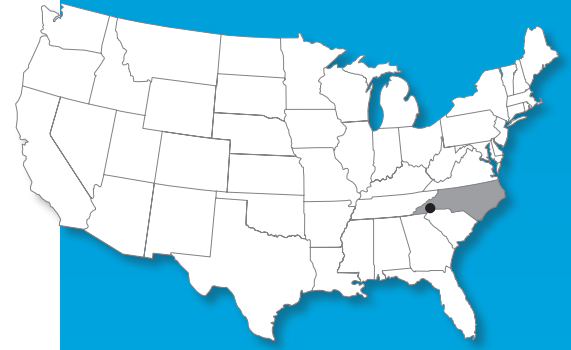


Dillsboro, North Carolina



	Dillsboro
Population (2000)	206
Municipal budget (2005)	\$174,000 ³²
Per capita income (2000)	\$14,400
Median household income (2000)	\$18,800
Poverty rate (2000)	23%
Minority population (2000)	7%
Proximity to urban center	180 miles to Charlotte, N.C.
Proximity to interstate highway	30 miles
Strategic approach	Entrepreneurship
Time frame	1998-2007

Located in the rural community of Dillsboro, the Jackson County Green Energy Park is using methane gas from a nearby landfill to power the studios of local artisans and small business entrepreneurs. Faced with migrating methane gas from the landfill, town and county officials decided to go beyond complying with environmental regulations by harnessing the gas to power small businesses. Since opening in 2006, the park has become home to a biodiesel refinery, three professional blacksmith studios and a series of greenhouse businesses. When completed, the park will create 20 to 25 jobs and provide opportunities for artisans and small business entrepreneurs to hone their skills at minimal cost.

The community and its history

Dillsboro is a railroad town situated just on the edge of the Great Smoky Mountain National Park in western North Carolina. Southern Railway constructed a railroad through town in the 1880s, which led a cluster of general supply businesses to spring up in Dillsboro. The railroad also brought tourists to town, as people from across the region came to experience the cool summers and Smoky Mountain scenery. Over the years, Dillsboro and Jackson County have continued to build on their tourism assets by showcasing the rich cultural heritage of the area. Each year, Dillsboro hosts festivals and celebrations to highlight its craft heritage with blacksmiths, glassblowers, quilters and potters. Dillsboro's town clerk, Herb Nolan, estimates that the small town has nearly 90

Dillsboro turned an environmental pollutant into an economic asset by converting landfill methane gas into energy to power local artists' studios at the Jackson County Green Energy Park. The results include new businesses and jobs for the community.

³²Interview with Herb Nolan, Dillsboro town clerk, April 18, 2007.

businesses, most of which cater to tourists. Elsewhere in the county, institutions such as Western Carolina University and Southwestern Community College provide employment for many of the area's residents.

Like most rural counties, Jackson County has a small landfill. Located on the outskirts of Dillsboro, the Jackson County landfill and trash-transfer site was closed in 1996. Within a couple of years, however, county officials were notified that methane gas from the landfill was escaping, or migrating, into the atmosphere and that the site was in violation of federal environmental regulations. The typical response to this type of violation is to exhaust the gas by burning the methane as it leaves the landfill. "We wanted to find a more creative solution," said county manager Ken Westmoreland. "We had a problem, and either we could come into compliance by exhausting the gas or try to find ways to harness the gas to do something innovative."

The strategy

A model solution was found just a few counties away, where the Energy Xchange Renewable Energy Center in Yancey County used methane gas to power the shops of local artisans. With the support of Dillsboro Mayor Jean Hartbarger, Westmoreland returned to the Jackson County Board of Commissioners in 1999 pledging that a similar park could be built in Dillsboro. Most importantly, it could be done for approximately the same cost as exhausting the gas (which would have been required absent another solution). All told, Westmoreland estimated the park would cost around \$1 million dollars and, with approval from the commissioners, set out to construct the Jackson County Green Energy Park.

Grant money from the Golden LEAF Foundation, N.C. Rural Economic Development Center and U.S. Department of Agriculture enabled the county to begin cleaning up the site and designing the park. In 2005, the county hired Timm Muth as park's project manager. By 2006, construction was underway, and Muth, along with other engineers, designed a means for converting methane gas into energy for the greenhouse and 10 studios that would make up the park. In October of 2006, the first artisan, a master blacksmith from Dillsboro, began operating out of the park.

To fill the remaining spots, Muth and Westmoreland assembled a committee to advertise and select participants from throughout the region and nation. Each participant is allotted a three-year residency and receives technical assistance and free energy during his or her tenure.

"Through the program, participants delay expensive start-up costs," Muth said. "Often those expenses are the biggest barrier for artisans to overcome." During the first year of the residency, participants work on their business plan with assistance from the local community college. By the second year, artisans are required to post their goods in retail locations throughout the

region. Finally, in the third year, artisans begin looking for new studio space, either in the county or elsewhere. Jackson County officials believe that by the third year, participants will have saved enough money from the previous two years to make the transition fairly easy.

Some of the newly established businesses in the park have had strong initial success. Recently, a biodiesel manufacturer located in the park and is producing fuel for Jackson County government and Cherokee Tribal vehicles. Once the park is completed, Muth estimates nearly 25 jobs will have been created. "Creating that number of good-paying jobs in a rural community goes a long way," he said. The Green Energy Park also has earned a number of state and national accolades. In the past year, the park received awards from the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners and the State Energy Office and was named the U.S. EPA Landfill Methane Outreach Project of the Year. By supporting a creative strategy to turn a liability into an asset, Dillsboro is bolstering its cultural heritage tourism niche and paving the way for a more sustainable future.

What are the lessons from this story?

When facing a challenge, look for a similarly situated community to serve as a mentor.

Jackson County was not the first county to face an issue with methane gas migrating from its landfill. Rather than reinventing the wheel, Dillsboro and Jackson officials looked outside their community for help and guidance. Not more than 100 miles away, they found that Yancey County had solved a similar methane gas problem by turning the methane into an energy source for a business park. This example sparked the initial idea for Jackson County's park and also gave officials insight into the difficulties Yancey County had to overcome. Jackson County was about to avoid pitfalls and build upon, reshape and improve the example provided by Yancey County.

Use environmental concerns as levers for economic development strategies. Typically, environmental regulations are perceived as burdens on a town budget. In this case, the town looked beyond the regulation to see how it might comply while also creating jobs and raising incomes. Further, in creating the Green Energy Park, officials spent about the same amount of money as they would have to merely comply with environmental regulations. In the process, Jackson County and Dillsboro linked their solution to the community's heritage tourism strategy.

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