

# **Duplin County Competitive Assessment**

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## Executive Summary

Using a conceptual model anchored in recent research on community competitiveness and information culled from a seventeen-year survey of several electronic databases, Duplin County's ability to compete in the new economy is evaluated by assessing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats inherent in its existing stock of *polity, financial, physical, human, cultural, and social capital*.

The findings suggest strongly that, given its locational advantages and natural attributes, Duplin County has the potential to become an extremely attractive place to live and do business. There are, however, major challenges which must be overcome if the community is to become highly competitive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge-based economy.

Specifically, Duplin County must (1) overcome the current political gridlock that appears to be stifling both economic growth and community development, (2) develop effective strategies to resolve the current "crisis" in its public education system, (3) embrace a more balanced approach to economic development by assigning equal weight to industrial recruitment and home-grown entrepreneurial ventures, (4) invest in the next generation of leaders that will propel the community into the future, (5) develop entrepreneurial strategies for solving the community's most pressing problems, and (6) reverse the "brain drain."

To address these issues the following six step action plan is recommended:

**Recommendation #1: Re-brand Duplin County as a sustainable community.** Communities striving to brand themselves as such typically adhere to what is referred to as the triple bottom line principles of sustainability in their efforts to revitalize, rebuild, or strategically reposition the community. In economic and community development projects, officials strive to (1) do no harm to the physical environment and protect natural resources to the maximum extent possible, (2) adhere to principles of social justice and equity, and (3) return strong shareholder/stakeholder value. In communities branded as sustainable places, natural and historic resources are preserved, jobs are available, sprawl is contained, infill development and adaptive re-use of existing buildings are advocated, neighborhoods are secure, health care is accessible, and all citizens have the opportunity to improve their lives. Knowledge workers and the creative class are attracted to places with core values that are consistent with sustainability principles.

**Recommendation #2: Develop an image marketing campaign to promote Duplin County in the economic development marketplace.** Based on the branding of the community, a multi-level marketing campaign should be launched to attract new residents and businesses to the area. The marketing materials should underscore the community's core values; highlight Duplin County's strengths--especially its strategic location, as well as its natural attributes; and leverage the web sites of the County and its constituent cities, towns, and organizations as the community's primary economic development marketing tools.

**Recommendation #3: Promote traditional business venturing entrepreneurship as one of the keys to future economic growth and development.** Accelerating efforts to facilitate small business growth and development will help diversify the local Duplin County economy, reducing the community's disproportionate dependency on several very large employers.

**Recommendation #4: Create a civic entrepreneurial culture to solve Duplin County's most pressing social problems.** To generate a sustainable revenue stream to solve or address pressing social problems, government and nonprofit leaders in Duplin County will require training in civic entrepreneurship. This is a relatively new area of executive development in which local officials acquire skills in the "nuts and bolts" of sound, socially responsible business practices that enable them to pursue a wide range of entrepreneurial approaches, including leveraging resources spent with the private sector, which generate community wealth--revenue that can be used to address unfunded mandates and other local issues that will enhance the attractiveness of the community.

**Recommendation #5: Re-engineer K-20 education to include more training and experiential learning in entrepreneurship.** By infusing course content on entrepreneurship in the K-20 curriculum, Duplin County education institutions can begin to foster, nurture, and facilitate the development of the next generation of homegrown entrepreneurs—traditional business as well as social and civic entrepreneurs—who, in turn, will create jobs through their for-profit and social purpose ventures. In addition, creating a generation of home-grown entrepreneurs may go a long way toward reversing the region's brain drain problem. This, of course, will require substantial investments in leadership

development in the public school system to improve education outcomes for a large segment of the county's school age population.

**Recommendation #6: Devise strategies to resolve Duplin County's human capital problem.** To reverse the brain drain, encourage and incentivize the best and brightest young talent to remain in the region after they graduate from college; launch a "bring back your own" program that offers incentives to home-grown talent that have done well professionally outside of the region and who may be willing to "move back" because of local roots or ties (e.g., aging parents and grandparents) in the region; and forge an alliance with AARP and similar organizations to extend the productive work life of local retirees, especially those with skills in areas where there is substantial unmet demand for workers in the local economy.