

RALEIGH, N.C. (April 26, 2022) [Visit North Carolina](#) today launched [Dream Big in Small Town NC](#), an initiative to boost economic recovery by attracting travelers and potential workforce to small towns in 16 counties facing population loss. Starting with a [sweepstakes promotion](#) and a satellite media tour in Haywood County, the campaign will showcase natural beauty and small-town charm in places with special challenges resulting from the pandemic.

Created by the General Assembly as the Rural Tourism Recovery Pilot Program, Dream Big will capitalize on travelers' interest in exploring small towns by drawing attention to the people, places and businesses in three distinct regions designated as the Scenic Mountains, the Northeast Lakes and Rivers, and the Inner Banks. As a unit of the [Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina](#), Visit NC is coordinating the program with the [N.C. Department of Commerce](#) and other private and public entities involved in growing the state's first-in-talent workforce.

"Dream Big is a natural extension of Visit NC's economic development role as the state's tourism marketing organization," said Wit Tuttell, Visit NC's executive director. "Our efforts center on showcasing local landmarks, memorable experiences, distinctive lodging, dining and shopping with the goal of an economic infusion from visitor spending. Dream Big takes the mission further by calling attention to the allure of living and working in charismatic places whose appeal is rooted in character and authenticity."

Funded with \$1.5 million from the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, the pilot program designates Graham, Haywood, Madison, Mitchell and Yancey counties in the Scenic Mountains; Edgecombe, Halifax, Vance and Warren in the Northeast Lakes & Rivers; and Chowan, Gates, Hertford, Martin, Perquimans, Tyrrell and Washington in the Inner Banks. Dream Big will also have a dedicated presence on [VisitNC.com](#), complete with links for job postings, as well as program partner [Airbnb's website](#).

The Scenic Mountains is the first region to take the spotlight. At Tuesday's satellite tour in Waynesville, representatives from national, regional and in-state media outlets joined the virtual tour and Q&A session. The launch also features a [sweepstakes](#) with a prize package that includes:

- A \$1,000 Airbnb stay voucher to experience Small Town NC life.
- A \$500 VISA gift card to help with travel expenses by plane, train or automobile
- A choice of gift cards for dining, recreation and shopping in the Scenic Mountain destinations.

In a separate promotion with the lodging-friendly Flip.to platform, travelers can [share stories](#) about the pleasures of adventuring and living like a local for a chance to win a stays and unlock discounts in Dream Big communities. Opportunities include the [Route 19 Inn](#) in Maggie Valley and [Fontana Village](#) at Fontana Dam.

Similar promotions and satellite media tours are planned for the program's launch in the Northeast Lakes & Rivers this summer and in the Inner Banks in the fall.

The campaign is well-timed to traveler sentiment, Tuttell said. According to a recent report from Destination Analysts, 28.4 percent of people surveyed plan to visit small towns or rural attractions this travel season. Increased demand is reflected in the doubling of short-term rentals available outside of North Carolina's urban counties since the pandemic began. For 2021, Airbnb reports a 128 percent increase in nights booked in rural areas compared with 2019. For the same period, nights

booked for rural stays of more than four weeks grew 160 percent, which supports Dream Big's promise to engage visitors for more than a getaway.

Tuttell also noted findings from a poll by booking.com that 58 percent of travelers said it's important for their trip be beneficial to the destination's local community. Twenty-nine percent said they would research how their tourism spending would affect or improve local communities.

Lynn Collins, executive director of the Haywood County Tourism Development Authority, said her destination will fulfill travelers' desires to make a positive impact.

"When people visit Waynesville, Canton and the other small towns in Haywood County, connecting with the community comes naturally," Collins said. "The pace is relaxed, and conversations flow whenever people visit shops, restaurants and other places as they explore. They can relate to the local residents they encounter and get a sense of the impact of their visit. With Dream Big in Small Town NC, we hope they'll also find common ground along with reasons to settle in for more than a getaway."

Beyond exposure from the satellite tour, Dream Big will reach the traveling public through a presence on VisitNC.com and posts on @VisitNC's social media channels. A media influencer campaign will bring selected tastemakers to the destinations to engage their followers in the local culture and lifestyle appeal for people interested in a change of scenery. Airbnb, which will also promote the campaign on its website and social media channels, will use its inventory of short-term rental properties to host the media visits.

"The partnership between Visit North Carolina and Airbnb is a creative way to inspire people to discover off-the-beaten-path, rural areas that otherwise may not be front of mind, but that have so much to offer to those looking for a new vacation destination or a new home," said Viviana Jordan, regional public policy lead for Airbnb. "This campaign will tap into the growing interest we're seeing in rural tourism, with domestic nights booked in North Carolina more than doubling since 2019, and will showcase the restaurants, shops, and attractions that make these rural communities unique and vibrant destinations."

Airbnb will also invest in [Airbnb Entrepreneurship Academy](#) programs for community residents seeking skills, practical tools and support for using technology to access and succeed as entrepreneurs on the Airbnb platform. The first sessions will be offered May 2 and 9 through Beaufort County Community College, whose service area includes Tyrrell and Washington counties. An additional Academy is planned for June.

"We're excited that Dream Big can help North Carolina residents explore direct opportunities for improving their fortunes as well as enjoy the benefits that come with growth," Tuttell said. "Cultivation of the short-term rental market will attract more visitors who are eager to discover hidden gems, and in the process, it will improve the prospects for population growth."

- *For a quick look at enticements in Dream Big destinations, click [here](#).*
- *Find photos from Dream Big destinations [here](#).*

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