



**Nancy Gottovi is a 2006-2008 William C. Friday Fellow for Human Relations**

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Central Park North Carolina taking shape  
Goal is to stimulate sustainable enterprise in seven-county region.

By [Todd Cohen](#)

STAR, N.C. -- The town of Star in Montgomery County has a new business incubator designed to hatch new businesses for the seven-county region of the southern watershed of the Yadkin-Pee Dee River Basin.

Entrepreneurs and people throughout the region involved with cultural tourism are getting training about developing and attracting new business.

The group spearheading all those efforts is getting a new name and brand, and launching a series of capital campaigns to support its work.

"We're going to have a strong regional identity," says Nancy Gottovi, executive director of the Yadkin-Pee Dee Lakes Project.

Formed in 1994, the nonprofit works to stimulate sustainable enterprise in the region.

Next spring, the group will change its name to Central Park North Carolina and launch a marketing campaign to promote the region.

The effort to spur growth in the region involves three broad initiatives, all aiming to link entrepreneurial development to the region's environmental beauty and cultural resources, Gottovi says.

Those include building the region's "social capital", revitalizing its small towns, and strengthening its identity and infrastructure.

To create the infrastructure needed to support tourism in a rural region with no big cities, Gottovi says, tourist-friendly small towns are critical.

"The whole idea of the Central Park strategy is to spend the night in the region," she says. "Most of our tourism infrastructure is going to happen in our towns, so places to stay and eat need to be developed in our towns."

In addition to Star, the Yadkin-Pee Dee Lakes Project has worked with the towns of Badin in Stanly County and Ellerbe in Richmond County to develop strategic plans, and next year plans to work with Ansonville in Anson County and a small town in Davidson County.

In Star, for example, the Project has developed the STARworks Center for Creative Enterprise, for which the town recently received a \$350,000 federal grant.

The new ventures the incubator is designed to nurture will mean new investment not only for Star but also for other towns in the region, Gottovi says.

But to attract firms hatched in the incubator, she says, other towns will need to be ready to recruit and serve them.

In Badin, a restored hotel and golf course known as the Badin Inn and Resort can be a "key economic engine," says Gottovi, attracting overnight visitors for golf, cycling, hiking and other activities in the entire region.

The revitalization plans the Yadkin-Pee Dee Lakes Project is helping towns develop involve not only "clean-and-green" efforts to spruce up their downtowns, she says, but also strengthening their zoning, ordinances, historic-preservation marketing, outdoor-recreation opportunities and hospitality infrastructure.

Developing the region's social capital also is critical, says Gottovi, whose group is convening a council of entrepreneurs from each of the seven counties.

And in partnership with the N.C. Rural Center, with funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in Battle Creek, Mich., the Project is holding workshops for entrepreneurs on how to create small businesses.

It also offers an eight-month training program on cultural tourism for museum and resort professionals, owners of small businesses, restaurants and bed-and-breakfasts, and officials chambers of commerce and tourism and development agencies.

The Project also is developing a new visitor map and website for the region and is working with the state to design new interpretative kiosks and signs for drivers, cyclists and hikers.

"When people think of places to go and visit in North Carolina, we hope that this new Central Park region will be as attractive as the more-familiar mountain or coastal areas," Gottovi says.

"This is an area worthy of preserving, even though it's surrounded by some of the fastest-growing urban areas on the East Coast," she says. "We risk losing this region unless we can make people understand that it is a beautiful area with very distinctive cultural opportunities."