

Preparing for the post-Pandemic Economy:
A Chatham County Minority Entrepreneurship Needs Assessment

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As in many other localities around the country, the racially disparate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the nationwide fallout over police-involved killings of George Floyd and other unarmed African Americans have renewed concerns about racial equity in Chatham County. One component of that concern is a focus on minority entrepreneurship, particularly with respect to the post-pandemic economy.

In order to inform Chatham County policy, potentially guide the actions of Chatham County agencies responsible for economic development, and enhance the understanding of other stakeholders, we propose to undertake an entrepreneurship needs assessment with a special focus on minority entrepreneurship. The proposed assessment will consist of three main parts:

1. an accounting of the state of entrepreneurship and minority business in Chatham County;
2. a distillation of the voices of existing and potential entrepreneurs; and
3. a survey of the policies and organizations supporting entrepreneurship in Chatham County.

This three-pronged approach will allow us to:

- identify the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats in the Chatham County minority business community,
- quantify any revealed disparities and shortfalls,
- catalog existing barriers along with potential support, and

- recommend ameliorative action steps to expand and grow minority businesses in Chatham County based on the research findings.

The proposed needs assessment will focus specifically on Black and Hispanic entrepreneurship in Chatham County. To place such entrepreneurship in context and identify commonalities with and divergences from the overall pattern of entrepreneurship in Chatham County, we will include a broader set of entrepreneurs in the scope of investigation. The needs assessment will also situate the Chatham County experience within the context of the Research Triangle Region and of the nation as a whole. Entrepreneurship is an important indicator of economic and social integration and, for many, a critical path to social mobility.

We will draw upon data from a host of governmental and non-governmental sources to construct as complete of an inventory as possible of Chatham County businesses, generally, and minority businesses. in particular. The list of potential sources include: the North Carolina state government Department of Administration directory of Historically Under-utilized Businesses; small business directories of relevant Chambers of Commerce; data on small businesses from the Chatham County government and the N.C. Department of Revenue; databases on the self-employed and small business establishments from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the Bureau of Economic Analysis, as well as inventories of minority businesses compiled by local nonprofit organizations such as the NAACP. For the purposes of this assessment, entrepreneurs will be classified as Black, Hispanic, and Other. This aspect of the assessment will allow us to identify potential disparities and shortfalls in entrepreneurship.

We will speak with a sample of existing and aspiring Chatham County-based entrepreneurs to identify the strengths of Chatham County's entrepreneurial base as well as any difficulties, and potentially barriers, they must overcome in order to start-up, growth, and develop as successful local businesses. To assess the impact(s) of the COVID-19 pandemic on economic activity, we will ask specifically about experiences navigating the past year and a half and the planned approaches to a post-pandemic economy. Key topics of exploration will include developing the

full range of needed skill sets, creating and expanding a customer base, obtaining finance, and navigating regulatory requirements.

Some of this information will be compiled through focus groups – a data gathering strategy that follows a semi-structured interview protocol but allows a group of participants to react to each other and explore issues that come up during a facilitated discussion. However, because a discussion of individual business hardships can cause discomfort, some topics may be covered through one-on-one interviews. Past experience suggests that such interviews may be warranted for some male and female business owners and possibly for entrepreneurs doing business in certain economic sectors.

Potential focus group and personal interview participants will be identified through the directories listed above and through various entrepreneur support organizations. This aspect of the assessment will create a basis for a detailed strategic analysis that identifies the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats that exist in the Chatham County entrepreneurial ecosystem.

We also will conduct key informant interviews with government, economic development, and support organization professionals to assess organizational capabilities and policies, practices, and procedures that facilitate and/or hinder minority entrepreneurship and business growth and development in Chatham County. The specific topics covered in these key informant interviews will be informed by the intelligence we gather from our focus groups and one-on-one interviews with minority entrepreneurs currently operating businesses in Chatham County. We anticipate speaking with representatives of the North Carolina state and Chatham County governments, the Chatham County Economic Development Corporation, Chambers of Commerce, business-adjacent civic groups, and other organizations as well as selected senior representatives of the business community.

Based on the foregoing three-pronged research design, we will produce a final report that develops a profile of current minority businesses in Chatham County; identifies the constraints and barriers they have faced in past as well as the challenges they will have to overcome to succeed in a post-COVID-19 business environment, and offers strategic changes in the Chatham County entrepreneurial

and small business ecosystem that will enhance the likelihood of minority business success moving forward. Given the shifting demography of our nation and especially this state, we anticipate that the findings of this study will provide a roadmap of how to increase the attractiveness of Chatham county as an inclusive, equitable, and just place to live, work, play, and do business.

The proposed itemized budget for this project is as follows:

Activity	Cost
Statistical Profile of Existing Minority Businesses	\$10,000
Focus Groups & Personal Interviews of Existing Minority Businesses	\$10,000
Key Informant Interviews with Local Leaders	\$ 5,000
Content Analysis of Focus Group/Key Informant Interview Data	\$10,000
Writing and Production off Final Report	\$15,000
TOTAL	\$50,000