

Twin Counties primed for grants

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A pair of initiatives have placed the Twin Counties in prime position to claim millions of dollars in grants for economic development during the next several years.

And if John Gessaman of the Carolinas Gateway Partnership has his way, he and other local officials will work to make the most of the opportunity.

During the last two years, the state has designated Nash and Edgecombe counties as 21st Century Communities, giving them priority over most other North Carolina counties when it comes to receiving state and federal grants to pay for economic and community improvement projects. The effort has helped primarily rural counties receive more than \$100 million in grants since it began in 2001, officials with Gov. Mike Easley's office said.

Meanwhile, Edgecombe County is set to receive up to \$10 million during the next decade after being selected by the Golden LEAF Foundation for its Community Assistance Initiative.

"The stars are aligning in this area, I suppose," said Gessaman, an economic development official. "We want to take our fullest advantage of the assistance that is being offered to us."

Each year since the 21st Century program started, the N.C. Commerce Department has encouraged distressed counties to apply. Communities are selected on a competitive basis, and state officials also consider the commitment from community leadership.

Nash County community leaders, who learned Nash had been selected to the program in February, have begun the process of determining priorities through extensive interviews.

As two of the 31 counties that have received the 21st Century designation since 2001, Nash and Edgecombe counties have high priority when applying for grants from agencies such as the N.C. Agriculture, Environment and Natural Resources and Transportation departments, as well as Golden LEAF.

"We're still very early in the process," Nash County Manager Bob Murphy said, "but we're optimistic that this program is going to bear real fruit for us. And it should help us to focus more tightly on economic development."

In Edgecombe County, a 21st Century Community since early 2007, local officials and community leaders have been invigorated in recent months through the Golden LEAF Community Assistance Initiative. The county is guaranteed a \$2 million grant every two years for the next decade through the initiative, a fundamentally new approach to grant writing designed to bring whole counties together under a shared goal.

Each \$2 million grant can be used for any number of programs, as long as the county unites and together determines how to use the money.

County leaders are scheduled to meet today at the East Carolina Agriculture and Education Center to begin discussing potential projects for the first \$2 million.

With the decline of North Carolina's manufacturing and textile industries in recent years, the Twin Counties can use the help offered by these two programs, said Krista Ikirt, Carolinas Gateway Partnership vice president for Nash County. Ikirt is working closely with Edgecombe County economic development officials to unite the two-county effort, she said.

If nothing else, Gessaman said, these initiatives are getting people thinking about how to position the Twin Counties for economic growth for years to come.

"We are in a very competitive economic climate, so any additional tools or resources we can bring to bear to first bring jobs here, help existing companies to grow and to get new companies to locate here is all the better for us," Gessaman said. "We welcome each of these initiatives."

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