-to-date documentation of canopy coverage, tree inventories, and event planning. Wilson also financially supported and participated in a drone pilot license training program that supported communities in forestry data collection. Program participants gained their certification in drone piloting that will aid UCPCOG member towns in more accurately collecting data for

tree inventory and maintenance. While UCPCOG served as a point of connection and partial funder, Wilson acted in part with the City of Roanoke Rapids as an additional funder to collaboratively support efforts for regional forestry data collection. Wilson is a great example of the importance of building out skill sets and data to identify where funding efforts are best placed moving forward.

Confronting Scarcity with Connection

Though funding cuts in 2025 have shortened the timeline of UCPCOG's ability to provide community forestry services, officials in Wilson and Castalia are working with the COG to identify new funding sources to support the work. In Castalia, UCPCOG is helping to establish a chapter of the non-profit ReLeaf that will help connect urban forestry programming with investments from private donors.



Even in the face of funding challenges, momentum and excitement remain strong across both the regional and municipal levels. Randy Lyon in Castalia feels optimistic that UCPCOG's help in the planning stages is what has allowed the town to develop strong grant application materials. The next steps are to plant trees, plan and host Arbor Day events, and build Castalia up to a Tree City USA designation.

Overall, the UCPCOG Community Forestry Program has given its members the ability to develop the building blocks necessary to sustain forests and the diverse benefits they offer to this region. As Lyon says, "The trees are the ultimate goal, but what I really want is for this work to touch people and be a benefit in as many ways as possible as we grow with it together."

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Though Community forestry creates social, economic, and environmental benefits that strengthen local resilience and EDDs are well-suited to support this work because they can coordinate across communities, secure resources, and provide technical expertise.
2. In areas facing economic hardship, EDDs and similar regional organizations can provide funding access by directly supporting grant applications. In the case of the UCPCOG Community Forestry Program, UCPCOG staff prepared grant application materials for tree inventories and directly made member governments more eligible for funding by educating community members on Tree City USA distinctions.
3. Community forestry programs can be adapted across town sizes and community need. For example, Castalia's goals in the town park look very different from Wilson's goals in its larger downtown district.
4. Maintenance of existing forests and coordinated preparation is necessary to acquire funds in the first place. To build out robust community forestry programs, towns must first provide evidence they are ready to take on the challenge by developing tree inventories, building public support through events, and strengthening staff capacity through trainings.

Photos in this case study courtesy of Upper Coastal Plain Council of Government, City of Wilson, and Wilson Chamber of Commerce.

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