

Enfield coalition's goal to improve economic growth: Group formation based on study, hope for town

By Richard Holm rholm@rddailyherald.com, Jan 10, 2023

Enfield community organizations formed an alliance to find ways to improve and bring business and economic opportunities to the town.

The Enfield Alliance Coalition was formed in June in response to a University of North Carolina – NCGrowth Economic Impact study that was completed during the summer.

NCGrowth is a UNC Chapel Hill-based center of the Kenan Institute of Private Enterprise that aids businesses and communities in creating opportunities through research and technical assistance.

According to a press release from EAC on Nov. 1, the Town of Enfield, Enfield Economic Development and Revitalization Commission and the Collective Society, which is made up of a group of citizens, reached out to NCGrowth in August of 2021 to conduct a study for development opportunities in the town.

On Monday, Larry Perkins, founding member and chairman of the Collective Society, said the process began nearly two years ago during the COVID-19 pandemic with himself, Executive Director Gerry Middleton of EEDRC and Lily Lowe to find ways to improve the town's economic situation.

“So we decided the first thing that we had to do is a study,” Perkins said. “We have to figure out what our benchmarks are, where our strengths and weaknesses are, and then put a plan together.”

He said the initiative grew and got more people and organizations in the town involved.

According to the EAC press release, the study revealed data that found 758 Enfield residents work outside of the town, while 253 people come to the town for work. It also showed 33 residents working in Enfield.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, as of 2021, Enfield has a population of more than 1,850.

When asked for his reaction to the data, Perkins said he was stunned.

“I was really surprised by that,” he said. “The data has a way of bringing the truth to light, and you wonder why the town can’t grow or is stagnant. That was really an eye-opener.”

Perkins pointed to the 758 folks working out of town and the 253 coming in the town for work but not spending their money in Enfield.

“They’re spending their money elsewhere, and the folks who come into town are going back home and spending their funds there,” he said. “So they’re taking money out of town, the folks who leave and work and not coming back to spend in town, and those 33 – I mean, God bless them because they’re holding up the ship, so I was really surprised by that. I think that’s one of the things that really helped motivate us to get going further.”

Perkins retired as a vice president and assistant general manager at the PNC Arena/Carolina Hurricanes and is himself an Enfield native. He said he remembers growing up in the rural town and, like many other farming communities, it suffered economically after Interstate 95 was built.

I-95 runs nearly 2,000 miles from Florida to Maine and was commissioned in 1956 by President Eisenhower’s National Interstate and Defense Highways Act.

Perkins said Enfield, like other small towns, was thriving back in the day when U.S. Highway 301, which runs through the town from Florida to Maine, had traffic flowing through it.

“That was a major thoroughfare,” he said. “I can remember it seemingly taking hours just to cross 301 when I came into town. Today, it’s dried up, and that’s because of I-95. That’s because of our progress as a nation and trying to get interstate highways. But those small towns that depended on that traffic for their well-being just dried up. And I thought that that was also another factor. Never say never – number one. Number two is to look at what resources you have, and what you can do about it.”

When asked how many businesses are in Enfield, Perkins said the study showed 200 businesses listed, but suspects the number is closer to 100.

“We’re working on refining that data now,” he said.

Perkins said some of the businesses listed were merely ATMs (20 of them), and others listed were not products and services one would consider a normal business.

“We’re going to publish that data because we think that’s one of the reasons people don’t buy, because they don’t think we have 100 businesses here in Enfield, but we do,” he said. “In fact, in one of our meetings, I announced that we had 100 businesses, and one person was shocked. They said, ‘No, where?’ That’s why we want to do that, so we’re going to publish that and get that data out there as well. The other thing I think is going to help is that there is a Google map that lists all the streets in Enfield, so if you publish the data on how many businesses there are along with a map that’s associated with it, it makes it easy for people to make it a one-stop shop, where they can go look at the business and then find out where it’s located.”

Perkins said most of the businesses in Enfield are listed in the study as part of the auto industry.

“That’s our number-one service and products supplier,” he said. “We also have the AmeriCap company, we have the Enfield Cotton Ginnery, Andrus Construction, Southern Secrets, fresh food and fresh fish market with Seafood Frenzy and even an inspection station that’s here. So we have a lot of stuff. And, of course, you know, we have doctors, dentists and lawyers, the flower shops. And obviously, some of the convenience stores. We are lacking, as you mentioned, restaurants. Certainly, restaurants and hotels would be key for us here.”

Perkins offered to utilize his Collective Center in Enfield for free – to hold a convention – but how to accommodate visitors on things to do and where to stay for a couple of nights is another matter.

“We send them to Roanoke Rapids or we send them to Rocky Mount,” he said. “And they’re going to say, ‘It’s nice of you to offer the business building for free, but we got to go where we can eat and sleep. Why would we come there?’ So we understand that. And, in fact, I was just on the phone with a gentleman from Minnesota last week, who might come here to look at some preservation aspects and other things, so we’re working behind the scenes to remedy those problems — hotels, restaurants and different things where you can sleep and eat right here in Enfield.”

Gerry Middleton, a former principal and superintendent in Halifax County Schools and director for EEDRC and board member of EAC, said the town needs a shared vision.

“Enfield’s residents have been active doing things to benefit the community for quite a while, but what the town has lacked is a shared vision,” she said in the press release. “There are a lot of ideas on how we should proceed – what our future should look like – but we don’t always agree on what our next steps should be. Fortunately, EEDRC was able to get the town designated as a historic district last year, but now where do we go? We need to build a consensus on how we are going to use this designation to our best advantage. I am confident the Alliance will allow us to hammer out our priorities and develop this vision, so we can move forward together.”

Julia Andrus, president of Downtown Enfield Restoration and Preservation and Andrus Corporation partner, said, “DERP has been dedicated to town improvements since 2011. Over the years we have been busy planting trees, improving facades, turning an empty lot into a community gathering space, installing awnings and holding events like the annual Fishing Creek Paddle to promote tourism, but our group understands the need to collaborate and create this alliance. We need to all be on the same page – to create community cohesiveness – especially when views are so divergent. I have faith in Enfield. Our company built 12 new houses in Enfield in the last two years, and we sold them quickly, which means a lot of people have faith in Enfield.

“We need to make sure we come up with a plan that allows everyone to thrive. I think it’s exciting that the study identified clearly that Enfield is a ‘young’ town – almost 49% of its population is under 35. I’ve always considered Enfield an ‘old’ town because it was founded in 1740. I’m glad the study gave us new information to help direct our efforts. We have a much better picture on where we need to go.”

The press release also included the alliance’s vision that was created at EAC’s first meeting on Oct. 24 that reads: “Through the creation of various subsector coalitions, each tasked with stated objectives and benchmarks, the EAC will work to accomplish the visions that are aligned with the NCGrowth study and other developments in the future. We will help improve the town of Enfield’s economic status, brand and quality of life.”

The Enfield Alliance Coalition will collaborate with the Town of Enfield and advise the Enfield Board of Commissioners and staff on community development needs. The group also plans to apply for grants to address the issues found in the NCGrowth study.

Perkins said Enfield is a beautiful place and relished what it has to offer.

“It’s warm, it’s caring, and that’s our character,” he said. “That’s what we’re known for is that warm hospitality, where everybody knows your name. And I love that, which was one of the reasons I came back and

invested millions of dollars so far in this town and, like so many others have. I'm going to continue to do that because it is my home. And I believe that unless you're willing to take part and give back, you can't call it a home. And that's what you have to do. You have to get back to your home – you have to upkeep your home, and that's what I'm doing. That's why we formed a coalition, and that's why those who are on the coalition are so passionate about what they do, because they believe in it, as well.”

Perkins said EAC is getting the word out and people are getting involved.

“We are asking our constituents – we need everybody here – in Enfield to get involved,” he said. “I don't care if you can give one hour a year. We need everybody. If you think about it, if you just commit to 24 hours over a year's time, that's not a lot of time. That's one day out of 365, so we're just asking our citizens to do their part. Support this coalition – support Enfield because it's for you.”

The Enfield Alliance Coalition is holding its regular meeting at 6 p.m. on Jan. 23 at the Collective Center at 131 Whitfield St. in Enfield. For more information, visit enfieldalliance.com, email info@enfieldalliance.com or call 252-445-1031.

EAC board and leadership

Business Development and Retention, Assets and Benefit and 301 Alliance

- Julia Andrus, Business Development and Retention
- Jennifer Locke-McCann, Business Development and Retention
- Gerry Middleton, Assets, Benefits and Grants

Branding, Marketing and Tourism and Technology

- Meredith Holford, Chair, Branding, Marketing and Tourism
- Brenda Greene, Branding, Marketing and Tourism
- Jacob Richardson, Branding, Marketing and Tourism

Technology

- Rob Scala
- Terrence Lowe

- Avery Williamson

Business Training, Including 30 Under 30

- Chester Williams, Business Training, Including 30 Under 30
- Michael Jones, Business Training, 30 under 30
- Dominette Hatchett, Business Training, 30 under 30

Housing, Energy and Environment

- James Andrus, Housing and Energy

Community and Wellness, Sports and Entertainment, Arts and Crafts and Gardening

- Tony Person, Community and Wellness
- Enfield Commissioner Bobby Whitaker, Community and Wellness
- Lisa Hart, Sector leadership, Enfield Sports and Entertainment
- Sarah Brinker, (Sector leadership, Enfield Arts and Crafts)

League of Churches

- Lily Lowe
- Molly Yates
- Carol Whitaker

Business Relations and Regulatory Affairs Coalition

- Larry Perkins
- Bobby Whitaker
- Andrew Wirtz
- Bob Cotter