

NC STATE

EXTENSION

Mountain West NC in North Carolina chosen for pilot program designed to strengthen rural economies

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By Becky L. Bowen
NC State Extension

RALEIGH, NC – North Carolina State University announces the selection of a multicounty region in North Carolina for participation in CREATE BRIDGES, a program designed to build up rural economies. CREATE BRIDGES was recently launched in Illinois, New Mexico and North Carolina with the help of a \$2,041,330 grant from [Walmart](#) to the Southern Rural Development Center (SRDC).

The selected Mountain West NC region includes Jackson, Swain, Macon, and Graham Counties as well as the Qualla Boundary.

As part of this innovative initiative, N.C. Cooperative Extension, NC State, the N.C. Department of Commerce, the Institute for Emerging Issues, the N.C. Association of Regional Councils of Government and other state resources will collaborate to pilot a process for helping rural communities build their capacity for strengthening the retail, tourism, hospitality and entertainment sectors. These sectors, which have been particularly hard hit by the coronavirus pandemic, provide jobs and business opportunities that frequently boost rural economies. CREATE BRIDGES provides opportunities to customize implementation according to community needs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We are excited to begin the hard work of community-engaged planning and implementation in the Mountain West NC region, and hope that the processes and strategies used in the CREATE BRIDGES program there will become a successful template for recovery in the retail, accommodation, tourism and entertainment sectors throughout the state of North Carolina,” says Becky Bowen, manager of the CREATE BRIDGES program in North Carolina. “The next three years will be both a testament to the commitment of the people of the Mountain West NC region to collaborate and innovate, and a test of their resolve to become even stronger post-pandemic.”

The Mountain West NC region was chosen for its clear desire to grow their tourism and retail industries, as well as their demonstrated commitment to CREATE BRIDGES businesses. Its application stood out from other regions because of a history of

successful collaborations regarding broadband expansion, affordable workforce housing development, and strategic support of the outdoor recreation industry sector.

Generally, the retail sector in rural communities fills local needs and serves as an entry point for new workers. However, entry-level workers do not always understand the available career paths that would allow them to move up or train for supervisory and management roles. In addition to other development measures, the CREATE BRIDGES process will inform workers of the various advancement opportunities offered in these sectors.

Bowen and other NC State Extension representatives will work with state partners to facilitate a business retention and expansion program and a CREATE Academy for regional leaders. They will also coordinate with regional workforce investment boards to identify opportunities for workforce training focused on incumbent and new workers. Additionally, the program will look at workforce solutions to retain workers and promote from within.

CREATE BRIDGES is being developed by a team of experts including Bowen, Dr. Susan Jakes, Dr. Duarte Morais, and Gary Bullen of NC State Extension, Dr. Michelle Eley of the Cooperative Extension Program at North Carolina A&T State University, Sarah Hall of NC State University's Institute for Emerging Issues, and the Southern Rural Development Center's Rachel Welborn and Grace Langford.

CREATE BRIDGES builds upon Stronger Economies Together, or SET, a collaborative effort across 32 states led by the SRDC that helps rural counties work together to develop and implement an economic development plan for their multicounty region.

For more information about CREATE BRIDGES, visit the [NC State CREATE BRIDGES website](#) and contact Becky Bowen at 919-628-4317 or blbowen@ncsu.edu.

About NC State Extension

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MEDIA CONTACT:

Becky Bowen at 919-628-4317
blbowen@ncsu.edu