

Collaborative Leadership for Economic Development in Alamance County

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Date : January 3, 2017

(Cover image from [The Times-News, 3/22/2016](#))

The N.C. Commerce Park in Alamance County, North Carolina is an economic development success story that underscores how vital interlocal and regional collaboration is for community and economic development. It also highlights the power of partnerships and collaboration, and the importance of local leaders that share a collaborative mindset.

The N.C. Commerce Park is an 1,100-acre economic development zone located in the Hawfields area of eastern Alamance County. The area includes parcels owned by dozens of private land-owners who have voluntarily become partners with the N.C. Commerce Park in agreeing to easements and (very importantly) providing options on their properties. The 1,100 acres includes parts of Graham, Mebane, and unincorporated Alamance County. Site development involved \$12 million for infrastructure, jointly funded by the three local governments and the N.C. Department of Transportation. Later the three local governments also each contributed \$100,000 to the Alamance County Chamber of Commerce to oversee the site certification process.

But what is perhaps the most innovative aspect of this partnership—and what demonstrates how substantial it actually is—is that **the three local governments also have created an interlocal agreement to share the financial benefits**. Tax revenues from within the Park are aggregated and split equally among the three entities. The cities of Graham and Mebane also have agreements in place regarding water and sewer service to the site.

Thus, what we have here is a really remarkable and complex partnership. A county, two cities, the Chamber of Commerce, several state agencies (including Departments of Commerce and Transportation), and, perhaps most importantly, dozens of local landowners. Graham City Manager Frankie Maness points out that **“the greatest partnership in the [Park] is not between the local governments and the Chamber of Commerce, it’s with the landowners.”** Securing easements, options on parcels, developing zoning overlays, making land purchases, et cetera required a great deal of communication and collaborative work with the private landowners.

So how did this partnership come to be? First, prior to a catalyzing opportunity in 2012, there was a long history of collaboration among the local governments and also between the local governments and the Chamber of Commerce. There was a history of working well together and thus a certain amount of relationship capital accrued between and among the entities involved. Maness, noting the positive working relationships, says the “partnership was not difficult.” Graham and Mebane have worked together on utilities and land use agreements for many years, and also have worked with the County and Chamber for years. “Our cities have long understood the value of partnership and have established seamless operations to ensure continued cooperation.” And all the entities have a shared goal of creating economic opportunity.

So when Wal-Mart was interested in locating a distribution center in the Hawfields area in 2012, a prospect of 450 quality jobs, it was quite natural for the partners to turn to each other. **County Manager Craig Honeycutt noted that no one entity had the resources or clout to put together the total package needed to secure the Wal-Mart facility. They needed to work together, and they did.** And landing the Wal-Mart facility was a significant win that became the catalyst for envisioning the development of the N.C. Commerce Park.

A committee was put together with representation from each of the local governments, and out of that committee came the vision, agreements, and financial commitments necessary to create the Park. The Park is directed by the oversight committee that works with the Chamber and also Samet Corporation to promote the site.

That collaborative infrastructure has been leveraged to enable the partners to work together productively to offer not only an attractive site for business development, but also to put together incentive packages that make them very competitive regionally. Prescient Corporation, a high-tech construction firm out of Denver, Colorado, recently selected the site and will bring 205 quality jobs with them. Their CEO noted that of all the offers different sites made, the N.C. Commerce Park was the best. In addition to a terrific location, the three local governments put together an incentive package worth over \$1 million that was combined with additional incentives offered through the state's Economic Investment Committee. **Governor Pat McCrory praised the high degree of collaboration among the local governments, noting that “[businesses don't care about political boundaries](#).”**

The N.C. Commerce Park is still very new. It was officially created in March of 2015 and is still in the process of becoming a certified industrial site. Yet it is hard to call this project anything but a resounding success so far, with about \$220 million in private investment and 750 new jobs between the three firms already secured (the Wal-Mart and Prescient facilities as well as a Lidl distribution facility). This successful partnership highlights many important lessons about [interlocal collaboration](#) specifically and [collaborative leadership](#) generally, including:

- The value of prior collaboration and trusting relationships.
- The value of a spark plug to help initiate collaborative investment. The City of Mebane invested over \$150,000 upfront (easements and environmental costs) and contributed significant staff time prior to the partnership coming together.
- The value of equitably sharing in the costs as well as the benefits to the extent possible.
- The value of trusted [third parties](#) to work with and through (in this case, the local Chamber of Commerce).
- The value state government can add in supercharging interlocal collaboration through leveraging state resources (such as road construction and economic incentive funds).
- The value of having elected officials involved and on board throughout the process. The three boards unanimously supported this effort from day one.
- Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the value of having community leaders with a [collaborative mindset](#). County Manager Craig Honeycutt importantly points out that there were “no egos – everyone was looking at the larger picture and the possibilities that this park and development could do for the future of Alamance County as a whole.”

Another longstanding principle of collaborative leadership is building on [small wins](#); success does indeed breed success. You could look at the various ways the partners worked together prior to the possibility of the Wal-Mart distribution center as building a history of wins. Then the Wal-Mart facility become a huge win. And that lead to developing the N.C. Commerce Park as an additional big win, which led to the “wins” of landing the Lidl and Prescient facilities. That sets up this partnership well for the future, and offers important lessons for local government leaders elsewhere.

This article is a modified version of one that appeared in the Community and Economic Development blog, also hosted by the UNC School of Government.