



Hillsborough Merchants Association: A Public-Private Partnership

BACKGROUND

The re-establishment of an active merchants association is an action item in the Hillsborough Comprehensive Sustainability Plan (page 9-6). Supporting local businesses is important to creating a sustainable local economy, and the Economic Vitality section of the Hillsborough FY2024-26 Strategic Plan calls for the development of partnerships and programming that strengthen local business with economic development partners (page 12). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, coordination and communication has suffered between area businesses, as well as with the Town. The Plan calls for reestablishing a merchants association to improve avenues of communication and help strengthen downtown, West Hillsborough and the overall business community. The association would provide a reliable way to inform merchants about events happening within the town and allow them to collaborate on planning, joint-marketing opportunities, and much more.

A merchants association would also aid in engaging businesses owned by women, veterans, and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) groups to support retention and expansion of these businesses, another goal identified in the Plan as particularly important for the town's economic growth.

MERCHANTS ASSOCIATION MISSION STATEMENT

The Hillsborough Merchants Association (HMA) will:

- facilitate and increase communication, connection and collaboration between area retailers, restaurants, bars and other customer-centric businesses to work as a collective whole;
- promote area business success through marketing, events and innovative community projects that enhance the experience and image of Hillsborough as a shopping and dining destination; and
- serve as an advocate and liaison for the business community with town government.

Through its efforts, the HMA will seek to improve the economic vitality of Hillsborough merchants. The Hillsborough Merchants Association will be organized and lead by the Hillsborough/Orange County Chamber of Commerce, in close collaboration with and support from area businesses and the Town of Hillsborough. Unlike Chamber membership, participation in HMA would be open to all businesses. The Chamber will work with HMA members to understand their needs, how to best serve their interests, and seek input and direction on identifying goals and projects.

We propose the HMA as a 2-year, public-private partnership serving as a pilot program to assist Hillsborough merchants become more engaged and resilient. \$15,000 in funding support would be provided annually during the 2-year trial by the Town to support the work of the HMA in pursuit of the objectives of the Comprehensive Sustainability Plan and Strategic Plan.

FOCUS AREAS, POTENTIAL PROJECTS AND TACTICS

I. Increase Collaboration and Communication Between Hillsborough Businesses

- a) Establish efficient ways to share information with local merchants:
 - hold monthly or bi-monthly merchant meetings to identify topical needs, share news and upcoming happenings, and receive feedback on issues affecting businesses;

- develop an all-inclusive online events and merchant-promotions calendar that will increase transparency and promote collaboration and joint marketing between businesses;
- make a new website repository of resources for download and use by Hillsborough businesses, such as: event flyers and social media post materials to advertise events and personalize with their promotions; branding/marketing templates and materials; logos; photos; business-topic educational materials, etc.
- conduct outreach to new businesses to connect them to other merchants and resources.

II. Event Management

- a) Revive “Ladies Night Out” (or similar concept) and hold events in spring and fall.
- b) Develop and manage new event ideas to drive additional business to Hillsborough merchants.

III. Marketing and Promotion

- a) Place event, tourism, and other town-related advertising in Chapel Hill and Durham magazines (through use of an established Hillsborough Chamber trade for services with Triangle Media).
- b) Work with media outlets to receive coverage of items that support promotion of businesses (earned media in lieu of paid coverage).
- c) Collaborate with the Town and other Orange County stakeholders to survey area businesses to identify BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color), woman and veteran-owned businesses to enable targeted promotion.
- d) Create a “Support Local” campaign that highlights Hillsborough’s unique business community and the importance of supporting local businesses.

IV. Advocacy

- a) Survey area businesses to identify specific needs and use this feedback to drive additional areas of focus and projects.
- b) Serve as a conduit to provide collective merchant input to local government staff and elected officials regarding issues of importance to the business community.
- c) Assist local businesses and the Town on the 2024 parking study to help reach consensus on the most viable parking solutions (new parking lots, a downtown shuttle, meters, etc.).

V. Education

- a) Host free seminars on topical issues (such as the new Corporate Transparency Act) and topics relevant to running a successful business.
- b) Provide training/information regarding ordinances and policies adopted by the Town that may affect business operations.
- c) Promote grants, incentives and other financial-support resources available to businesses.

VI. Workforce Development

- a) Analyze the current labor market and skills gaps/needs. Perform the analysis as a joint project between the Merchants Association/Chamber, Durham Tech, Orange County Schools and others to define the current workforce and identify current and future needs (per an action item in the 2030 Sustainability Plan).