

Living the Outdoor Economy

This is a blog post by Anson County Economic Development Partnership (AnsonEDP) Director John Marek, published on April 20: Economic developers have a long-running joke that if a community has absolutely nothing going for it - no infrastructure, no business community, no skilled workers - it will promote itself as a "sportsman's paradise." Some might see the term "outdoor economy" and think it's just a fancier way of saying the same thing, but nothing could be further from the truth.

I spent a good part of last week at the Outdoor Economy Conference in Cherokee, North Carolina, and it was an eye-opening experience. The conference featured speakers on various topics, from trends in outdoor retail to bike trail development and construction. Although the conference had a distinctly North Carolina feel, more than two dozen states were represented, including Oregon, Colorado, Maine, Washington, and my native Ohio.

First of all, let me say that my organization, AnsonEDP, has already acknowledged the critical role the outdoors has played and will continue to play in our local economy. We have partnered with the Anson County Tourism Development Authority to promote Anson as the "Sport Shooting Capital of the Carolinas" and include the outdoor economy as one of the targeted economic drivers in our strategic plan. Further, we have budgeted an "outdoor economy contest" for 2024, and while the exact details are yet to be worked out, this will most likely take the form of an entrepreneurial "pitch" competition focused on some aspect of the outdoor economy, with the winner receiving a scholarship to Western Carolina University's online Certified Outdoor Professional program and grant funding to help start the business.

That begs the question, though, what exactly is the outdoor economy? When most people hear the term, they immediately think about tourism and service industries built around the outdoors. While tourism-related businesses constitute a significant component, the outdoor economy is an ecosystem of related sectors, all of which support and are supported by the others. A healthy outdoor economy includes elements of tourism, professional services, manufacturing, logistics, and transportation. In some cases, peripheral sectors such as housing, education, and health care can even play an important role.

A diverse and productive outdoor economy does not happen by accident, however. I was joined at the conference by my Montgomery County counterpart, Savannah Heath, and the discussion soon turned to ways our adjoining counties could collaborate to promote the outdoor economy. Although separated by just a hundred yards of the Rocky River, the two counties are very different. More than two-thirds of Montgomery County is Federally-protected lands of the Uwharrie National Forest, and developing practical ways to utilize those otherwise untouchable acres for recreation is a primary focus of their economic efforts.

While similarly rural, Anson County is a major transportation route connecting Charlotte and the South Carolina Upstate to the coast, and land here is available and affordable. As such, the two county's approaches to tourism and the outdoor economy are both distinct and complementary, and there is a strong sense that we can cooperatively combine our strengths to develop a larger, more diverse outdoor economy.

The key is to get the people who come to the Uwharries for hiking, camping, and off-roading to consider a day of sporting clays at Four Branches or Hyatt's, or a guided hunt at Buchanan Shoals or Devil's Rib. And vice-versa. Many components of a thriving outdoor economy are already in place; we simply need to find creative ways to leverage those resources.

Political Signs in Road Right of Way

Drivers traveling on North Carolina roadways are likely seeing a lot of campaign signs ahead of the primary election on May 17. Per General Statute 136-32 (b), political signs, if properly placed, are allowed on N.C. Department of Transportation right-of-way until May 27.

NCDOT has the authority to remove any signs that violate the general statute, create safety hazards for travelers or interfere with maintenance operations. NCDOT employees may remove signs that are illegally placed within the state right-of-way, as time permits. The signs are normally taken to local maintenance offices where they will be stored until claimed.

Per the general statute, restrictions regarding the signs include:

- Whoever places a sign is required to get the permission of any property owner of a residence, business or religious institution fronting the right of way where a sign would be placed;

- No sign is permitted in the right of way of a limited-access highway such as an interstate;
- No sign can be closer than 3 feet from the edge of the pavement of the road;
- No sign can obscure motorist visibility at an intersection;
- No sign can be higher than 42 inches above the edge of the pavement;
- No sign can be larger than 864 square inches; and
- No sign can obscure or replace another sign.

If anyone else removes or vandalizes a sign, they could be subject to a Class 3 misdemeanor citation from law enforcement.

Campaign signs can remain in place for 10 days after the May 17 primary election. Signs still in the right of way after May 27 are in violation of state law, and the NCDOT is authorized to remove and dispose of them.

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