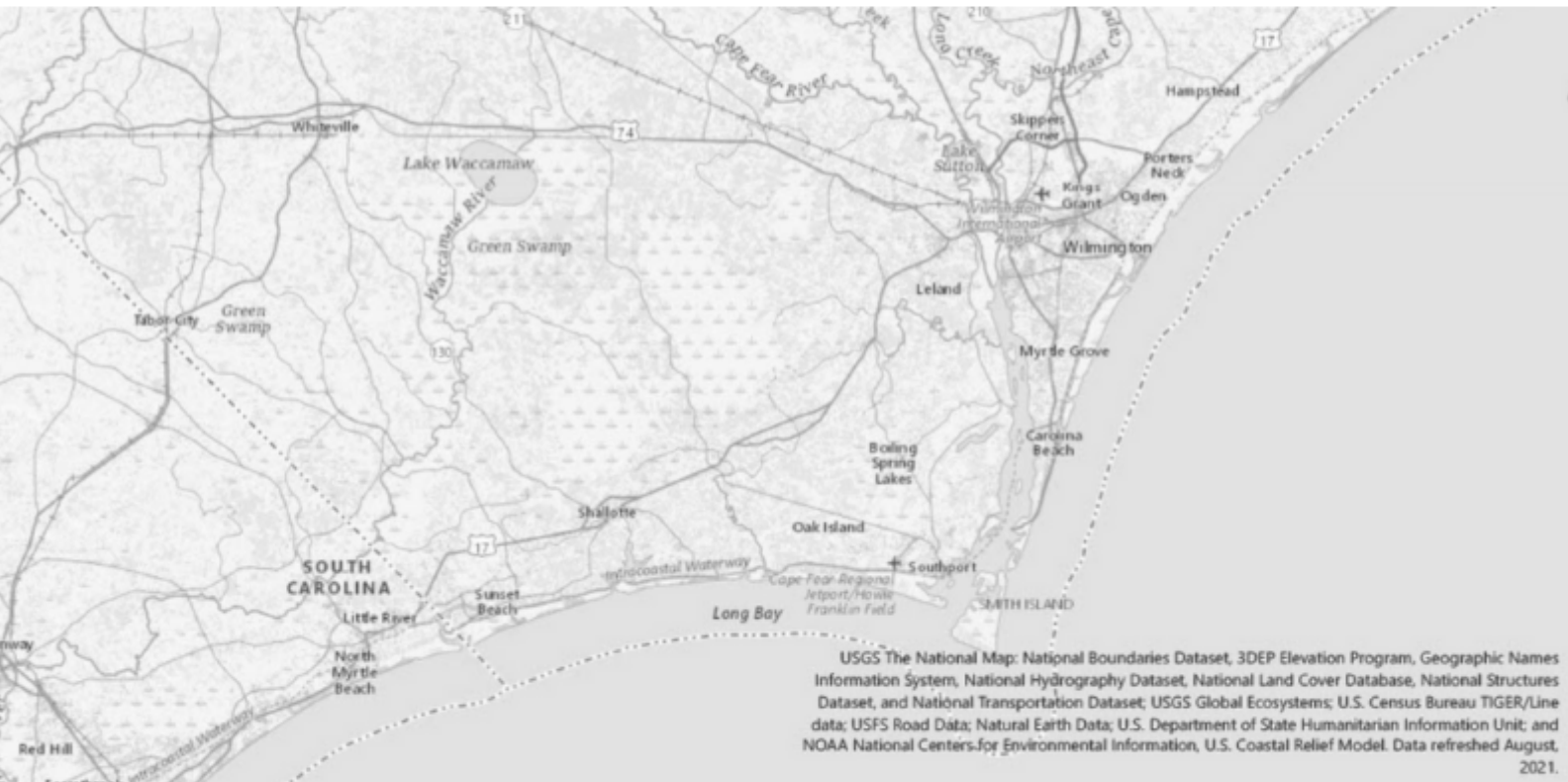


PROFILING THE CAPE FEAR MANUFACTURING PARTNERSHIP

A Project of the Institute for Networked Communities



CAPE FEAR MANUFACTURING PARTNERSHIP

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This case study is one in a series of Next Generation Sector Partnerships profiles from across the country. Its primary purpose is to give practitioners insights into the key milestones and critical ingredients for success to-date that have shaped the journey of the Cape Fear Manufacturing Partnership. Its intended audience is the diverse mix of business, education, workforce development, and economic development leaders who are committed to the work of taking their communities to a new level of shared prosperity. The profile is organized into six sections: motivations for launch, mechanisms for change, moments of transformation, measurable results, major ingredients for success, and the future of the Cape Fear Manufacturing Partnership going forward.

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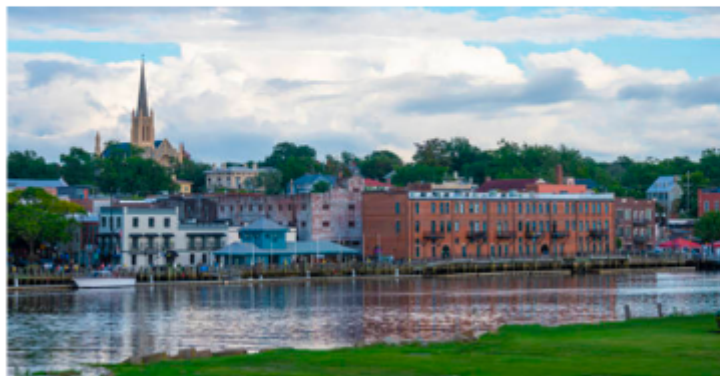
ABOUT THE CAPE FEAR MANUFACTURING PARTNERSHIP

The Cape Fear region of North Carolina, best known for its beaches and shoreline, is home to a small but growing manufacturing sector. Although manufacturing accounts for fewer jobs than sectors like hospitality and tourism, it has grown steadily in recent years and offers higher-than-average wages. The region has also recently attracted new manufacturing companies, with recent announcements bringing 350 jobs and millions in investments to the region.

In the summer of 2020, the State of North Carolina invited regional teams from around the state to apply for technical assistance to support the development of industry-driven Next Gen Sector Partnerships. Cape Fear was one of the regions that applied, seeking a new way to engage businesses in the manufacturing sector.

It was time to experiment with a new approach. About three months into the COVID-19 pandemic, it was clear that business as usual wouldn't be returning anytime soon. Public partners were eager to respond to the rapidly changed economy, helping put people back to work and helping get businesses on stronger footing. But the region lacked a mechanism to understand industry needs in real time and to coordinate efforts across education, workforce development and economic development. The Next Gen model addressed both goals—and to define what a partnership would look like in a virtual, post-COVID world.

Over a year later, the Cape Fear Manufacturing Partnership is now a vibrant network of manufacturers and public partners working to elevate the region's manufacturing industry. The Partnership is organizing to change the perception of manufacturing careers, build a workforce pipeline into good jobs and connect business leaders to one another to foster innovation and competitiveness. Despite launching in the early months of the pandemic and only recently shifting to in-person meetings, the Partnership has fostered meaningful relationships among manufacturers and across education, workforce and economic development partners in the region. It has provided a focal point to amplify and accelerate the impact of manufacturing on the region's economy and community.



MOTIVATIONS FOR LAUNCH: AN INDUSTRY WITH UNTAPPED POTENTIAL

The Cape Fear region has long been known as a destination for tourists. Its hospitality and tourism industry accounts for a significant share of overall employment. But the manufacturing industry has been a steady—and growing—source of jobs in the region. When the team gathered to make decisions about what industry sector to target in forming a Next Gen Sector Partnership, economic developers had been actively cultivating the manufacturing base. They had recently announced two major expansions, bringing over 350 jobs and significant investment to the region. The manufacturing industry represented an opportunity both to grow good jobs in the region and to diversify, shoring up an economic driver less susceptible to economic fluctuations than hospitality and tourism.

At the time the sector partnership launched, there was no shortage of efforts to engage with and support the manufacturing industry. Like most regions, Cape Fear was home to multiple community colleges that operated advisory boards for each of its manufacturing-related programs. Likewise, the region's Chambers of Commerce and economic developers were also actively engaged in working with manufacturers to understand and respond to their needs. Further, the workforce development board had also been engaged in career pathway development to build a talent pipeline into the industry. When the team applied to receive coaching to develop a Next Gen Sector Partnership they reflected, "Although public partners in our region often work together to assist businesses, 'program push' has been at the heart of working with businesses. A Next Gen Sector Partnership will afford partners the opportunity to use 'industry pull' to truly get to the underlying factors affecting success of an industry in our region."

The Partnership launched with three organizations sharing the convening role. This was a critical decision that helped to position the partnership squarely as a collaborative regional effort, not an initiative driven by a single organization. Erin Easton, with the Workforce Development Board, Cliff Pyron, with Wilmington Economic Development and Kevin Lackey with Brunswick County Economic Development, shared the convening role, helping to identify and recruit initial industry champions. The Partnership launched virtually with an initial 16 manufacturers in attendance. Since then, it has continued to expand.

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"This partnership has given manufacturers a purpose in their community, beyond what they're making in their companies."

- GINGER BRICK, DIRECTOR
CAPE FEAR WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT BOARD

MECHANISMS FOR CHANGE: FINDING AND PROJECTING A COLLECTIVE VOICE

The manufacturing sector in Cape Fear is diverse. Companies manufacture products ranging from aerospace parts to smoked fish, guitars and grills. They vary in size from less than 25 employees to hundreds. As a result, before the partnership launched, it was not obvious what common challenges these companies faced or whether they would find value in coming together in the first place.

From the first launch meeting in the fall of 2020, however, the partnership helped manufacturers discover their common ground. Regardless of the size of the company or the products produced, manufacturers were equally affected by the public's perception of the industry as a dirty, dangerous, and poorly paid career field. They all shared the challenge of attracting and recruiting skilled talent in this environment, without strong pipelines into the industry. "When we got together in our initial sessions, we all realized we face similar obstacles. That's when I realized, 'I'm not alone in this.' If we can do something together, we'll have a much bigger voice," said Jim Flock, General Manager of HSM Machine Works and one of the early champions of the sector partnership.

The Partnership quickly organized around two action teams, both aimed at growing the pool of talent interested and prepared for careers in manufacturing. The first focused on aligning talent supply and demand in the region, defining career pathways in the industry, and working with educators to align program to those pathways. The second focused on elevating the image of the industry, partnering with K-12 schools to expose students to careers in manufacturing and generate excitement about the opportunities the industry offered.

Neither of these strategies were entirely new. Companies had weighed in on community college and K-12 curriculum for years via advisory boards. They had also been involved with student tours and career days on an ad hoc basis. This time, however, the scale and breadth of engagement was different. Speaking with a collective voice across companies, they garnered greater attention and were therefore about to affect change at a larger scale. "We're a 20-person shop," said Jim Flock. "But together with Mojo Tone and General Electric, Corning. All of a sudden, we have a lot bigger voice. As soon as we started to project that voice, we could see the enthusiasm of public partners."



MOMENTS OF TRANSFORMATION: PUBLIC PARTNERS LEANING IN

The public partner team, led by the co-conveners at Workforce and Economic Development, operated with two principles in mind. On the one hand, they were committed to ensuring the partnership was authentically owned and driven by industry leaders. They were careful not to overstep or over-staff, providing just the right level of facilitation and support to give the business leaders confidence that the partnership would get things done. "This isn't our thing," repeated Erin Easton, one of the co-conveners of the partnership, as she spoke with business leaders. "It's yours."

At the same time, the team also understood the importance of being responsive to the partnership, moving quickly on priorities that emerged from the teams of manufacturers and working creatively to develop solutions together. This willingness to lean in and follow through had the effect of building manufacturers' momentum and enthusiasm. They sensed that public partners were eager and willing to take their ideas and put them into practice and, therefore, were more willing to contribute themselves.

One of the first major wins of the partnership, for example, was creating a new Certified Production Technician program at a local community college. This program emerged out of a collaborative discussion with the manufacturers and a team of leaders from three community colleges in the region. Coming out of the discussion, it was clear that a Manufacturing Production Technician program would help to address the most significant gaps among entry-level candidates. Cape Fear Community College committed to developing a non-credit program based on the criteria the manufacturers had developed. The Manufacturing Production Technician program is now underway, with companies committed to interviewing candidates that complete the program.

MOMENTS OF TRANSFORMATION: CONTINUED

The partnership experienced a key transition when the lead staff person convening the partnership at the Workforce Board, Erin Easton, transitioned to a new job at Cape Fear Community College. This transition tested the staying power of the partnership. It required public partners to reassess their roles and reorganize to maintain support. Erin Easton continued to serve as co-convenor in her new job at the College, working alongside with her partners at Wilmington and Brunswick economic development as well as the Cape Fear Workforce Development Board. The partnership emerged stronger with renewed commitments to seeing it through as a collaborative regional effort, not just an initiative driven by a single organization.

MEASURABLE RESULTS

After only a year the Cape Fear Manufacturing Partnership has already generated results for the industry and for the region as a whole. (This is all the more significant considering that the partnership's first year coincided with the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic).

In the fall of 2021, the partnership held a series of activities for Manufacturing Day, reaching more students and companies than ever before. The Partnership organized an event in collaboration with Cape Fear Community College that brought together over 300 people and 30 manufacturing companies, displaying their products, doing presentations and showcasing the work that they do. They also held an event at Brunswick Community College to showcase manufacturing careers and relevant programming at the college. Both events resulted in immediate positive feedback, with new inquiries about manufacturing programs and jobs at members companies.

The new Production Technician program also represents a significant expansion of training capacity in the region. No similar program existed in the region prior and this will be the first time that manufacturers have worked together to define a common set of needed skills and competencies. Similarly, the partnership has created a K-12 team tasked with forming partnerships with school districts in each of the region's four counties. Task force members work to get on school calendars with guest speakers, tours and to join advisory boards, "adopting" school districts to embed a manufacturing presence in the schools.



LOOKING FORWARD: FORMALIZATION AND CONTINUED MOMENTUM

The Cape Fear Manufacturing Partnership has a long list of ambitions going into 2022. There are plans in the works to create a promotional video on Cape Fear manufacturing designed to drive interest in the industry and to showcase the breadth of opportunities in the region. The video will be used at open houses and at career days in the high schools. They are also exploring ways to foster stronger connections among businesses. In addition to networking and creative problem-solving that has emerged organically from the partnership, they are considering leveraging shared buying power to create insurance programs to help smaller companies or sharing freight costs across companies.

In addition, the Partnership is exploring different organizational structures to support its ongoing activities. The leadership team is evaluating whether incorporating as a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization would give it greater clout and leverage. They are also exploring the possibility of creating a dues structure to formalize member roles. These organizational questions will be answered through the same lens that launched the partnership initially: will it contribute to industry ownership and collaboration across public partners? And will it benefit the manufacturing industry as a pillar of a strong and healthy regional economy?

Although the Cape Fear Manufacturing Partnership is just getting started, its wins so far have demonstrated that when the right leaders come together with a common set of challenges and a willingness to be a part of the solution, big things can happen.

“We get very compartmentalized. I've gotten into a mindset that our problems are our problems and we have to fix them ourselves. I see now that's not the case. There's a lot of good in a collective approach. We have to have that cooperation.” - **Jim Flock**
HSM MACHINE WORKS, INC