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GOV. EASLEY ANNOUNCES FIVE NEW 21ST CENTURY COMMUNITIES Initiative to Foster Economic Growth Underway in 31 Counties

RALEIGH - Gov. Mike Easley announced today that five additional counties in North Carolina have been selected to participate in the 21st Century Communities program. The N.C. Department of Commerce initiative helps foster economic growth in the state's most distressed communities.

"By participating in the 21st Century Communities program, local leaders gain the resources needed to help their communities move forward in today's global economy," said Easley. "Helping our struggling counties develop long term, sustainable business plans also makes sure North Carolina's business climate remains number one in the nation for many years into the future."

Alexander, Camden, Clay, Nash and Scotland join 26 other counties that have received the designation since the program started in September 2001. The 21st Century Communities program examines the strengths and challenges faced by local economies hardest hit by global economic changes, particularly the loss of traditional manufacturing jobs. A task force within the state Commerce Department partners with local officials to develop strategies for economic vitality in each county and then works with counties to implement recommended changes.

Each fall, the Commerce Department encourages distressed counties to apply to the program. Communities are selected on a competitive basis. Criteria for participation includes relative economic distress, such as rising unemployment, as

well as a commitment from community leadership.

Other 21st Century Communities include: Anson, Beaufort, Burke, Caldwell, Caswell, Cherokee, Columbus, Duplin, Edgecombe, Gaston, Graham, Halifax, Harnett, Hertford, Hoke, Hyde, Mitchell, Montgomery, Northampton, Robeson, Rockingham, Rutherford, Sampson, Warren, Washington and Yancey counties.

For more information about the 21st Century Communities program, visit <http://www.nccommerce.com/en/CommunityServices/CommunityPlanningAssistance/21stCenturyCommunities>

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