BLADEN COUNTY

CREATING OUTDOOR RECREATION ECONOMIES

STRATEGIC PLAN

2024-2029

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Acknowledgements

The Creating Outdoor Recreation Economies (CORE) program is made possible by a U.S. Economic Development Administration State Tourism Grant which awarded $6 Million to the State of North Carolina's Supporting and Strengthening Resiliency in North Carolina's Travel, Tourism, and Outdoor Recreation Sectors Initiative. As a component of this Initiative, the North Carolina Department of Commerce's Rural Economic Development Division (REDD) developed the CORE program. The CORE program offers strategic planning and technical assistance to help rural communities leverage North Carolina's abundant outdoor recreation assets to bolster local economic vitality.

The REDD announced the technical assistance program offering Outdoor Recreation Economy Strategic Planning and Asset Development services in late 2022. Communities from across the state applied to engage with strategic planning services and 34 local governments were accepted to participate. Bladen County and the town of White Lake both applied. It was decided to combine the two entities' efforts into one strategic plan and one plan of work. Main Street & Rural Planning (MS&RP) staff, who is responsible for facilitating strategic economic development planning and implementation services, worked with local government staff to communicate the goals of the program, identify local opportunities, and assemble a planning work group.

This project would not be possible without the support and participation of the Bladen County Board of Commissioners, the work group members, the businesses, and citizens of Bladen County.

This plan was prepared by the North Carolina Department of Commerce, Rural Planning Program, using Federal funds under award 04-79-07689 from the Economic Development Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce. The statements, findings, conclusions, and recommendations are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Economic Development Administration or the U.S. Department of Commerce.

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Adopted: October 21, 2024

Bladen County
Town of White Lake

Executive Summary

Through CORE, Bladen County collaborated with N.C. Department of Commerce, Rural Economic Development Division staff members and local stakeholders in a strategic planning process to identify and develop outdoor recreation assets that present economic growth opportunities. Strategy development focused on leveraging outdoor recreation assets to increase tourism, encourage small business development, enhance quality of life for residents, plan for outdoor recreation asset and infrastructure development, and position communities to grow and attract outdoor gear manufacturing industries and businesses. The planning process was tailored to meet the specific needs, goals, and opportunities that local stakeholders identified.

White Lake

The plan proposes strategies, goals, objectives, and actions communities can take to increase economic vitality by leveraging outdoor recreation. For the purposes of this strategic planning program, outdoor recreation is defined as all recreational activities undertaken for leisure that occur outdoors, with an emphasis on those activities that involve some level of intentional physical exertion and occur in nature-based environments. Furthermore, other community assets and economic institutions that benefit from or complement the outdoor recreation economy are addressed in the plan.

Bladen County has a wealth of outdoor assets such as the Cape Fear River, NC Forest Service Turnbull Educational Forest, NC State Park Jones Lake, Brown's Creek Bike Park, and more. White Lake's major asset is the lake itself. There is growing interest in outdoor recreation and the County is poised to capitalize on those opportunities. The County's workforce, economic development, tourism development, and local leaders want to fulfill its vision for the County in the Bladen County Strategic Plan 2022-2032:

> *Bladen County will be a safe, welcoming community known for our outdoor amenities and growing, rural atmosphere. We promote a vibrant economy, healthy and active lifestyles, and nurture a love of lifelong learning for all our diverse residents.*

The White Lake Comprehensive Plan 2023-2043 also highlights the outdoors. The plan references a partner program to CORE, Project UPLIFT. The plan points out:

Understanding that the size of White Lake's economy makes it dependent on surrounding areas to provide for needs of residents and visitors and that borders do not exist in an economy, UPLIFT may offer valuable opportunities to further promote the Town as a destination.

The Bladen County CORE work group developed its own vision statement to mesh with the County strategic goals as well as provide a focal point for the CORE plan:

Bladen County, known as Mother Nature's Playground, is the destination for outdoor recreation in Eastern North Carolina. Located by Carolina Bays and along the Cape Fear River, we tell our story and honor our history through our connections to the water, farms, forests, and community. A confluence of warm hospitality, wealth of outdoor opportunities, and hometown businesses, the County welcomes visitors and locals to plant themselves in our communities and grow.

Bladen County has long recognized that it has a wealth of outdoor assets and has noted the importance of the outdoor recreation economy there. White Lake has been recognized as a premier location for outdoor activities and this ties into the importance of the outdoor recreation economy in the town and the County. The CORE program allowed the County to develop a strategic plan of work to expand the outdoor recreation economy. This report and plan of work lays out how to attract both local citizens and visitors to use the unique outdoor recreation assets as well as develop strong connections to the local culture, community and businesses.

Background

There is a long tradition of outdoor recreation in North Carolina. From the mountains to the coast, there are incredible landscapes and unique places to pursue a wide variety of outdoor recreation activities. Participation in these activities generates a large economic impact.

In recent years, statistics show that participation in outdoor recreation is increasing, particularly in the wake of COVID-19. This growth continues and can create increased economic impacts of outdoor recreation, particularly in rural locations where many of the state's outdoor recreation assets are located. There is also great potential to expose and engage people that have historically not participated in outdoor recreation activities at the same rate as others. It is important for all individuals to have the opportunity and access to enjoy recreational pursuits and benefit economically from outdoor recreation. These factors, combined with other on-going outdoor recreation initiatives across the state, make it an ideal time to critically examine how this sector can benefit local economies.

Economic Impact

Outdoor recreation activity and associated expenditures generate a large economic impact. This is a broad economic sector that comprises a diverse range of industries including manufacturing, retail, arts, entertainment, and recreation. This economic sector also includes many supporting activities such as construction, travel and tourism, accommodation and food services, and more.

In 2022, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of Economic Analysis' Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, the outdoor recreation economy represented $563.7 billion in current-dollar gross domestic product (GDP), or 2.2 percent of the United States' total GDP. The outdoor recreation sector of the economy is growing at a faster rate than the overall economy:

> *Inflation-adjusted ("real") GDP for the outdoor recreation economy increased 4.8 percent in 2022, compared with a 1.9 percent increase for the overall U.S. economy, reflecting a deceleration from the increase in outdoor recreation of 22.7 percent in 2021. Real gross output for the outdoor recreation economy increased 7.5 percent, while outdoor recreation compensation increased 9.1 percent, and employment increased 7.4 percent.*

Employment in the outdoor recreation industry increased in all 50 states during 2022.

At the state level, outdoor recreation contributed $11.8 billion in total value-added economic impact to North Carolina's GDP. North Carolina ranked as the 11th highest state in "Value-Added Outdoor Recreation in Total outdoor recreation activities" in 2021. This included employment for over 130,000 individuals that resulted in over $5.9 billion in total compensation.

Jones Lake

Family Hiking Source: Terri Dennison

According to VisitNC, visitor spending in 2022 was $51.5 million in Bladen County. There were 257 people employed in the hospitality industry during this time and those workers earned over $10.5 million. Local tax revenue was $1.7 million that year[i]. Table 1 below illustrates the categories of visitor spending from 2022. Food and beverages were the highest in spending.

Bladen County 2022 Visitor Spending (millions)

Lodging	**$ 8.09**
Recreation	**$ 7.21**
Transportation	**$ 13.64**
Food and Beverage	**$ 17.92**
Retail	**$ 4.71**
Total Spending	**$ 51.57**

Table 1 Bladen County Visitor Spending Source: VisitNC

The County has an abundance of natural resources. The Cape Fear River, the South River, and the Black River run through Bladen County. NC Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC) manages nine boat ramps along these rivers.

Bladen County has three NC Wildlife Resources Commission Gamelands scattered throughout the County- Bladen Lakes, Suggs Mill Pond, and Whitehall Plantation. Gamelands allow hunting for wide ranges of game – bear, doves, deer, turkey, waterfowl and more. There are also two private hunting preserves in the County that serve hunters from around the region and the United States. Fishing is also available at the gamelands.

Source: Allen Bros Outdoors

In North Carolina, hunters spent $138.64 per trip and made 6.5 hunting trips in 2022. The largest costs for hunters were gas and ammunition. The overall economic impact of hunting in the state was just under $1billion and the largest impact for this category was in retail sporting goods [ii].

Freshwater fishing is popular in the County, at White Lake, and along the rivers. In 2022, NCWRC estimated that the average NC angler spent almost $135 per day and spent 13.5 days freshwater fishing. Statewide, residents who spent $1 on freshwater brought a return of $1.62 to the state's economy. The highest impact was on retail motor vehicle and parts.[iii] Restaurants and groceries were among the top expenses for both groups.

NC Freshwater Fishing and Hunting Economic Impacts (2022)

	Anglers	Hunters
Trip Expenditures	$1,400,000,000	$274,000,000
Equipment Expenditures	$2,510,000,000	$541,000,000
Total	**$3,910,000,000**	**$815,000,000**
Restaurants	$185,000,000	$25,000,000
Groceries	$166,000,000	$25,000,000

Table 2 Freshwater Fishing and Hunting Economic Impacts Source: NC Wildlife Resource Commission

Currently, Bladen County does not realize the retail tax revenue due to insufficient retail and restaurant options, beyond those in Elizabethtown. In Table 3, the retail gaps and growth potentials are outlined in 20- and 30-minute drive times from the County courthouse. Many of

these businesses could serve the outdoor recreation community and improve the outdoor recreation economic impacts. More options will enable Bladen County to capture much of the retail business that is lost to neighboring communities such as Fayetteville and Lumberton.

	Retail Gap			Growth Potential	
	20 Minute Drive Time	30 Minute Drive Time		20 Minute Drive Time	30 Minute Drive Time
Category					
Groceries	$31,674,438	$15,411,065		$6,745,702	$4,498,702
Beer, Wine, Liquor	$4,410,509	$3,242,384		$688,176	$425,658
Drinking Places	$3,055,233	$1,990,576		$110,411	
Full-Service Restaurants	$30,393,495	$20,021,024		$1,164,105	$684,293
Limited-Service Restaurants	$7,666,615	$1,948,427		$1,360,947	$751,324
Sporting Goods	$3,445,312	$1,834,165			

Table 3 Retail Gaps Source: Claritas

Outdoor Recreation Participation

According to the 2022 Outdoor Industry Association 'Outdoor Participation Trends Report', "outdoor participation continues to grow at record levels. More than half (54%) of Americans ages 6 and over participated in at least one outdoor activity in 2021, and the outdoor recreation participant base grew 2.2% in 2021 to 164.2M participants. This growing number of outdoor participants, however, did not fundamentally alter long-term declines in high frequency or 'core' outdoor participation."[iv]

Studies show that approximately 56% of North Carolinians participate in some form of outdoor recreation each year[v]. This includes more than 22.8 million visitors to North Carolina state parks in 2021 — three million more than any other year on record. Many parks, national forests, and other public recreation areas report increased visitation as well.

These numbers represent a solid base of individuals participating in outdoor recreation and contributing to associated economic activity. But there is still room to engage more individuals and continue to increase participation in outdoor recreation, particularly among populations that have not historically participated in outdoor recreation at levels comparable to others. Also, people increasingly want outdoor recreation opportunities that are convenient to where they live so they can participate on a regular basis without the need to travel long distances.[vi] [vii]

Carolina Bay Source: Ourstate.com

Carolina Bays are unique natural features in the eastern part of North Carolina and Bladen County has the most bays in the state. Jones, Salter, Singletary, and White Lakes are some of the remaining bays with water and are used recreationally. These three lakes are managed by the NC Division of Parks and Recreation but only White Lake has residential and commercial development around the lake. Jones Lake is linked to Salter Lake.

Visitation has increased tremendously to public parks and lands. Jones Lake State Park increased visitation from 145,208 to 166,067, or by 14.4%, from 2021 to 2022. Singletary Lake State Park had an increase in visitors from 25,289 to 27,007 over those two fiscal years[viii].

There are two state forests in the County: Bladen Lakes State Forest and Turnbull Educational State Forest. Both forests offer hiking trails, fishing, hunting, and other recreational activities. Bladen Lakes saw an increase of 54.6% in visitors/users from 2021 to 2022. Bladen Lakes State Forest has also been used for horseback riding, star gazing, military training, emergency training, and Scouts. Bladen Lakes offers cabins and has a dining facility for overnight accommodation. Turnbull Educational State Forest had 617.9 increase in visitors between 2021 and 2022[ix].

The Mountains to the Sea Trail (MST) is a trail across the state that stretches from the Great Smokey Mountains to the Outer Banks. The trail uses footpaths, backroads and bike paths to showcase the natural features of the state. Segment 13 of the trail crosses Bladen County from Suggs Mill Pond Gamelands in the northwestern part of the County to Singletary Lake in the southeast. This section of the trail is approximately 39 miles. Segment 14 continues from Singletary Lake into Pender County below Kelly. This entire segment is 66 miles long and approximately 20 miles are in Bladen County.

Setting

Bladen County is in the coastal plains of the state with a population of approximately 30,000[x]. There are seven municipalities within the County: Elizabethtown - the County seat, Bladenboro, Clarkton, Dublin, East Arcadia, Tar Heel, and White Lake. Bladen County is crisscrossed with several highways. US Highway 701 runs from US Highway 95 near Smithfield to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. NC Highway 87 stretches from Fayetteville to NC Highway 17 to Wilmington and several North Carolina beaches.

Between 2017 and 2021, just under 50% of the County civilian labor force was engaged in work and 85% of the population completed high school. The median household income in Bladen County was $39,259 in 2021.[xi] Within a 20-minute drive of the County Courthouse, however, the median household income increased by 18.1% (Table 1). This could reflect the significance of second homes, resort services and other amenities that attract higher income individuals.

Bladen County Demographics

Category	20 Minute Drive Time
Median HH Income	$ 47,117
Average HH Income	$ 68,236
Highest Income Distribution	$ 50,000-$74,999
% of residents earning below $50,000	52.6%
% of residents earning above $50,000	47.5%

Table 1 Bladen Demographics 20 Min Drive Source: US Census and Claritis

Existing Plan Review

Lu Mil Vineyards

To complement and build upon subsequent community planning efforts, staff assembled and reviewed other relevant plans and documents. This review provides valuable insight and helps avoid duplication or contradictions of past planning proposals. The following documents were reviewed and considered during the CORE planning process.

Southeast Economic Development Commission's Community Economic Development Strategy

The Bladen County community is located within the Southeast Economic Development Commission's (SEDC) Economic Development District (EDD). The SEDC EDD's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) indicates that Outdoor Recreation is an industry cluster for growth and development. Tourism was specifically cited as "a vital component of the regional economy". SEDC's CEDS plan also encourages leverage of regional advantages around cultural and natural heritage tourism, creation of 'green infrastructure' plans and maps, and advocate for multi-modal transportation for healthy activities.[xii]

Bladen County Strategic Plan 2022-2032

The Bladen County Strategic Plan specifically calls out outdoor recreation as a major County asset and as a means of expanding economic development. Under the *Prosperous Economy* priorities, the County states that it will "continue to offer a variety of outdoor experiences and invest in the maintenance/continual building of these infrastructures." Outdoor recreation fits under multiple focus areas detailed in the plan: Environment and Agriculture, Healthy Community, and Prosperous Economy.[xiii]

White Lake Comprehensive Plan 2023-2043

The town of White Lake's Comprehensive Plan was completed in 2023 and takes a twenty-year view for the town. This plan noted that the lake was the major asset for the town and made recommendations and actions to capitalize on that asset. Specifically, actions were listed to tie White Lake into "The Great Trail State" initiative that was spun off from the 2023 "Year of the Trail". There was also a specific recommendation to increase public recreation opportunities for citizens and visitors.[xiv]

Planning Process

Under the REDD, MSRP Center staff facilitated the CORE strategic planning process with participation from the local government and an established local work group. This work group was comprised of individuals with a vested interest in leveraging outdoor recreation to enhance economic development. The planning process employed established planning methods including economic and associated data, asset mapping, economic driver identification, SWOT analysis, stakeholder interviews, business questionnaires, local work group discussions, and more. The planning process was tailored to meet the specific needs, goals, and opportunities that local stakeholders identified.

Meeting Dates	Topics
October 19, 2023	*Meeting #1:* Overview of CORE and the outdoor recreation economy Asset identification
November 16,2023	*Meeting #2:* Review outdoor recreation economic impacts Community survey results Itinerary building exercise
January 18,2024	*Meeting #3:* Stakeholder interview results SWOT analysis Identify common themes in survey and interview responses Creation of vision statement
February 15, 2024	*Meeting #4:* Strategic Plan Review Plan of work development
March 21, 2024	*Meeting #5:* Plan of work completion

Situational Analysis

REDD staff toured part of Bladen County to view the various assets such as the Jones Lake and Singletary Lake State Parks, one of the Cape Fear Lock and Dam put ins, the White Lake Multi-Use Path, and Browns Creek Nature Park and Bike Trail. Surveys were conducted with the work group and the community that helped flesh out this report and plan of work. Interviews were conducted with stakeholders identified by the work group which provided additional insights into the outdoor recreation economy in the County.

Local Work Group Establishment and Involvement

Work Group meeting at Elizabethtown Inn

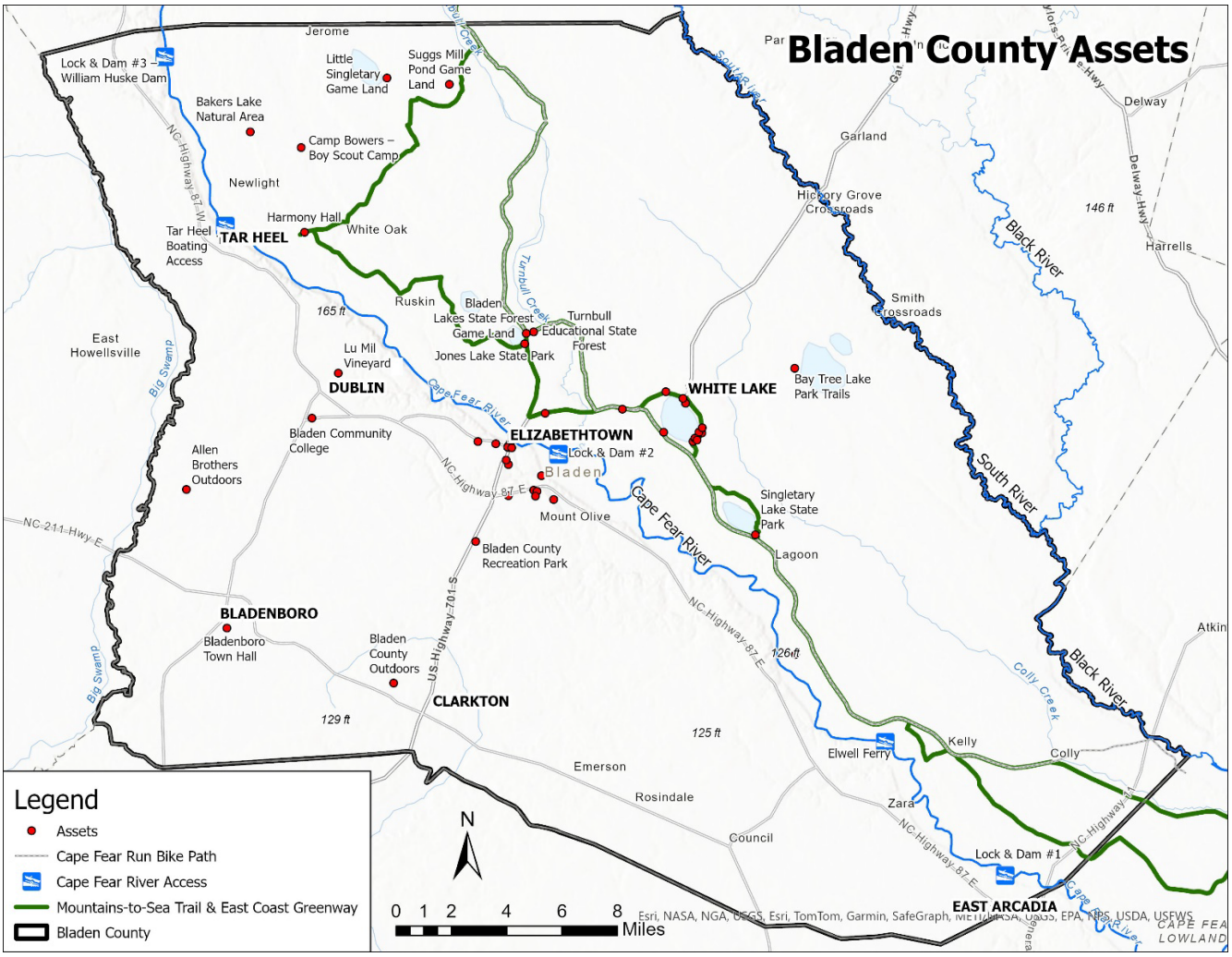
A discussion about the work group makeup was held with the Bladen County Economic Development staff and the Elizabethtown White Lake Chamber along with input from other town and County staff. Members of the group represented a wide swath of the community from Bladen Community College to private business owners to local volunteer groups. The work group actively participated in the five meetings that were held from November 2023 to March 2024.

Some of the work group responsibilities were to vet information presented, partake in activities such as asset mapping and itinerary building that fleshed out potential economic development ideas, provide stakeholders to interview, and review the final report and plan of work. The work group provided sound guidance for the plan of work. Specific members of the work group were tasked with actions and tasks. The group also identified partners and resources to achieve the goals laid out in the plan of work.

Asset Mapping

To develop a sound plan of work and critically look at what is needed to develop the outdoor recreation economy in Bladen County, an inventory of assets needed to be completed by the work group. Assets ranged from the County school system to the Mountains to the Sea Trail that cuts through the County to the region's history were among the many identified. The map below shows the assets. Using these assets, the work group began to amplify goals, strategies and actions to create a robust outdoor recreation economy.

The maps below display the assets based on the inventory. It also includes specific areas that were noted by the work group as tied to the outdoor economy. Since White Lake and Elizabethtown are major players in the outdoor recreation fields, a map was also created to note assets specific to those areas.


Bladen County Assets
Jerome
Lock & Dam #3 – William Huske Dam
Little Singletary Game Land
Suggs Mill Pond Game Land
Bakers Lake Natural Area
Camp Bowers – Boy Scout Camp
Newlight
Harmony Hall
White Oak
Tar Heel Boating Access
TAR HEEL
NC Highway 87 W
Ruskin
Bladen Lakes State Forest Game Land
Turnbull Educational State Forest
Jones Lake State Park
Turnbull Creek
Bull Creek
165 ft
East Howellsville
Big Swamp
Lu Mil Vineyard
DUBLIN
Cape Fear River
Bladen Community College
Allen Brothers Outdoors
ELIZABETHTOWN
Lock & Dam #2
Bladen
NC Highway 87 E
Mount Olive
Bladen County Recreation Park
NC 211 Hwy E
BLADENBORO
Bladenboro Town Hall
Bladen County Outdoors
US Highway 701 S
CLARKTON
129 ft
125 ft
Emerson
Rosindale
Council
WHITE LAKE
Bay Tree Lake Park Trails
Singletary Lake State Park
Lagoon
NC Highway 87 E
126ft
Cape Fear River
South River
Black River
Colly Creek
Elwell Ferry
Kelly
Colly
Zara
Lock & Dam #1
EAST ARCADIA
Cape Fear River
Garland
Hickory Grove Crossroads
Smith Crossroads
Delway
Delway Hwy
146 ft
Harrells
Atkin
Legend
Assets
Cape Fear Run Bike Path
Cape Fear River Access
Mountains-to-Sea Trail & East Coast Greenway
Bladen County
N
0 1 2 4 6 8
Miles
Esri, NASA, NGA, USGS, Esri, TomTom, Garmin, SafeGraph, USDA, USFWS

Elizabethtown/White Lake Area Assets
White Lake Marine
White Lake Motel & Campground
Gilligans' Island Resort
Sandy Ridge Campground & RV Resort
Carolina Sands at White Lake
Glen Mar Rd
Cape Fear ATV Trail
Suttons Corner
NC Highway 53 W
NC Highway 242 N
White Lake
The Tradition at White Lake
Glass Bottom at Goldston's Beach
Grand Regal Resort
FFA Camp
Lake Church & White Lake Christian Camp & Retreat
Camp Clearwater
White Lake Town Hall
Sweet Home Church Rd
The Elizabethtown Inn
Tory Hole Park
Melvins
Elizabethtown
Chamber of Commerce
Fishers
Leinwands
Barefoot Brow
Cape Fear River
Lock & Dam #2
Bladen County Hospital
Urgent Care – Bladen Medical Associates
S Poplar St
E Broad St
Martin Luther King Dr
Peanut Rd
Browns Creek Nature Trail & Bike Park
Browns
Elizabethtown Airport Industrial Park
Cape Fear Vineyards
Curtis Brown Airport
Big Blue Store
Greens Lake Conservation Park
Curtis L Brown Jr Field
87
Mount Olive
Cape Fear River Access
Cape Fear Run Bike Path
East Coast Greenway & Mountains-to-Sea Trail
Cape Fear River Trail
Bladen County
Assets
N
0 0.25 0.5 1 1.5 2 Miles
State of North Carolina DOT, Esri, TomTom, Garmin, SafeGraph, GeoTechnologies, Inc, METI/NASA, USGS, EPA, NPS, USDA, USFWS

Public Engagement

Several public engagement efforts were made during the planning process. The work group promoted the community survey throughout the County and provided stakeholders to interview. Both the community survey and the stakeholder interviews provided great insight into the outdoor recreation economy in Bladen County.

Jones Lake

The community survey revealed that the participants were heavily involved with outdoor recreational activities such as hiking, fishing and camping. Improvement and creation of trails were the top recommendations to improve and enhance outdoor recreational opportunities in the County. Several commented that there is a need to have businesses that serve outdoor recreational activities such as hunting and fishing supply stores and gear shops. Survey participants noted the needs for outdoor recreation activities that catered to seniors and youth and that were available to everyone in Bladen County, regardless of location. The stakeholder interviews echoed the need for outdoor recreation opportunities across the county and across age groups.

The stakeholders were also asked to complete a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis. The work group added to the SWOT during one of their meetings. The results are in the appendix and were used to shape the Plan of Work.

Figure 1 Canoers on Jones Lake Source Terri Dennison

The strengths that were listed repeated the awareness of the ample outdoor recreational activities that exist in Bladen County and in White Lake. The weaknesses identified reflected the challenge of a rural county with a small population – lack of funding specific to outdoor

recreation, hospitality needs, and the need for better communication. Opportunities were Bladen County and White Lake's locations which are within an hour to two-hour drive from several major metropolitan areas. Threats also showed the rural nature of the County limiting outdoor recreation – small population and less money than other areas nearby.

From these community engagement efforts and the SWOT analysis, key points for this report and the plan of work were noted. Specifically, the importance of quality of life, improvement of promotion and marketing of Bladen County outdoor assets, growth of the hospitality and tourism segment of the economy, and small business development. These key points also were used to produce the Plan of Work.

Economic Vision Statement Development

Over the course of work group meetings, the group developed an outdoor recreation economic vision statement. This was culled from data gathered from the community survey, stakeholder interviews, asset identification, and the SWOT analysis. This vision statement will guide the work group, partners, and the plan of work in the incremental economic growth for outdoor recreation.

Bladen County, known as Mother Nature's Playground, is the destination for outdoor recreation in Eastern North Carolina. Located by Carolina Bays and along the Cape Fear River, we tell our story and honor our history through our connections to the water, farms, forests, and community. A confluence of warm hospitality, wealth of outdoor opportunities and hometown businesses, the County welcomes visitors and locals to plant themselves in our communities and grow.

Source: Allen Bros Outdoors

CORE Plan of Work Development

With the development of the vision statement, the work group created a strategic plan of work to pursue that vision over the next five years. This is an incremental economic development plan. The plan of work was created with the idea that this vision could be achieved by the work group, stakeholders and partners and lead to a strong outdoor recreation economy in Bladen County.

Strategy: Bladen County is the destination for outdoor recreation in North Carolina.
Goal 1: Strengthen the brand of Mother Nature's Playground.

Objective 1: Enhance residents, travelers, and consumers' experiences of Bladen County as the place to experience outdoor recreation.

Action 1: Create a marketing campaign to share across various platforms and audiences.

Action 2: Extend the tourist season to attract more people and residents to outdoor recreation assets in the county.

Action 3: Use sustainable methods and comprehensive planning to continuously maintain and improve natural resources and recreational assets.

Strategy: Bladen County has a wealth of outdoor opportunities and hometown businesses.
Goal 2: Encourage expansion and development of outdoor based businesses.

Objective 1: A variety of outdoor based businesses will provide needed services and programming for citizens and visitors to enjoy assets.

Action 1: Recruit businesses to fill specific needs.

Objective 2: Entrepreneurship in the outdoor recreation economy will grow and diversify Bladen County's economy.

Action 1. Provide entrepreneurial training, support, and networking opportunities for new and existing businesses to expand and diversify the County's economic base.

Action 2: Partner with new and expanding businesses to identify potential capital and funding sources.

Outdoor Recreation Product Manufacturing

The Bladen County CORE work group did not identify "encouraging potential for outdoor recreation-oriented product manufacturing" as a primary goal of this strategic planning process. Raising awarness, understanding and education about the potential for outdoor recreation-oriented product manufacturing should be encouraged among all local leaders, particularly those who want to advance economic development.

The prospect exists for the manufacturing of outdoor recreation products, including supply chain materials, across the state of North Carolina. Attracting an exisiting company to expand their operations in the community as well as assisting a local startup business to kick off operations should be considered. Of the total $14.5+ billion impact that outdoor recreation contributes to the state's annual GDP, more than $2.3 billion of that is contributed from manufacturing. This sector employs over 7,600 people.[xv]

CORE Strategic Plan Adoption

Plan Review and Adoption

The Bladen County Creating Outdoor Recreation Economies Strategic Plan was presented and adopted by the Bladen County Board of Commissioners October 21, 2024. The work group continues to operate as part of the Bladen County Tourism and Promotion Committee under the Bladen County Chamber of Commerce.

Plan Implementation, Monitoring, and Evaluation

Bladen County will be responsible for monitoring, evaluation, and reporting accomplishments on the objectives of this plan to the Rural Economic Development Division. The town of White Lake will contribute to these tasks.

Plan Implementation

A dedicated group is imperative for the success of this plan. A solid group can address the goals and objectives outlined in this plan as well as assist with attaining the potential economic impact of these strategies. The same work group that developed this plan can be tasked to advance the goals of this plan or another similar group that is representative of the community can be asked to take on this role.

The sustained presence of such a group builds 'social capital' within the group that improves their ability to work together and effectively address common goals. Furthermore, a dedicated group ensures continuity from the planning stage through implementation, provides

accountability to ensure that objectives are being met, and allows the community to react and respond quickly when an opportunity is presented. This group should not, however, be the sole entity responsible for implementing all the goals of the plan. Instead, the group should function as a convener and point of contact to connect to other individuals, organizations, and resources to help the broader community achieve these goals. Maintaining a regular meeting schedule will also help increase the effectiveness of the group and the plan.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Regular monitoring and evaluation to review progress on the goals, objectives, and action steps in this plan will ensure it remains a viable, living document. This can be done via regular review sessions with the Strategic Planning team and other community stakeholders. REDD staff will periodically communicate and provide assistance as needed to help advance the goals and document the outcomes of the plan.

Bladen County CORE Plan of Work 2024-2029

Vision Statement

Bladen County, known as Mother Nature's Playground, is **the destination for outdoor recreation** in Southeastern North Carolina. Located by Carolina Bays and along the Cape Fear River, **we tell our story and honor our history** through our connections to the water, farms, forests, and community. A **confluence of warm hospitality, wealth of outdoor opportunities and hometown businesses**, the county welcomes visitors and locals to plant themselves in our communities and grow.

Strategy: Bladen County is the destination for outdoor recreation in Southeastern North Carolina.				
Goal 1: Strengthen the brand of Mother Nature's Playground				
Objective 1: Enhance residents, travelers, and consumers' experiences of Bladen County as the place to experience outdoor recreation.				
Action 1: Create a marketing campaign to share across various platforms and audiences.				
Tasks	**Responsibility**	**In-House-Outsource**	**Cost / Time**	**Partners / Assistance**
1. Develop, fund, and implement a marketing campaign to attract outdoor recreationists and tourists as well as build support and excitement for Bladen County assets.	CORE Work Group, Tourism Promotion Committee/ Elizabethtown-White Lake Chamber	Both	$60,000/ by June 2027 and ongoing.	Visit NC, Uplift program, consulting firm

2. Create signage, digital and printed materials that utilize the brand.	CORE Work Group, Tourism Promotion Committee/ EWLCOC	Both	$$$/ by June 2027	State Parks and Forests, consulting firm
3. Develop merchandise around the updated marketing campaign that supports and funds the destination marketing efforts.	CORE Work Group, Tourism Promotion Committee/ EWLCOC	Both	$$$/ by January 2028	Local Manufacturers, retailers, consulting firm
4.Continue Trail Festival weekend and explore adding an outdoor recreation expo.	CORE Work Group, Tourism Promotion Committee/ EWLCOC	Both	$10,000/ yr. Ongoing	State Parks and public lands VisitNC/Outdoor NC

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Goal 1: Strengthen the brand of Mother Nature's Playground

Objective 1: Enhance residents, travelers, and consumers' experiences of Bladen County as the place to experience outdoor recreation.

Action 2: Extend the tourist season to attract more people and residents to outdoor recreation assets in the county.

Tasks	Responsibility	In-House-Outsource	Cost / Time	Partners / Assistance
1. Survey visitors and residents to identify desirable amenities that would increase time spent in Bladen County.	CORE Work Group Tourism Promotion Committee/ EWLCOC	In house	$ By October 2025	State parks and forests county parks and rec local businesses local governments
2. Assist businesses and organizations with new programming and services, business plans, and marketing which are based survey responses.	CORE Work Group Tourism Promotion Committee/ EWLCOC/	In House Outsource	$$/ by March 2026 and ongoing	Bladen CC SBA Fayetteville State SBTDC

3. Support regional collaboration between jurisdictions and organizations to improve communication between municipalities and the County, expand partnerships, and promote events and activities.	CORE Work Group Tourism Promotion Committee/ EWLCOC	In House	No cost Ongoing	State parks and forests, county parks and rec local businesses, local governments
4. Assist new and existing businesses with marketing and promotion on various platforms – social media, online, print media.	CORE Work Group Tourism Promotion Committee/ EWLCOC	In House Outsource	$/ by June 2026 and ongoing	Bladen CC SBA Fayetteville State SBTDC
5. Analyze visitor spending trends for Bladen County	Chamber of Commerce	Outsource	$$ /By December 2025	VisitNC, Uplift
6 Link our outdoor assets to emerging trends in outdoor recreation.	CORE Work Group, Tourism Promotion Committee/ EWLCOC		Ongoing	VisitNC/Outdoor NC
7. Conduct a business gaps analysis	EWLCOC Bladen Econ Development Commission	Outsource	$$/ By December 2025	NC Commerce LEAD Consulting firm
8. Identify current businesses involved in outdoor recreation and tell their story	Chamber of Commerce, Bladen County Economic Development	In House	$/ By December 2025	

Strategy: Bladen County is the destination for outdoor recreation in Southeastern North Carolina.

Goal 1: Strengthen the brand of Mother Nature's Playground

Objective 1: Enhance residents, travelers, and consumers' experiences of Bladen County as the place to experience outdoor recreation.

Action 3: Use sustainable methods and comprehensive planning to continuously maintain and improve natural resources and recreational assets.

Tasks	Responsibility	In-House-Outsource	Cost / Time	Partners / Assistance

1. Identify and map all the outdoor recreation experiences in Bladen County including points of contact.	County GIS/GPS	In House and outsource	$$/ By December 2025	State lands, county and town parks, local businesses
2.. Develop a county wide task force (County Outdoor Recreation Task Force) that focuses on all aspects of outdoor recreation: asset development, economic potential, funding, and other related aspects.	County Commissioners		By June 2026	Great State Trails Committee
3. Create a prioritized list of recreational projects for the county for improvements: i.e., multi-use, trail around White Lake, completion of MTS trail links, bathroom at Brown's Creek Bike Park, ADA adaptations and other improvements.	County Outdoor Recreation Task Force (Mother Nature's Assistants) Local government Parks and Rec Friends MTS	In House	By March 2025	Local and County Governments
4. Identify user groups and individuals who can act as advocates and volunteers and seek funding for prioritized projects.	CORE Work Group			Friends of MTS SORBA

Strategy: Bladen County has a wealth of outdoor opportunities and hometown businesses.

Goal 2: Encourage expansion and development of outdoor based businesses.

Objective 1: A variety of outdoor based businesses will provide needed services and programming for citizens and visitors to enjoy assets.

Action 1: Recruit businesses to fill specific needs.

Tasks	Responsibility	In-House-Outsource	Cost / Time	Partners / Assistance
1. Provide business start-up information and assistance	Bladen Small Business Center		$ By January 2025	

2. Keep an inventory of available spaces for businesses throughout county.	Bladen County Economic Development Commission Local town staff EWLCOC		By December 2025	Local realtors
3. Develop a mentoring program to support start-ups and new businesses in the area	Bladen County Economic Development Bladen SBC		By January 2026	

Strategy: Bladen County has a wealth of outdoor opportunities and hometown businesses.

Goal 2: Bladen County has a culture of entrepreneurship around the outdoor recreation economy.

Objective 2: Entrepreneurship in the outdoor recreation economy will grow and diversify Bladen County's economy.

Action 1: Provide entrepreneurial training, support, and networking opportunities for new and existing businesses to expand and diversify the County's economic base.

Tasks	Responsibility	In-House-Outsource	Cost / Time	Partners / Assistance
1. Engage with local and regional partners to develop entrepreneurial programming around outdoor recreation.	EWLCOC CORE Work Group	In house	By September 2025	Bladen School System Bladen Community College SBC Bladen EDC
2. Identify businesses/individuals to participate.	CORE Work Group EWLCOC		By December 2025	Bladen EDC
3. Host networking events to get the word out about this entrepreneurship program.	CORE Work Group EWLCOC		By March 2026	

Strategy: Bladen County has a wealth of outdoor opportunities and hometown businesses

Goal 2: Bladen County has a culture of entrepreneurship around the outdoor recreation economy.

Objective 2: Entrepreneurship in the outdoor recreation economy will grow and diversify Bladen County's economy.

Action 2: Partner with new and expanding businesses to identify potential capital and funding sources.

Tasks	Responsibility	In-House-Outsource	Cost / Time	Partners / Assistance
1. Identify new and expanding businesses.	CORE Work Group EWLCOC Bladen EDC	In House	By January 2028	Balden SBC
2. Explore revenue streams that specifically support innovative business proposals.	CORE Work Group EWLCOC		By December 2027	Fayetteville State SBTDC Bladen SBC
3. Assist these businesses with development of prospectus to present to potential funders.	CORE Work Group EWLCOC		By June 2028	Fayetteville State SBTDC Bladen SBC Bladen Economic Development Commission
4. Hold matchmaking/speed-dating/Shark Tank event to introduce businesses with potential funders.	CORE Work Group EWLCOC		By December 2028	Fayetteville State SBTDC Bladen SBC Bladen EDC
5. Invite regional entrepreneurs to speak to local groups to share experiences.	CORE Work Group EWLCOC		By September 2024	
6. Research lodging options for county and municipalities	CORE Work Group EWLCOC		By January 2028	Bladen EDC

Appendices

Synopsis of Stakeholder Interviews in Bladen County:

- Extend tourism season
    - Use SBC to work with businesses on expansion and start up
    - Marketing/Promotion of year round access to assets
    - Complete White Lake MUP
- More amenities to appeal to wider audiences
    - Fill activity gaps for seniors and children
    - More food options – another grocery store, more restaurant choices, tap room
    - More accommodations
        - Especially in other parts of county
        - Need safe options/higher end
    - Improve accessibilities of parks and lakes – ADA, focus on seniors/kids
    - Offer activities to different skill levels
    - Other communities in county need outdoor activities and opportunities
    - Attract new businesses and expand existing businesses
        - Need businesses tied to outdoor rec – fishing gear, bike shop, outdoor rec equipment.
- White Lake is main econ driver
    - Complete MUP
- Improve communications
    - Raise awareness of what is in county to areas outside of county
    - Branding/Marketing
    - Promote and use services at SBC

Bladen County SWOT Analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
A lot of land and opportunities for trails.	Not populated. Large county but not a large population - sparse.	Wide open for opportunities.	Sometimes behind 8 ball because so rural sometimes it hurts. But outdoor rec could help. A lot of people want to get away and come to Bladen.
Not as crowded as other counties i.e. New Hanover.	Don't have advantages of cities and other towns.	Plenty of land	Lack of funding for facilities. Losing population.
Weather is good compared to national.	Representatives will provide for more populated regions.	Growing – esp Etown. Traffic from an hour radius comes to town.	Money to take to improve rec is not there immediately.
Enormous potential to attract people.	Funding – Etown has a lot more grants.	Large county by area	Need to find good grant writer.
Have infrastructure in place i.e. Brown Creek Bike Trail	Small county has small tax base so have to rely on small tax base.	Easy place to get to and pull from 60-80 mile radius – half million visitors to attract.	Not a lot of lodging.
Multiple lakes, lot of opportunities.	Have to find creative ways to improve and expand outdoor activities.	County has wineries with lodging and White Lake has accommodations.	Other areas that may have similar facilities like lake – they may have more things to do and more population. This could give area more business/trade.
A lot of ways county can accommodate many.	Need to find better ways to reach people outside of county – better marketing and advertising.	Could benefit developing ways for more hunters to come to the community like hunting clubs.	No developmental threat because no one is trying to develop
Easy to get to – close to lots of areas.	Adequate overnight accommodations. Many old mom and pop hotels on White Lake, but none throughout the rest of the county. Some are being updated around White Lake, which the whole county needs.	Could benefit developing ways for more hunters to come to the community like hunting clubs.	Poorer County, Income levels

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Central location in southeast.	Communication to let people know what is actually available – for kids and citizens.	Many beautiful old homes that could be turned into B&Bs in E Town and Bladenboro	People don't move there because "it would be great to live here but there is no money here"
Jones Lake, State owned and open to the public, impressive mini museum.	There is nowhere to stay that is decent, no high end hotels or ones you feel safe for transient traffic.	Communication	Very Localized Economy
Who Bladen County is with so many Carolina Bays is what makes the county interesting.	Only a few good restaurants, no seafood or tap rooms.	Utilizing the public land for year-round, horseback riding and ATV, using the river as well	Lack of opportunities to use outdoor assets.
Mix of commercialized outdoor rec and public, pristine.	Need a specialty restaurant or bar. Really just need one to get started for 20 something and 30 somethings.	Only river trail is at Tory Hole Park.	Weather – floods – rain can flood put-ins and close Elwell ferry.
Endless opportunities for hunters, hunting clubs.	More availability of commercial properties, plots of land that are affordable and available	More trails along river.	Red Tape
Community college is best kept secret with Yoga classes, new program for ag, new greenhouses and volunteers	Limited county transportation – gets people to basic facilities.	Potential markets with population around Bladen County.	Lack of year-round opportunities
Places available to do activities – White Lake, facilities that tie to outdoor rec – state parks. Available to visit and hike. Hiking trail in Etown.	Lack of advertising and awareness – didn't know about state parks	Opportunities to develop equipment shop – kayak, canoe, bikes.	Lack of interstate access
The massive amount of public land	Doesn't see itself as desirable destination	White Lake pontoon rentals take big investment to rent but no other boating options available for lesser costs.	
The lake			

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Farmers market in E Town			
Abundant opportunities			
Cost of entry – state parks are free – few barriers to participation			
Airport			
Small businesses doing well			
Proximity to major highways			
Intact successful downtown E Town			
Town Square in Bladenboro			
Southern Charm			
Old South Feel- welcoming, leisurely pace of life, hospitable, warm and welcoming.			
We have the “want to succeed”			

Endnotes

[i] VisitNC Economic Impacts Studies:
https://partners.visitnc.com/contents/sdownload/73486/file/2022+County+Level+Visitor+Expenditures.pdf
[ii] Ibid.
[iii] NC Wildlife Resources Commission 2022 North Carolina Outdoor Recreation Experiences
[iv] Outdoor Industry Association. 2022 Outdoor Participation Trends Report.
https://outdoorindustry.org/resource/2022-outdoor-participation-trends-report/
[v] The Citizen-Times. North Carolina outdoor recreation is a $28 billion industry, poised for further growth. October 11th, 2019. https://www.citizen-times.com/story/news/2019/10/11/outdoor-economy-conference-asheville-highlights-28-billion-industry/3923846002/
[vi] Headwaters Economics. Recreation Counties Attracting New Residents and Higher Incomes.
https://headwaterseconomics.org/economic-development/trends-performance/recreation-counties-attract/
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[viii] NC Department of Natural and Cultural Resources Visitation Data 2021-2022.
[ix] NC Department of Agricultural and Consumer Services NC Forest Service Visitation Data 2020-2023.
[x] US Census: https://data.census.gov/profile/Bladen_County,_North_Carolina?g=050XX00US37017
[xi] Ibid.
[xii] Southeastern Economic Development Commission Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy 2022-2027: https://nmcdn.io/e186d21f8c7946a19faed23c3da2f0da/ae7e997d2b734c79be580e29ef3abfa6/files/SEDC-CEDS-2022-2027_final.pdf
[xiii] Bladen County Strategic Plan 2022-2032: https://bladennc.govoffice3.com/vertical/sites/%7B3428E8B4-BA8D-4BCE-9B92-0A719CB4C4FB%7D/uploads/Bladen_County_Strategic_Plan_2022-2032_Clean_Copy.pdf
[xiv] White Lake Comprehensive Plan 2023-2043: https://bladennc.govoffice3.com/vertical/sites/%7B3428E8B4-BA8D-4BCE-9B92-0A719CB4C4FB%7D/uploads/Bladen_County_Strategic_Plan_2022-2032_Clean_Copy.pdf
[xv] U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis. Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, U.S. and States, 2022. https://www.bea.gov/data/special-topics/outdoor-recreation