RESEARCH WHITE PAPER

Executive Perspectives on Community Growth

Improving executive decision-making across the full community growth journey

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July 2026

Prepared for city and county managers

Executive summary

The defining challenge of modern local government is not simply making good individual decisions. It is making good interconnected decisions consistently over time.

North Carolina communities are deciding amid rapid population growth, aging infrastructure, rising construction costs, workforce constraints, new industrial demand, and fast-changing energy requirements. The technical disciplines that support local government remain indispensable. What has changed is the number of consequential decisions that now sit between those disciplines: where infrastructure should go, which opportunities fit the community, how risks and costs should be allocated, when the public should be engaged, and how one project changes the assumptions behind another.

This white paper makes the case for stronger executive decision support across the full community growth journey—from the first recognition of an opportunity or constraint through implementation, evaluation, and adaptation. The objective is not to replace engineers, planners, attorneys, financial advisers, economic developers, or utility professionals. It is to help city and county managers connect their expertise to community priorities, organizational capacity, and long-term public value.

Core proposition

A project can be technically sound and still be strategically wrong, poorly timed, fiscally misaligned, or inconsistent with community priorities. Executive decision support addresses that space between technical excellence and long-term community outcomes.

Five findings

- Growth is increasingly interdependent. Population, utilities, transportation, housing, workforce, land use, fiscal capacity, and public confidence move together.
- Technical expertise and executive judgment answer different questions. Technical analysis determines what is feasible; executive leadership decides what is desirable, affordable, timely, and aligned.
- The highest-value decisions often occur before a project is formally defined. Once a site, scope, funding approach, or public commitment is fixed, strategic options narrow quickly.
- Community readiness is a portfolio, not a checklist. Infrastructure, organizational capacity, land-use policy, stakeholder alignment, and implementation capability must reinforce one another.
- A continuous strategic partner can strengthen—not compete with—specialized advisers by helping managers frame decisions, connect consequences, and preserve strategic intent over time.

1. The operating context has changed

North Carolina added nearly 757,000 residents between the April 2020 population base and July 2025, an increase of 7.2 percent. In the most recent annual estimates, it ranked third among states in both numeric and percentage growth.[1] That growth is not evenly distributed. Fast-growing metropolitan and suburban communities

face capacity and pace challenges, while many rural communities are balancing selective growth, aging systems, limited staff capacity, and the need to create competitive sites.

11.2M	7.2%	#3
North Carolina population, July 2025[1]	Growth from the 2020 estimate base[1]	State rank for 2024–25 numeric growth[1]

Infrastructure pressure compounds the growth challenge. EPA's 2022 Clean Watersheds Needs Survey identified $630.1 billion in reported clean-water infrastructure needs nationwide through 2041, including treatment, conveyance, stormwater, reuse, and decentralized systems.[2] North Carolina's own long-range water-supply framework is built from more than 500 local water-supply plans, underscoring how state readiness depends on local decisions about capacity, conservation, service areas, and timing.[3]

The implementation challenge is organizational as well as financial. Recent ICMA research found that strategic-plan implementation was incomplete across communities of every size; the authors concluded that sustained leadership, cross-departmental coordination, and clear accountability matter in addition to resources. Community engagement was the most frequently cited practice respondents would repeat.[4]

2. From complexity to interdependence

Local government has always been complex. The more consequential shift is interdependence: changing one decision can alter the cost, timing, feasibility, and public acceptance of several others. A utility extension changes land-development economics. A major employer changes traffic, housing demand, emergency-service needs, school enrollment, and workforce partnerships. A downtown investment affects tax base, identity, mobility, and talent attraction. A single transmission constraint can decide whether an industrial site is marketable at all.

> **The manager's job is not to eliminate complexity. It is to keep interconnected decisions pointed toward a coherent community future.**

Federal transportation guidance reflects this systems view. FHWA notes that land use, transportation, economic development, infrastructure finance, housing, and environmental outcomes influence one another, and that collaborative planning should bring the relevant agencies, elected leaders, and community stakeholders into the process.[5] FERC has similarly required long-term regional transmission planning to use multiple scenarios and a planning horizon of at least twenty years.[6] The disciplines differ, but the lesson is consistent: major public decisions improve when they account for downstream consequences and multiple plausible futures.

3. Technical expertise and executive judgment

Technical advisers answer essential questions: What capacity is available? What is the feasible alignment? What will it cost? What permits are required? What financing structures are lawful and affordable? Those answers create the decision record. They do not, by themselves, determine the community's choice.

Technical questions	Executive questions
What can be designed or built?	Should the community pursue it?
What capacity and permits are required?	Is this the right priority and timing?

Technical questions	Executive questions
What alternatives are technically feasible?	Which tradeoffs best fit community goals?
What is the project cost?	Who bears the risk, and what other priorities move?
How can the project be delivered?	How will success be defined ten or twenty years later?

The distinction is not hierarchical. Executive judgment depends on excellent technical work. The greater the technical sophistication of a project, however, the more important it becomes to frame the decision clearly, surface the tradeoffs, and connect the recommendation to governing-board priorities and public expectations.

4. A community growth decision framework

A practical framework should help managers see connections without creating another planning bureaucracy. The following six lenses can be applied to an emerging opportunity, a capital program, or a policy choice. They are decision prompts, not departmental silos.

1. Community outcome

What long-term public value are we trying to create, and for whom?

2. Infrastructure readiness

Do water, wastewater, power, transmission, transportation, broadband, and public facilities have the right capacity, location, timing, and resilience?

3. Market and workforce

Is the opportunity supported by realistic demand, labor, housing, education, supply-chain, and regional conditions?

4. Land and place

Does the land-use approach protect community priorities, manage adjacent impacts, and create a coherent development pattern?

5. Fiscal and organizational capacity

Can the community finance, staff, operate, maintain, regulate, and adapt the decision over its full life?

6. Trust and governance

Are elected officials, residents, utilities, institutions, and partners engaged at the right time with clear information about benefits, costs, and tradeoffs?

5. The decision-making journey

Many consulting relationships begin when a scope is ready to procure. The executive journey begins earlier and lasts longer. By the time an RFP is issued, a community has often already chosen the problem definition, the site, the preferred alternative, the funding logic, and the stakeholder posture. Those early choices usually carry greater strategic consequence than any later design refinement.

Recognize. Identify an emerging opportunity, risk, capacity constraint, or pattern before it becomes a crisis or a defined project.

Frame. Clarify the desired outcome, decision rights, assumptions, alternatives, and information gaps.

Test readiness. Assess infrastructure, finance, organization, land use, market conditions, stakeholder alignment, and implementation capability.

Decide and align. Present tradeoffs honestly; align the governing board, staff, advisers, utilities, partners, and community around the selected path.

Deliver and adapt. Preserve strategic intent through design and construction, monitor results, and adjust as costs, conditions, or priorities change.

A useful test

If a strategic adviser enters only after the project is defined and exits at project completion, who is helping the manager connect the decisions made before, between, and after technical assignments?

6. Data centers: a readiness decision, not simply a prospect

Data centers illustrate the need for integrated executive decision-making. Nationally, data centers consumed an estimated 4.4 percent of U.S. electricity in 2023; DOE's 2024 analysis projected a range of 6.7 to 12 percent by 2028.[7] NERC has warned that large, concentrated loads create new forecasting, operating, and reliability considerations for system planners.[8] These are national findings, not a forecast for any one North Carolina community, but they explain why local competitiveness increasingly depends on credible power and infrastructure strategy.

For a community, data-center readiness should be evaluated across five connected questions:

- Power and transmission: Is firm capacity available when the project needs it? What generation, substation, transmission, interconnection, redundancy, and cost-allocation decisions would be required?
- Water and wastewater: What cooling approach is proposed? How would water consumption, peak demand, reuse, drought conditions, treatment capacity, and rate impacts be managed?
- Land use and physical impacts: Does the community have a policy for siting, scale, noise, visual buffers, environmental resources, adjacent uses, and future land-development patterns?
- Fiscal and economic value: Do capital investment, tax base, construction activity, permanent employment, local procurement, and infrastructure obligations produce a public return consistent with community goals?
- Stakeholder engagement: Have residents, landowners, utilities, institutions, employers, and regional partners been engaged before positions harden and commitments narrow the available choices?

North Carolina's current legislative debate shows how quickly these questions are moving into public policy. Bills considered in the 2025–26 session have proposed site assessments, water-use standards, utility-cost protections,

public reporting, and explicit preservation of local land-use authority.[9] [10] Because these proposals may change, managers should treat them as evidence of the issues under debate—not as a statement of current law.

> **The competitive community will not be the one that simply says yes. It will be the one that can show—in advance—how power, transmission, water, land use, public value, and community priorities fit into a credible strategy.**

7. What continuous executive decision support looks like

The emerging need is not for a generalist to substitute for specialists. It is for a partner focused on the quality and continuity of the executive decisions that connect specialized work—someone who works for the manager's decision process and alongside the technical team.

Project-specific support	Continuous executive decision support
Begins with a defined scope	Begins with an opportunity, risk, or community objective
Optimizes a discipline or deliverable	Connects disciplines, decisions, and consequences
Measures project performance	Tests project performance against long-term community value
Ends at task or project completion	Maintains continuity as projects, people, and conditions change
Provides recommendations	Strengthens the manager's and governing board's decision process

This capability may reside in senior staff, an owner's representative, an engineering or infrastructure firm, a regional partner, or an independent advisory practice. The organizational home matters less than the discipline: the work must be trusted, technically literate, politically aware, candid about tradeoffs, and accountable to the community's long-term objectives.

8. Actions for city and county managers

1. Define the decision before commissioning the analysis. State the public outcome, the decision-maker, the alternatives, the time horizon, and the major uncertainties.
2. Use a common readiness review for major growth decisions. Apply the six lenses in this paper before a site, incentive, utility commitment, or public position becomes difficult to change.
3. Sequence stakeholder engagement around real choices. Engage early enough to shape policy, while the community still has meaningful alternatives to discuss.
4. Connect strategic, capital, land-use, utility, and economic-development planning. Require each major recommendation to explain its consequences for the others.

5. Preserve strategic continuity. Maintain a concise decision record that captures assumptions, commitments, risks, and trigger points for reevaluation across leadership transitions.
6. Evaluate advisory relationships by the quality of decisions they enable. Ask whether the team helps leaders see the whole picture, surface tradeoffs, and adjust when conditions change—not only whether the assignment was delivered on schedule.

Conclusion

Communities do not experience growth as a sequence of isolated professional assignments. They experience it as a chain of decisions whose consequences accumulate over decades. Roads, utility systems, industrial sites, downtowns, housing, public facilities, power infrastructure, and land-use policies are not ends in themselves. They are choices about the kind of community residents will inherit.

The technical disciplines serving local government are stronger and more capable than ever. The next opportunity is to strengthen the executive capacity that connects them: framing the right decisions, engaging the right people, recognizing interdependence, and sustaining a coherent direction from first question through long-term results.

Question for the profession

What capabilities, relationships, and forms of support will city and county managers need over the next twenty years to make better interconnected decisions for long-term community growth?

Research notes and sources

This paper synthesizes public data, regulatory guidance, and practitioner research. It offers a proposed decision framework; it does not report results from the Executive Perspectives questionnaire. Legislative proposals are identified as proposals and should be checked for subsequent action before external publication.

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