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# The Daily Record

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## Benson One Of Six Towns Picked For Main Street Program

**David Anderson, Jr.**

Reporter for The Daily Record

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Benson is one of only six towns in North Carolina accepted this year into the Small Town Main Street program. Nearby Roseboro was also selected.

Since the program started in 2003, 22 towns, all with populations of less than 7,500, have participated in the program. Angier was inducted in 2007.

"This is an exciting step for us," said Ben Murphrey, Benson's downtown revitalization coordinator. "(Small Town Main Street Community) is an important title to have when you're a town of this size."

While downtown Benson is already attractive, Ben Murphrey, the town's downtown revitalization coordinator, said more businesses such as restaurants and boutiques would draw in more shoppers. -Daily Record Photo/David Anderson Jr.

The program, although offering no money, helps towns promote and preserve historic business areas, while, at the same time dragging them full force into the 21st century.

### Four-Point Approach

For the first year of membership, representatives from the Division of Community Assistance, part of the N.C. Department of Commerce, visit monthly in the communities, offering advice and resources to help develop the downtown districts. Less frequent meetings are set for the second year. After two years, member communities have priority access to staff and may schedule additional meetings as needed.

Representatives will meet with citizens to discuss four approaches to improving downtown business: organization, promotion, design and economic restructuring.

Discussions focused on organization ensure groups that have a stake in the success of downtown business, including the chamber of commerce, the town board, bankers and civic groups, work together toward common goals.

Promotion involves not only seeking out traditional forms of advertising, but creating a heightened level of excitement for the downtown area among residents. Mr. Murphrey said that while Benson's downtown is already appealing to look at and drive through, he hopes it will eventually become a shopping district that people in Benson and surrounding communities think of first whenever they want to go out to eat or go shopping for fun. He hopes the revitalization effort will allow downtown merchants to compete on a real level with larger, modern shopping complexes.

The town's recently-unveiled slogan, "Benson: The Center of Attention," will play a key role in developing marketing campaigns to draw people downtown.

Design includes helping merchants apply for grants to rehabilitate historic buildings and offering professional services, such as drafting mock-ups for facade improvements, at no cost to property owners.

Representatives working on economic restructuring will conduct market analysis to create a clear picture of the types of businesses that dominate the market, what new ventures residents would be likely to support and how to

diversify the downtown market place. Mr. Murphrey said Benson's current downtown area houses plenty of professionals - doctors, dentists, lawyers and accountants - but could benefit from more entertainment-oriented businesses, like restaurants, cafes and boutiques.

"If we can get a more diverse clientele downtown, we'll attract more people, we'll attract all types of people and we'll be more successful," Mr. Murphrey said.

#### On Track for Success

This year, 19 towns asked to be included in the project.

Mr. Murphrey's father, Bob Murphrey, is the program coordinator for the eastern part of the state. While Bob Murphrey would typically be involved in the selection process of applicants, three independent consultants were brought in to eliminate candidates this year, due to the conflict of interests.

Both Roseboro and Benson have already taken steps to show they're serious about preserving their downtowns.

In recent years, Roseboro has used grants from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the N.C. Department of Transportation to move all of their utilities underground and install antique-styled lampposts bordering Main Street.

"We hope to get our downtown property owners excited about redoing the facades of their buildings and to show them ways to make improvements," Roseboro Town Clerk Drenda Ammons said.

In May, Benson demonstrated a commitment to their downtown merchants by hiring Mr. Murphrey. Elizabeth Parham, director of the Main Street program, said towns the size of Benson typically do not have the resources to hire a downtown manager.

"That's something that really speaks to the interest level that the town has in this program," she said.

Community interest is essential to the success of the program. All workshops are open to the public, but town officials are encouraging people with a vested interest in the downtown community - existing business owners, realtors, contractors and potential business owners - to seek the assistance the representatives from the program will offer.

Benson has tentatively set their first meeting for Sept. 15 at 6 p.m. in the town hall. The official date will be decided and citizens will be notified by a flyer in their utility bills this week.

Ms. Ammons said Roseboro's town board will set a date at its meeting tonight.

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