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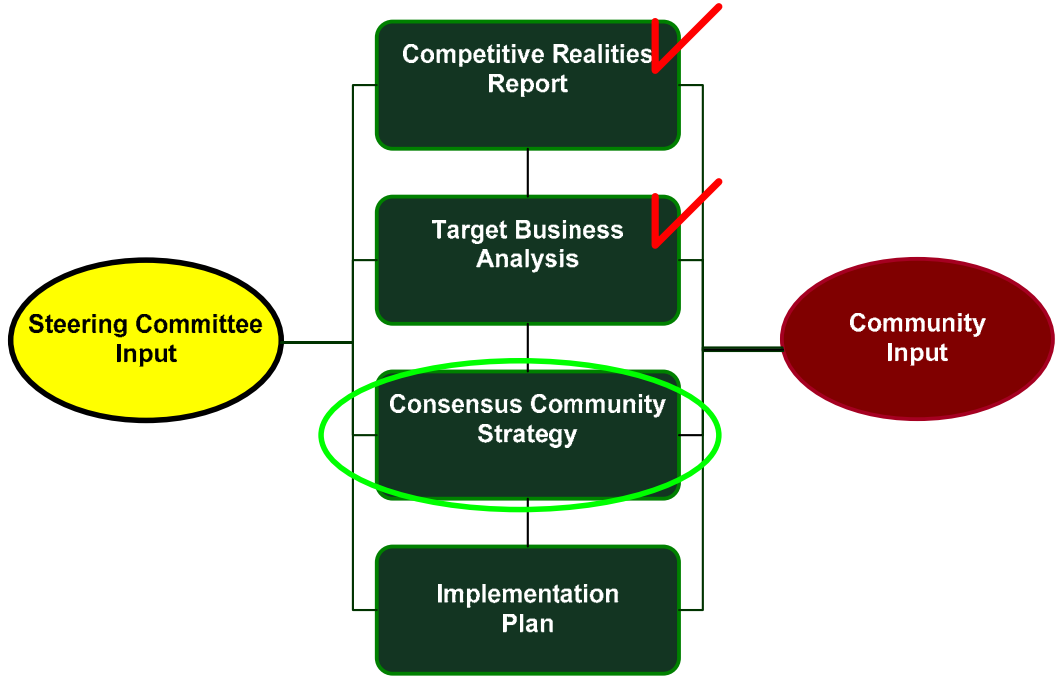
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PROJECT OVERVIEW

Business and community leaders in Caldwell County have acknowledged that the New Economy is changing the dynamics of local competitiveness and quality of life. Together with Caldwell 20/20, community leaders are embarking on the development of this *Consensus Community Strategy* – the first effort of its kind in Caldwell County – in order to identify opportunities for community growth, to strengthen local workforce opportunities, and cultivate local quality of life assets. This is another positive step on the road to establishing Caldwell County as a community where current and future residents can **Live, Learn, Work, and Grow**.

There are four key components of the Caldwell County community strategic planning process. Each is outlined in further detail on the facing page. The first two phases, the *Competitive Realities Assessment* and *Target Business Analysis* has been completed and the *Reports* are available on the project website (www.lenoircaldwellstrategy.com). This *Consensus Community Strategy* is the third phase of the process.



The following is a brief description of the stages of the planning process.

1. **Competitive Realities:** This *Report* demonstrated the current realities of Caldwell County's demographic trends, economic structure, and its overall business climate. This *Report* helped develop a shared understanding among project stakeholders of Caldwell County's challenges and opportunities.
2. **Stakeholder Input Process:** This process gathered the perspectives of community members; *Market Street* conducted interviews, focus groups, and an online survey.
3. **Target Business Analysis:** The document presented priority target industry sectors for Caldwell 20/20 to pursue. It included an analysis of current business concentrations and an assessment of Caldwell County's current workforce development capacity for each sector.
4. **Caldwell 20/20 Community Consensus Strategy:** This *Strategy* will utilize all previously collected research to provide a blueprint for Caldwell 20/20's immediate and long-term goals. This document will recommend goals, objectives, and specific action steps needed for the community to realize its preferred future.
5. **Implementation Plan:** The final document in this process will assist Caldwell 20/20 in prioritizing action steps, assessing key implementation entities, building timelines, and researching current and potential funding sources.

At the end of this process, Caldwell 20/20 and its partners will have a *Consensus Community Strategy* focused on addressing the community's goals and leveraging opportunities, with the action steps and implementation guidelines necessary to achieve success. **This *Strategy* will assist Caldwell 20/20 in achieving its mission:**

To deliver preparation, opportunity, and prosperity – great jobs, superior education, excellent healthcare, and incredible livability.

Steering Committee

The Steering Committee was established at the beginning of the Caldwell 20/20 strategic visioning process to provide guidance and leadership. The Committee represents a broad group of community and business leaders. It has been responsible for reviewing project deliverables, providing feedback, and participating in discussions about the future direction of Caldwell County. The following individuals are the members of the Steering Committee:

Committee Co-Chairs

Deborah Murray
News Topic

David Horn
Caldwell Memorial Hospital

Committee Members

Scott Anderson
Bank of Granite

Deborah Ashley
Caldwell County Chamber of Commerce

Lane Bailey
City of Lenoir

Don Barrier
Caldwell County Commissioner/Duct Dudes

Rebecca Bentley
Town of Hudson

Alex Bernhardt, Jr.
Bernhardt Furniture

Dr. Kenneth Boham
Caldwell Community College & Technical Institute

Laura Easton
Caldwell Memorial Hospital

Bob Floyd
The Floyd Group

John Forlines
Bank of Granite

Hon. Barry Hayes
Town of Granite Falls

William Howard
Bernhardt Furniture

Doug Johnson
Blue Ridge Electric Membership Corporation

Brent Kincaid
Community Leader

Todd Perdue
City of Lenoir

Rev. Ike Perkins
Mt. Pilgram Church/LINK

Lisa Sims
Economic Development Commission

Ann Smith
First Citizens Bank

Jim Sponenberg
Parkway Bank

Dr. Steve Stone
Caldwell County Schools

Linda Story
Town of Granite Falls

Pat Triplett
The Education Foundation

Sheila Triplett-Brady
Broyhill Family Foundation

Bobby White
Caldwell County

Monte Willis
Hog Waller Development

Janet Wilson
Community Leader

Alan Wood
Economic Development Commission

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The realities involved in becoming a community that is competitive are often stark. Some communities win, some lose. Some communities make the investments in programs and personnel needed to compete; some do not. Some communities move forward, some retreat. While it is inconceivable that a community can change its competitive trajectory overnight, it must nevertheless commit to a sustained process of improvement or risk being left behind in the battle to build a better community.

This *Consensus Community Strategy* is a very ambitious program to enable the community to “catch up” to competitors that have already traveled the road to competitiveness for a number of years. However, it is more than just an exercise in capacity building: the Strategy – if effectively implemented – could position Caldwell to be a recognized leader in progressive community and economic development. However, for these ambitions to be realized, Caldwell County’s public and private entities will need to come together to dramatically enhance the community’s capacity to implement this strategic plan. These dynamics – and other aspects of the “how” related to the “what” of the *Strategy* – will be comprehensively detailed in the *Implementation Plan* for Caldwell County.

In assessing Caldwell County’s competitive position and other community dynamics as part of this strategic process, four goal areas emerged as vital to Caldwell County’s future vitality. These goals are:

- **Competitive Workforce**
Development of a first class educational system, which provides opportunities for seamless education from Pre-K to 16 as well as lifelong learning opportunities for adults, that insures the competitiveness of the local labor force for both traditional and “New Economy” careers created locally.
- **Economic Opportunity**
Utilization of a diverse set of strategies and tools to diversify Caldwell County’s economy by encouraging intra-industry cooperation, leveraging natural assets, cultivating entrepreneurship, and enhancing Project Homefront.
- **Leadership, Community Pride, and Civic Engagement**
Building strong leadership, a spirit of collaboration, and cooperation and pride among Caldwell County’s constituencies, all efforts related to community development will be necessary for continued success.

- **Vibrant Quality of Life:**
Improve the quality of life for all residents while leveraging Caldwell County’s natural assets to assist in recruiting by promoting and supporting downtown revitalizations, safer streets, diverse arts, entertainment, culture and recreation options, greenways, retail options, and community health.

Under these four primary Goals, there are **20 specific objectives**. These 20 objectives each contribute to the improvement of the community and make the long-term improvement of the community possible. The four Goals and the 20 objectives are interdependent and rely on each other. These objectives are outlined in the pages to follow.

Each Goal is tied to the fortunes and success of the other. Caldwell County cannot thrive without a competitive workforce; diversified economy; strong leadership, community pride and civic engagement; and a dynamic quality of life. The *Consensus Community Strategy* represents a means to achieving a positive and progressive local future – a plan that can embody local citizens’ vision for sustainable and inclusive community development and growth.

CONSENSUS COMMUNITY STRATEGY

Competitive Workforce

Vision: Caldwell County will have a labor force competitive for both traditional and “New Economy” careers created locally. A seamless training system will encompass first-class education for youth of all ages and adults, enabling them to obtain quality local employment and thrive in Caldwell County.

Objective 1: Ensure that K-12 public school facilities are transformed into optimal learning environments for Caldwell County youth.

Action: Partner with Caldwell County Schools in designing, funding and implementation of a comprehensive facilities-improvement program in Caldwell County public schools.

Action: Seek partnerships and funding to provide students with up-to-date technology, including computers, software and state-of-the-art learning tools.

Action: Consider means to develop additional certified safe playgrounds at Caldwell County schools.

- For all new playgrounds, obtain the services of a Certified Playground Safety Inspector (CPSI) to complete playground audits/inspections, provide insight into unsafe conditions, and provide recommendations on how to alleviate and correct potential problems.
- Consider increasing the number of hours the playgrounds are open and improving access to the playgrounds to provide children more opportunities for supervised play.

Objective 2: Enhance early-childhood education and afterschool programming in Caldwell County.

Action: Develop and fund a comprehensive Pre-K program in Caldwell County.

- Partner with state officials to source funding for the effort and to design a best-practice curriculum.

Action: Establish a Coalition to develop and coordinate pre-school, afterschool, and summer enrichment educational programming and support for Caldwell County youth involving Wraparound Program, Communities in Schools, the Family Resource Center, LINK, Smart Start, and other related organizations and agencies.

Action: Emphasize the necessity for higher levels of academic achievement so that Caldwell County Schools may become competitive both for their education as well as their ability to facilitate the recruitment and retention of professionals seeking quality schools for their children.

Objective 3: Increase career-focused and entrepreneurial-education opportunities for Caldwell County students by strengthening the existing programs of the Caldwell Council for Adolescent Health and/or by re-establishing a Junior Achievement program in the county.

Action: Implement the North Carolina K-8 REAL program¹ in Caldwell County schools and/or expand the CHOICES program in grade levels other than its current grade 8 programming.

Action: Continue partnering with CCC&TI to launch independent Career Academies, focused on top local employment sectors, in Caldwell County high schools.

- Ensure Career Academies are effectively aligned with the County's priority growth industries.

Action: Expand and enhance the Project Lead the Way (PLTW) program in Caldwell County for the purpose of increasing the curricula in math, science, and technology.

Action: Enhance the Middle College High School concept of technical-education opportunities so that high school students can choose to follow a trade-focused career track starting in their freshman year.

- Partner with CCC&TI to prepare students to transition seamlessly into the workforce upon graduation or to transfer to degree and/or certification program in their trade.

Objective 4: Fully engage the local business community and philanthropic support to improve student performance and augment educational capacity in Caldwell County.

Action: Broaden awareness in the Caldwell County business community of locally available programs at the K-12 and two-year college level.

- Work with local businesses to take advantage of eligible programs and promote local institutions in any way possible.
- Ensure business representation on the Workforce Development Board consistently pressures the board to optimize its role in local workforce development.

¹ The K-8 REAL curriculum is a detailed instructor's guide for establishing a community in a self-contained classroom, grade, or school. It includes activities and step-by-step guides for implementing school-based enterprises, financial literacy, and community service projects. Note: The K-8 REAL curriculum is licensed only to teachers/educators who attend a K-8 REAL Institute.

Action: Dramatically increase private sector funding through a formalized countywide program to guarantee participation in mentorship and internship programs through Caldwell County schools.

Objective 5: Optimize the impact of two- and four-year colleges on local workforce competitiveness.

Action: Cooperate with CCC&TI to best leverage its programs so that its training continues to be a transformative resource for local workforce development.

- Ensure that training remains consistently aligned with local employer needs.

Action: Build curricula leading to the presentation of a Certified Work-Ready Certificate awarded by CCC&TI.

- Program materials could include interactive videos, presentations, and texts explaining the “new realities” of local economic development and employee competitiveness for high-paying positions.
- Coordinate with private businesses to ensure training is reflective of local needs and issues.

Action: Encourage Appalachian State University to expand the university’s available programmatic offerings in Caldwell County.

Action: Work to launch a school-based “I Have a Dream” program in Caldwell County schools.²

- Ensure the program is prioritized at local schools with the highest percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.
- For those students not participating in “I Have a Dream,” consider the development of a “Caldwell Promise” program subsidizing a student’s higher educational tuition if they attend college locally and remain in the community for a set period of time after graduation.

² The “I Have a Dream” program sponsors entire grade levels of 50-100 students in under-resourced public schools and works with participating students from early elementary school all the way through high school. Upon high school graduation, each program participant receives guaranteed tuition assistance for higher education.

Economic Opportunity

Vision: A diverse set of strategies will ensure that Caldwell County's economy provides high-quality, well-paying careers for generations of local adults.

Objective 6: Formalize a Caldwell County Business Council with representation from the community's largest employers from all sectors.

Action: Take the informal group of top businesspeople that had been meeting together to the next level.

- Staff the Council with EDC or other appropriate agency staff member(s).

Action: Coordinate a regular meeting schedule for the Council and work to address key competitive issues that arise from Council discussions.

Objective 7: Optimize the impact of key local opportunities.

Action: Encourage the creation of task forces under the Business Council in each of the four (4) target industry sectors identified in the Target Business Analysis: Advanced Manufacturing; Logistics; Health Care; and Corporate, Professional & Data Services.

- Staff each task force with EDC or other appropriate agency representative.
- Inform the development and programming of the task forces through an examination of national best-practices.
- Take mission trips to other communities to source ideas for the optimal use of Caldwell's industry task forces.

Action: Create a "Green Economy" Task Force of experts to develop the potential for growth in this segment.

- Take advantage of efforts that can potentially benefit Caldwell County's development of a "green" economy. These include:
 - North Carolina Governor Mike Easley's sustainable energy policy efforts.
 - Appalachian State's designation as North Carolina's "green" university.
 - Existing and potential "green" programs at CCC&TI.
 - Local utilities with mandates to provide sustainable energy options.

Action: Create a local Furniture Manufacturing Task Force.

- Ensure that key representatives from large and small Caldwell County furniture manufacturers are involved in the Task Force.
- Discuss ways to optimize local processes or develop “niche” products to keep furniture employment in Caldwell.
- Pursue opportunities to transform certain furniture manufacturing into plastics – composites and finishes and lighter weight products (some local companies are doing this).

Action: Develop an “Up the Hill and Down the Mountain” initiative to capitalize on the residential and tourism potential resulting from the four-lane completion of state Highway 321 from Caldwell’s southern to northern borders.

- Create a Task Force to deal with the opportunities and implications related to cross-border benefits of holding residency in Caldwell County.
- Sell advantages of Caldwell’s cheaper land costs to potential residents and businesses.
- Position Caldwell as a “bedroom community” for Boone and Hickory – improve marketing and access related to these opportunities.
- Partner with Blowing Rock on promising relocation projects and tourism efforts.

Objective 8: Enhance Project Homefront business retention and expansion (BRE) efforts in Caldwell County.

Action: Purchase BRE software and sub-license to all interested community partners.

- Utilize to optimize business-calling inquiries and discussions.
- Enter all BRE-sourced info into database and leverage for future visits, recruitment, and expansions.

Action: Further develop a partnership with Google to maximize their effect on Caldwell County.

Action: In recognition of its importance as an economic engine for future economic development growth, collaborate with Caldwell Memorial Hospital in its efforts to provide competitive-edge medical services to the Caldwell population.

- Facilitate linkages with training partners, if necessary.
- Work with local government on regulation and permitting issues.

Action: Solidify the relationships that exist with businesses, county and municipal governments, the EDC, and Chamber of Commerce so that this coalition can form the foundation of a public private partnership for economic development.

Objective 9: Ensure that efforts to develop a “culture” of entrepreneurship in Caldwell County are effective.

Action: Better leverage the High Country Business Network (HCBN).

- Leverage Chamber membership to utilize and promote the services of the HCBN.
- Prominently include in Chamber publications.
- Integrate in K-12 and CCC&TI entrepreneurial education and services.
- Potentially broaden the membership on Caldwell’s local HCBN council.
- Ensure linkages to HCBN and its programs are included on all economic development and government websites.

Action: Support the establishment of a public, non-profit “mixed-use” small business incubator.

- As a mixed-use incubator, its focus will not be limited to any specific sector; the range of businesses that can lease space can be diverse.

Action: Determine viable means of expanding locally available financial support for small-business start-ups and expansions.

- Leverage the NC Rural Economic Development Center’s Microenterprise Loan Program, BRAIN and federal funds.

Action: Strive to broaden awareness of the Advance Micro Power – Research Technology Incubator (AMP-RTI).

- Assess the need to leverage Chamber/EDC marketing funds to make the facility more widely known among public and private researchers and technology entrepreneurs in Caldwell County and adjacent communities.
- Work with AMP-RTI to develop a dynamic website and develop search-optimization capacity.

Objective 10: Provide competitive local infrastructure and incentives for economic growth.

Action: Secure industrial and/or commercial sites under the ownership of the EDC and other appropriate agency as speculative property for development.

Action: Develop a re-use plan for obsolete manufacturing buildings and “grayfield” sites.

- Leverage the NC Rural Economic Development Center’s Building Reuse and Restoration Program.

Action: Continue participation in the Western Piedmont Council of Governments’ Regional Transportation Task Force.

Action: Leverage current partnerships for a plan to continue to explore all modes of logistics enhancements including rail, airport, and highway transportation.

Action: Enhance the “toolbox” of available incentives to help attract local investment and close deals with relocation prospects.

- Develop written policies on incentives for industry sectors.
- Ensure that the incentives program includes performance benchmarks for the recipients and “clawback” provisions.

Objective II: Work to better leverage regional opportunities.

Action: Expand partnerships with economic and governmental officials in adjacent counties to determine potential areas of joint interests including transportation initiatives; jointly developed industrial parks with revenue-sharing provisions; land-use planning; environmental and watershed protection; and others.

Action: Strengthen the Caldwell County identity and influence in Raleigh and Washington, DC through the strengths and connections of local and regional leaders.

Leadership, Community Pride, and Civic Engagement

Vision: Caldwell County will become a community that public and private leadership – and the population as a whole – will cherish and work tirelessly to sustain.

Objective 12: Grow local leadership’s capacity to affect positive change in Caldwell County.

Action: Encourage local elected officials to participate in the NC Rural Economic Development Center’s Rural Economic Development Institute.³

- Ensure that officials leverage their training to better engage local residents in community-improvement efforts and educate their colleagues on the key tenets of the REDI program.

Action: Formalize a process for Leadership Caldwell graduates to be involved in a wide variety of community affairs.

- Strongly encourage them to actively participate in civic leadership projects as alumni of the program and design a mechanism for civic accountability.

Objective 13: Develop a “Youth Engagement and Empowerment Initiative.”

Action: Coordinate program development and implementation through a partnership of schools, social service and community development agencies, faith-based institutions, and community foundations.

- Engage young people in community life; listen to young people, value them as a resource, and act on their ideas; support young people in developing and using their passions, talents, and skills to better themselves and their communities⁴.
- Focus efforts on building “next-generation” leadership and instilling pride in the Caldwell County community.

Action: Develop a Youth Leadership Caldwell program as a partnership of the Caldwell County Chamber and Caldwell County schools.

³ The North Carolina Rural Economic Development Institute is a leadership development program that provides participants with the knowledge, skills and insights they need to bring about positive change in today's challenging economic environment.

⁴ Program based on 2008 Southern Growth Policies Board report, “Brave New South.”

Action: Support LINK in efforts to secure additional funding to extend program hours and increase program offerings.

Objective 14: Initiate a community-branding campaign focused on raising levels of community pride and engagement.

Action: Source funds to develop and implement an internal multi-media marketing campaign coordinated around an agreed upon, community-driven tagline (potentially Live Learn Work Grow).

- Develop logo – website – newspaper inserts – TV and radio ads – billboards – newsletters – pins – bumper stickers – brochures for distribution at community events.
- Leverage in-kind contributions from local ad and marketing firms, website development companies, radio, TV, newspapers, printers, and billboard advertisers.

Action: Through the campaign, host contests, community forums, speeches, recreational events and an annual County Celebration Day with rides, games, local specialty foods, local arts and crafts, information booths, small-business recognition awards, and other activities.

Action: Support Lenoir’s use of the “All-America City” designation in its many and varied applications promoting the community.

Objective 15: Partner with CCC&TI to develop a program focused on improving the work ethic of the County’s adult population.

Action: Define and promote the definition of “work ethic” that can be accepted as the community standard by employers.

Action: Source rosters of adults to participate in the program through partnerships with the Western Piedmont Workforce Development Board and JobLink Centers, faith-based institutions, social service agencies and departments, local businesses, and law-enforcement departments.

Action: Create a program designed to communicate the expected standard of “work ethic”.

Action: Track the performance of program graduates and utilize them as “coaches” for current program participants. Use employers as advocates for the program.

Objective 16: Improve local coordination, collaboration, and consensus across constituencies and communities in Caldwell County.

Action: Encourage individual municipalities to independently, yet collaboratively as a part of the county, promote the benefits of their communities.

Action: Ensure that dialogues and efforts related to community collaboration in Caldwell are diverse, representative, and inclusive of all income levels, races, ethnicities, ages, and geographic areas.

Action: Partner with Caldwell Jaycees to leverage the group's membership to build bridges between young adults and other local constituencies.

- Determine the potential to create programs coordinated by the Caldwell Jaycees that contribute to the enhancement of local pride and engagement.

Vibrant Quality of Life

Vision: Ensure that Caldwell County is a place where individuals and families want to live, work, visit, and retire.

Objective 17: Enhance the tools available to encourage downtown revitalization in Granite Falls, Hudson, and Lenoir.

Action: Ensure that existing and potential downtown agencies effectively coordinate their efforts.

- Agencies include: downtown development authorities and their boards, Main Street organizations, business associations, etc.
- Work to address any potential issues related to vacant, degraded, and “dark” downtown properties.
- Ensure existing zoning codes and regulations reflect the community preferences for future development.

Action: Provide a diverse array of funding mechanisms to incentivize downtown development.

- Incentive tools include grant application assistance, TIF districts; historic tax credits; New Market Tax Credits; and land banking.

Action: Enhance the development and enhancement of programs that would help draw people to downtown environments.

- Determine the potential to provide wi-fi or wi-max accessibility in Caldwell’s downtown environments.
 - Seek to partner with Google on efforts of this type.

Objective 18: Capitalize on the wide and varied range of Caldwell County’s outdoor-recreational assets.

Action: Ensure that amenities such as hiking, biking and equestrian trails, athletic fields, and the walking park are effectively marketed to potential residents, companies and visitors.

- Continue to integrate quality-of-life amenities into economic development marketing.

Action: More effectively utilize Caldwell County’s array of golf courses and outdoor sports as a tool to attract companies and visitors.

Action: Re-establish public-private support for the development of greenways and pathways in Caldwell County, including rails-to-trails paths.

- Partner with the Forest Service to develop additional mountain trails – and better marketing of existing trails.

Objective 19: Capitalize on Caldwell County’s array of arts and culture amenities.

Action: Fully leverage Caldwell County’s designation by the Smithsonian as the county with more public sculptures per capita than any place its size in America.

- Pursue grant opportunities from non-profit arts foundations and local foundations.

Action: Ensure that Caldwell’s many museums and rich history are integrated into efforts promoting the County’s arts and culture amenities.

Action: Assess the potential to convert certain obsolete buildings into artist’s spaces.

- Consider potential incentives to attract artists to the spaces.

Objective 20: Work to ensure that Caldwell County is a safe, healthy, and well-maintained community.

Action: Improve access to – and the capacity of – the Caldwell Health Access Program (CHAP).

Action: Develop programs similar to North Carolina’s Fit Community or National Institute of Health’s We Can! to promote healthier lifestyles countywide.

Action: Enhance aesthetic-improvement efforts with an Annual Caldwell Cleans-Up day – a community-wide volunteer effort to pick up trash, paint over graffiti, and plant trees/flowers.

Action: Further develop and execute the Caldwell Beautiful campaign as a development of the Caldwell County Chamber of Commerce that is awaiting funding.

CONCLUSION

Grounded in the underlying purpose of achieving sustainable prosperity for Caldwell County, the *Consensus Community Strategy* represents a first step toward building a blueprint for the community's future. Caldwell County has a tremendous opportunity to capitalize on its strengths and create a stronger future. Achieving a stronger community and local economy involves addressing fundamental issues like community pride, quality education, poverty alleviation, and economic diversification. Caldwell County must continue to leverage its best assets – particularly its educational resources, Caldwell Memorial Hospital, quality of life, location, and local amenities – to recruit and retain businesses and people.

The Goals of this *Strategy* – Competitive Workforce, Economic Opportunity, Leadership, Community Pride, & Civic Engagement, and Vibrant Quality of Life – are all equally important and interrelated. The 20 objectives associated with these Goals were selected based on the findings of the strategic planning process' research, and each is critical to ensuring community success. Even so, prioritization of the goals relative to early- or later-stage investment in the *Implementation Plan* will enable local leaders to focus their efforts and investments on goals that require immediate attention.

Once the *Strategy's* Goals, objectives, and action steps are confirmed by the Steering Committee, the “real” work will begin. Caldwell County's leaders in the public and private sectors must work together to expand capacity, enhance resources, and make a commitment to implement the *Consensus Community Strategy* as effectively as possible.

Caldwell 20/20 – Live Learn Work Grow