2022
COMPREHENSIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

WPCOG

PREPARED BY THE

Western Piedmont
Council of Governments

Creative Regional Solutions Since 1968

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COVER IMAGE

Alexander County Courthouse Park - Taylorsville, NC

INTRODUCTION

This Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) is an essential tool that contains specific strategies designed to improve economic conditions and our region's quality of life and create new job opportunities. The Western Piedmont Council of Governments appointed the 2022 CEDS Committee in January of 2022, which guided the creation of the CEDS report. Committee members represented community leaders from Alexander, Burke, Caldwell, and Catawba Counties (the four counties in the Western Piedmont Region). The CEDS includes a summary background, regional strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis results, a regional resiliency analysis, 35 strategies, and performance measures. For additional information about the 2022 CEDS, including the regional profile, a summary of the CEDS process, the CEDS survey and stakeholder interview results, the CEDS performance measures, and the CEDS Committee meeting minutes, please visit the WPCOG website (**www.wpcog.org**).

SUMMARY BACKGROUND

The Western Piedmont (also known as the Hickory-Lenoir-Morganton Metropolitan Statistical Area or MSA) region's population fell by 0.1% from 365,497 in 2015 to 365,471 in 2021. Alexander County had the fastest growth rate over the past 5 years (2.0%), followed by Catawba County (1.0%). Since 2010, the population in Burke and Caldwell counties has decreased. The lack of population growth in the Western Piedmont Region compared to other regions in North Carolina is most likely due to substantial employment losses suffered in the region between 2007 and 2010, and a lack of net in-migration of younger households into the region. The North Carolina Office of Management and Budget predicts slow population growth for the region through 2035 with an increase from 365,491 to 374,383. This population growth of 8,912 persons represents a 2.4% increase over the next 20 years.

VISION STATEMENT

The CEDS will serve as a key strategic tool to help guide the Western Piedmont Region as it becomes more vibrant, healthy, and prosperous over the next 5 years. This vision will be achieved through robust and aggressive economic development, the construction of desirable and affordable housing, the successful marketing of regional assets, the development of an inclusive community, the retention and recruitment of a talented workforce, and the development of an efficient and well-maintained infrastructure system – all of which will ensure an equitable and resilient future for the entire region.

CEDS by the Numbers

11 Committee Members

25 Survey Questions

6 CEDS Subject Categories

6 Committee Meetings

968 Survey Responses

35 CEDS Strategies

13 1-on-1 Stakeholder Interviews

Western Piedmont Regional Data Overview

365,276 Population

4 Counties

5 Hospitals

137,968 Occupied Housing Units

24 Municipalities

6 Higher Education Facilities

$151,600 Median Home Value

4.6% Unemployment Rate

REGIONAL RESILIENCY

As part of the CEDS process, committee members discussed "Resiliency" in the Western Piedmont Region. Below is the committee's response to the question.

How are we resilient now?
> Our economy today is more diverse now than ever
> Our region has more passive recreation opportunities, which has become much more important since the COVID pandemic
> Institutions in the region are highly engaged in mutually beneficial partnerships
> The region understands that water and sewer system infrastructure expansion leads to growth
> The region has expanded local greenway systems and is planning for new greenways and regional connectivity
> Many businesses in the region are locally owned and are locally supplied
> The region's leadership has remained stable and committed throughout periods of significant change

SWOT ANALYSIS

A regional SWOT (**Strengths**, **Weaknesses**, **Opportunities**, & **Threats**) analysis was developed by the CEDS Committee. The process was used by the Committee to assess the region's current conditions and to determine specific strategies for future development.

STRENGTHS
> Communications
> Welcoming community
> Location (proximity to mountains/beach)
> Educational opportunities
> Entrepreneurial spirit
> Strong and diverse economy
> Manufacturing sector
> Low cost of living

WEAKNESSES
> Lack of diversity in leadership
> Retention of young professionals and young families
> Affordable housing
> Uneven infrastructure
> Loss of population
> Lack of housing
> Childcare
> Illegal drug use/addiction epidemic
> Diversity of housing cost and type
> Aging leadership

OPPORTUNITIES
> Regional marketing
> Downtown revitalization
> Broadband infrastructure
> Vacant buildings/commercial/industrial
> Community colleges/partnerships with 4 year colleges
> Small towns
> Hickory Regional Airport
> Public access to water
> Remote workers
> Unique area
> Roadway connections/conditions
> Greenway connectivity
> Diverse economic foundation
> Outdoor amenities
> NC School of Science & Math
> Charlotte's growth

THREATS
> Drug use/addiction epidemic
> Lack of succession planning strategies for leadership
> Filling jobs/lack of workforce
> Decline in birth rates/population
> Modest or lax about promoting/telling our story
> Complacency or not listening to new ideas/others
> Population loss
> Traditional education versus online
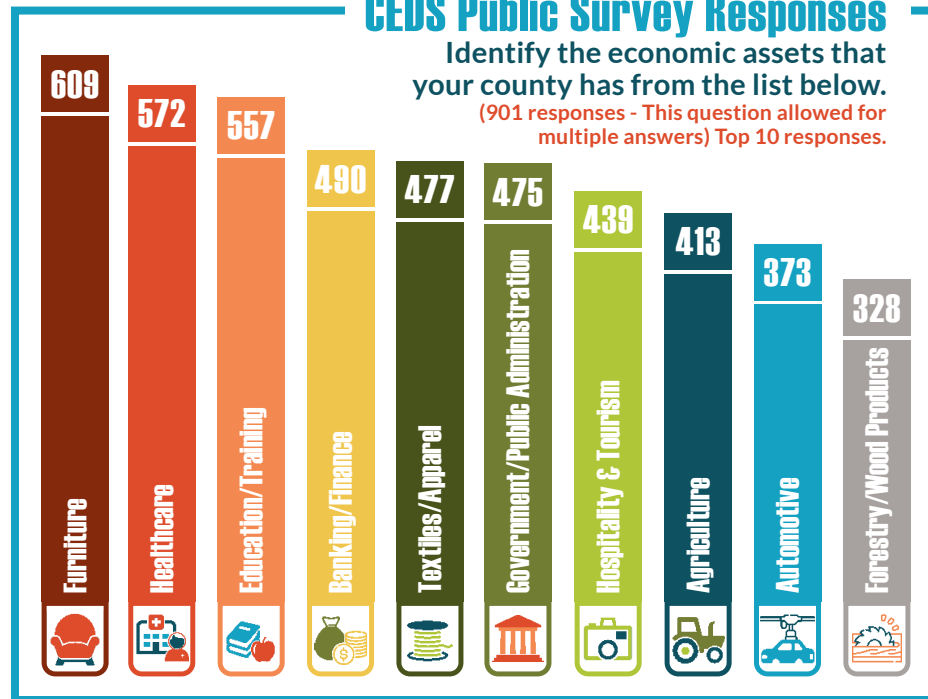> Stagnant youth population

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The economy in the Western Piedmont Region historically relied on the furniture, textile, and fiber-optic industries. Changes to these industries resulted in the entry of new business sectors and also created opportunities to strengthen existing industries. In addition, the region is welcoming new state educational institutions, international product testing centers, and new businesses. Strategies in this section of the CEDS will lead to economic development and job creation opportunities for the region. These strategies include constructing additional shell buildings and pad-ready sites, increasing capacity for economic development projects and grant development, maximizing building reuse and site development opportunities, and promoting economic development assets - including the Manufacturing Solutions Center, the Morganton Campus of the NC School of Science and Math, the Hickory campus of Appalachian State University, and the region's many institutions of higher education.

CEDS Public Survey Responses

Identify the economic assets that your county has from the list below.
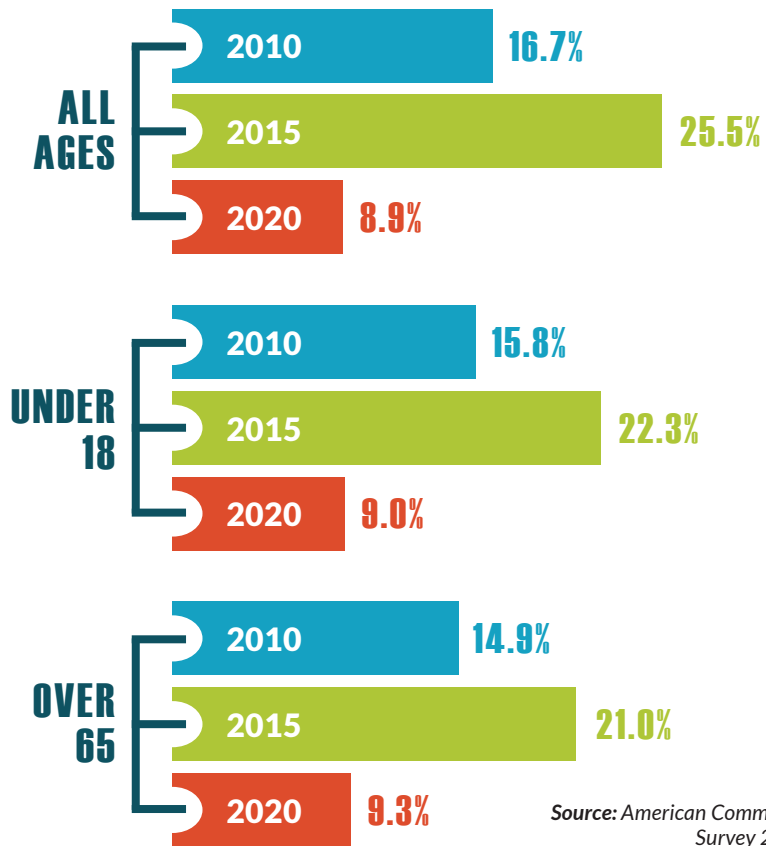(901 responses - This question allowed for multiple answers) Top 10 responses.

Category	Responses
Furniture	609
Healthcare	572
Education/Training	557
Banking/Finance	490
Textiles/Apparel	477
Government/Public Administration	475
Hospitality & Tourism	439
Agriculture	413
Automotive	373
Forestry/Wood Products	328

Western Piedmont Regional Employment Distribution

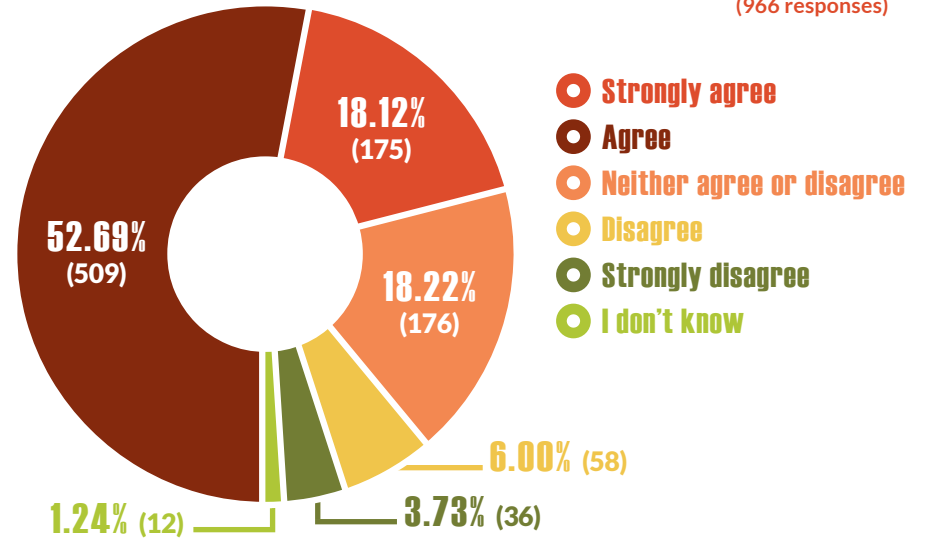| EMPLOYMENT SECTOR	2010	2020	% Change 2010-2020
Civilian employed population 16 years and over	162,221	167,377	3.2
Agriculture, forestry, fishing & hunting, & mining	1,437	1,437	0.0
Construction	11,144	9,304	-16.5
Manufacturing	42,605	43,349	1.7
Wholesale trade	6,025	5,616	-6.8
Retail trade	17,899	19,067	6.5
Transportation and warehousing, & utilities	7,532	8,491	12.7
Information	1,637	2,031	24.1
Finance and insurance, & real estate & rental & leasing	5,287	5,514	4.3
Professional, scientific, & mgmt., & admin & waste mgmt. services	9,200	9,874	7.3
Educational services, and health care and social assistance	34,762	33,012	-5.0
Arts, entertainment, & recreation, and accommodation & food services	11,314	15,164	34.0
Other services, except public administration	7,440	8,661	16.4
Public administration	5,939	5,857	-1.4

Source: Labor & Economic Analysis Division, NC Dept. of Commerce.

Western Piedmont MSA Poverty Rates (2010-2020)

ALL AGES
- 2010: 16.7%
- 2015: 25.5%
- 2020: 8.9%

UNDER 18
- 2010: 15.8%
- 2015: 22.3%
- 2020: 9.0%

OVER 65
- 2010: 14.9%
- 2015: 21.0%
- 2020: 9.3%

Source: American Community Survey 2020.

CEDS Public Survey Responses

My community supports small businesses
(966 responses)

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree or disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- I don't know

- 52.69% (509)
- 18.12% (175)
- 18.22% (176)
- 6.00% (58)
- 3.73% (36)
- 1.24% (12)

Downtown Morganton, NC - Historic Morganton Festival.

Burke County - JE Ekornes, expansion.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

Strategy 1 | Construct additional shell buildings and pad ready sites throughout the region

Actions

> Encourage communities to develop 50,000 to 100,000 square foot shell buildings and pad-ready sites
> Identify public/private partnerships for shell building construction
> Identify the number and size of needed pad-ready sites in the region. Complete an assessment of existing sites, evaluate regulations and future land use plans
> Increase the number of shovel-ready sites in the region
> Evaluate rail corridors and railroad rights-of-way for potential economic development opportunities
> Encourage local governments to add website links to NC Department of Commerce site inventory map

Metrics

> At least 10 new shell buildings constructed in the region with an average employment of 40 jobs per 50,000 sq ft
> Number of pad-ready sites available/created
> New public/private partnerships
> Identified sites and number of new shovel-ready sites
> Number of evaluated corridors/rights of way/rail improvements
> Number of added links

Responsible Parties

WPCOG, local governments, EDCs, private partners, federal, and state granting agencies

Strategy 2 | Enhance and maintain capacity for project and grant development

Actions

> Hire additional Community and Economic Development staff to increase grant writing capacity and grant administration
> Encourage EDCs to have a policy support role with additional project and grant development to ensure project coordination
> Pursue opportunities through the CHIPS and Science Act
> Explore emerging software and technologies to improve regional research and data analytics

Metrics

> Additional grant writing and administrative staff hired
> Number of grants awarded
> Grant funding amounts and jobs created
> Number of new implementations

Responsible Parties

Local governments, federal and state grant agencies, WPCOG, and EDCs

Strategy 3 — Maximize building reuse and site redevelopment opportunities

Actions
> Identify locations in the region that are ideal targets for building reuse or site demolition grants
> Prepare successful demolition/building reuse grant applications

Metrics
> Develop 20 grants over a 5 year period with an average of 15 jobs created per project, at wages that exceed the manufacturing wage for county

Responsible Parties
Local governments, federal and state grant agencies, WPCOG, and EDCs

Strategy 4 — Support small business development lending for job creation

Actions
> Work with businesses and local agencies that provide loans

Metrics
> Number of loans

Responsible Parties
Local governments, federal and state grant agencies, small business center, EDCs, SBTDC, community colleges, VEDIC, Inc., and WPCOG

Strategy 5 — Work with federal, state, and local officials to assist existing businesses with expansions, while also recruiting new companies to the region to further the growth of diverse, well-paying jobs across a broad spectrum of industries

Actions
> Reduce the approval process time for development - modify processes and ordinances to become more development/business friendly
> Provide a regional economic development guide to inform local governments about opportunities & available resources

Metrics
> The creation of at least 250 new jobs each year, increased regional diversification of industries (manufacturing and non-manufacturing). Wage growth that exceeds the rate of inflation
> Number of local governments support with amendments
> Completed resource guide

Responsible Parties
WPCOG Staff, Local Governments, EDCs, NC Commerce, Economic Development Partnership of NC, Appalachian Regional Commission, Economic Development Administration, and Community Colleges

Strategy 6

Promote & support regional assets such as the Manufacturing Solutions Center (MSC), Morganton Campus of the NC School of Science and Math (NCSSM), Appalachian State University - Hickory, the NC Center of Engineering Technologies (NCCET), community colleges, LRU, & other critical economic development assets

Actions

> Support regional efforts to partner with business and industry to enhance workforce development, economic development, and talent recruitment efforts
> Inform the community of the importance of these assets to the region
> Create new economic development opportunities near campuses, such as retail (shopping & restaurants), hotels, housing, sidewalks, greenways, recreation, and transit
> Assist to align/coordinate the missions and funding sources of these entities to ensure short and long-term support
> Develop a community marketing plan on the importance of MSC regionally
> Support MSC's mission to improve, develop, and create innovative products in furniture, hosiery and other industries by creating strategies for expansion and growth by assisting with the development of a marketing plan
> Develop a newcomer welcome plan for students, faculty, parents and visitors to NCSSM
> Support community colleges, and ASU/NCCET's mission to educate and train students in engineering-related fields and bring ideas and innovation to the marketplace

Metrics

> List specific strategies for expansion and growth. Assess new regional economic development opportunities and partnerships
> Assess new housing, retail/hotels, recreational and other opportunities near applicable campuses
> Assess sidewalks/greenway and transit opportunities created for students, faculty and visitors to the campuses; evaluate areas near campuses for necessary zoning changes and infrastructure investments - implement changes where appropriate
> Strategic plan outlining actions and funding sources
> Increased promotion of the MSC as an important regional asset; # of graduates entering workforce
> Completed marketing plan
> Completed newcomer welcome plan
> Expansion of engineering and tech related programs

Responsible Parties

WPCOG, MSC, NCSSM, NCCET, EDCs, local industry, local governments, chambers of commerce, NC Department of Commerce, community colleges, ASU, LRU, Western Carolina University, UNC Charlotte, and other universities, Greater Hickory Metropolitan Planning Organization, Greenway Public Transportation, federal, & state grant agencies

Strategy 7

Work with local businesses to provide contingency planning support

Actions

> Provide support and education to existing business owners for the continuation of business after retirement

Metrics

> Number of persons/businesses supported; grants awarded

Responsible Parties

Local governments, federal and state grant agencies, small business center, EDCs, SBTDC, community colleges, and WPCOG

WORKFORCE

Both private and public sector employers in the Western Piedmont Region depend on a well-educated and highly skilled workforce. Therefore, programs that align education and job training with career opportunities are critical elements of workforce development, as is the use of social media in communicating employment opportunities. The strategies described in this portion of the CEDS intend to build upon the region's efforts to improve and update the Western Piedmont Industry Growth Analysis (IGA); align career pathways with education and training opportunities to meet industry needs; maintain consistent, coordinated, long-term marketing of workforce development activities across and within the region (through social media and emerging methods); and ensure that wage data is used to assess recruiting and retention efforts.

Western Piedmont NCWorks Career Centers (2021)

689 Assisted Customers
(Developing/Updating Resumes)

166 Recruitment Events
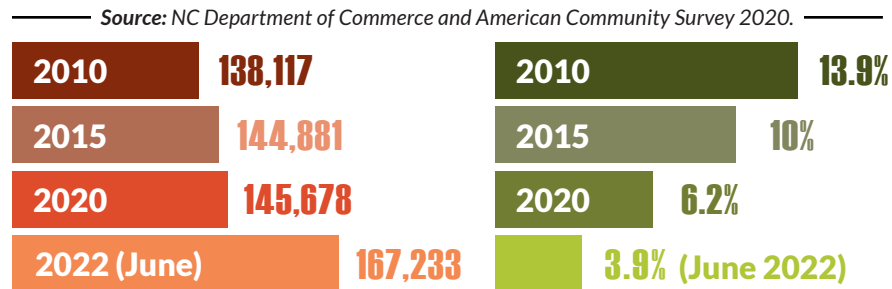(Staff assisted recruitment events at a career center or employer site)

13,033 Provided Business Services
(Job postings, recruitment, referrals, Labor market Intelligence, & Upskill)

1,806 New registered unemployed
(Not working & registered in *ncworks.gov* July 1, 2021 - June 30, 2022)

Western Piedmont Regional Workforce Data

Average Employment (2010-2020)

Source: NC Department of Commerce and American Community Survey 2020.

2010	138,117
2015	144,881
2020	145,678
2022 (June)	167,233

Unemployment Rate (2010-2020)

2010	13.9%
2015	10%
2020	6.2%
	3.9% (June 2022)

Median Earnings for Population Over 25 by Educational Attainment Level
Source: American Community Survey 2020.

Less Than High School	$26,403
Some College or Associate's Degree	$32,500
Bachelor's Degree	$41,960

NEXTGEN (Workforce Youth/Young Adult Program)

11 Youth/Young adults completed GED/HS Diploma

34 Entered Permanent Employment

40 Enrolled in Post-secondary Education

**23** Participated in short-term paid internships

Western Piedmont Change in Employment by Industry (2016-2020)

| Transportation & Warehousing	1,066
Construction	944
Retail Trade	626
Professional, Scientific, & Technical	145
Health Care & Social Assistance	121
Finance & Insurance	109
Public Administration	68
Real Estate, Rental, & Leasing	24
Other Services (Not Public Admin)	-82
Information	-184
Arts, Entertainment, & Recreation	-235
Admin. & Support & Waste Mgmt. & Remediation	-884
Accommodation & Food Services	-926
Manufacturing	-1,520

Source: *US Census.*

CEDS Public Survey Responses

**The job training resources that I need are available to me.** (964 responses)

- 28.22% (272)
- 14.94% (144)
- 36.72% (354)
- 9.85% (95)
- 2.28% (22)
- 7.99% (77)
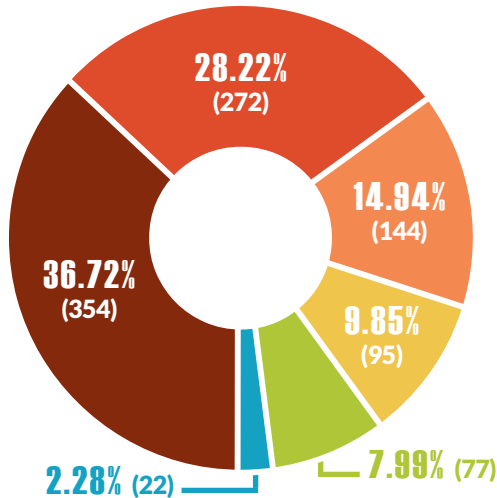
○ **Agree**
○ **Neither agree or disagree**
○ **Strongly agree**
○ **I don't Know**
○ **Disagree**
○ **Strongly disagree**

Which group or organization needs to do more to prepare students to be successful in the workplace? (917 responses)

- 39.48% (362)
- 47.55% (436)
- 6.54% (60)
- 1.20% (11)
- 5.23% (48)
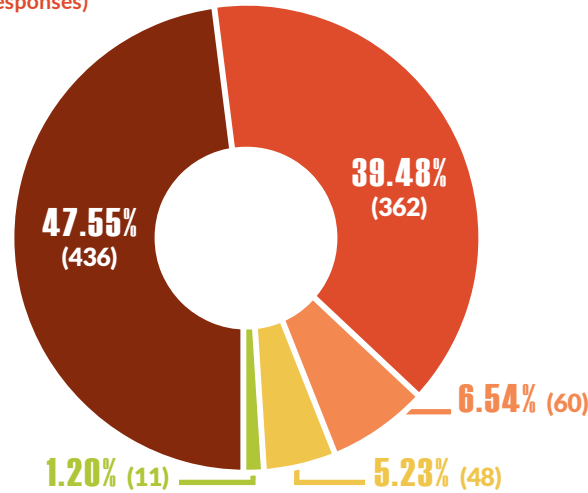
○ **Parents**
○ **Public Schools**
○ **Community Colleges**
○ **Public or Private Universities**
○ **I don't know**

Did you work from home during the COVID-19 Pandemic? (960 responses)

- 56.25% (540)
- 43.54% (418)
- 0.21% (2)
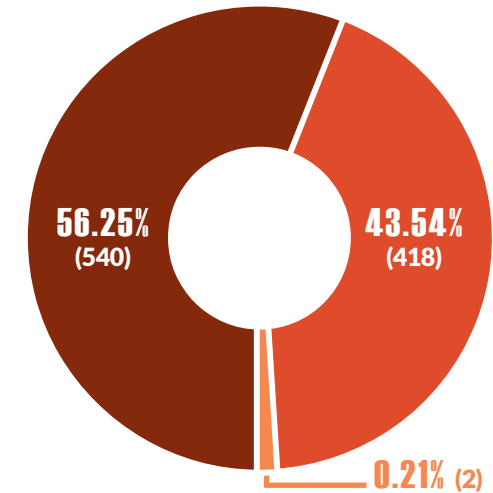
○ **No**
○ **Yes**
○ **Not employed**

I don't have adequate internet service. (0 Responses)

WORKFORCE STRATEGIES

Strategy 1	Update and design the Western Piedmont Industry Growth Analysis (IGA) for business recruitment efforts

Actions

> Ensure Western Piedmont Workforce Development Board (WDB) members and key stakeholders help shape the information that is needed in the IGA
> Link to online tools developed by NC Commerce Labor & Economic Analysis Division (LEAD)
> Meet with EDCs to develop IGA into a tool for economic development
> Increase exposure of the IGA results throughout the region

Metrics

> Gain input from private sector workforce development board members whose industries are targeted for increase or decrease
> Prepare a precise and digestible document for industry, agencies, and government
> Number of promotion & outreach efforts for the IGA

Responsible Parties	Workforce Development Board, EDCs, community colleges, Appalachian State University, Lenoir Rhyne University and other four-year universities, WPCOG Data group, NC LEAD

Strategy 2 — Align career pathways with education and training opportunities to meet industry needs

Actions

> Promote career interest tools that help potential employees navigate the skills and education needed for the job they desire - "focus on the lifestyle they desire"

> Involve K-12 and Business Industries Alliance (BIA) to identify pathways that impact the region now and in the future, increasing intern and apprenticeship opportunities that build partnerships between employers, NCWorks NEXTGEN programs, and educational entities across the four counties. Pathways should continue from education to the workplace.

> Research the number of 4-year universities sending students to our region for internships/apprenticeships

> Continue and increase integration of community colleges, higher education, and high schools

> Work with NCSSM to survey student population (to create a baseline) regarding future college choices to help retain talent in the region

> Identify educational/training opportunities for higher-level (academically intellectually gifted) students that position our schools as strong assets to attract high performing students and their families

> Ensure students and parents are aware of career opportunities available in the region and educational programs that align with those careers

Metrics

> Number of publications provided to potential employees

> Identify opportunities for internships or apprenticeships within the certified pathways (advanced manufacturing, healthcare, energy, human services). Work with businesses, agencies to place interns/apprentices

> Develop marketing material to advertise and demonstrate the benefits of career pathways (input from the BIA) will be needed to ensure relevancy and continued usefulness

> Increase number of college level classes and industry training (industry credentials) to high school students

> Assemble local and regional Business & Industry Alliance (BIA) groups, including high schools, community colleges and EDCs, to ensure pathways are current

> Number of students surveyed/number of students indicating the likelihood to stay in the region

> Number and amount of strategic investments for new gifted student learning opportunities

Responsible Parties

Workforce Development Board, workforce development partners, K-16 groups (including high schools and community colleges), business & industry, chambers of commerce, CTE programs, Appalachian State University, Lenoir-Rhyne University and other 4-year universities, STEM West, and WPCOG

Strategy 3	Maintain consistent, coordinate, promote, long-term marketing of workforce activities across and within the region (social media, new and emerging media)

Actions

> Strengthen workforce partner relationships by encouraging agencies to share job/employment related information
> Generate a daily/weekly/monthly posts of workforce labor activity (example: Hootsuite application)
> Broaden outreach to underserved populations
> Promote/market local area careers; labor market details for the region
> Convene a regional workforce summit

Metrics

> Increase advertising budget and boost social media presence
> Increase postings of jobseeker success stories particularly where the local workforce system as a whole was part of the impact
> Collect data from employers regarding success of recruitment events based on social media outreach/advertising
> Create a comprehensive and assessable distribution list

Responsible Parties	WPCOG Communications, Workforce Board, NCWorks Career Centers/Advisors, Workforce Intel Committee, Community College Career Centers, local governments, chambers, EDCs, and other workforce partner career services

Strategy 4	Utilizing the concepts outlined in the EnVision Center Initiative, identify and assist individuals in overcoming barriers – such as housing, childcare, transportation, drug-abuse recovery, post-incarceration transition – that are precluding their entry or re-entry into the regional workforce

Actions

> Identify bus routes that are close to local area employers, higher education facilities, and childcare centers
> Strengthen advocacy efforts for re-entry candidates (formerly incarcerated) so they can more quickly enter the workforce (Western Piedmont Regional Re-entry Initiative)
> Identify childcare facilities located in the region - through use of the Quality of Life Portal
> Identify healthcare facilities to include recovery in the region - through the use of the Quality of Life Portal

Metrics

> Assist 50 screened applicants each year to participate in the program, Achieve funding for the EnVision Center Initiative
> Create digital and printed maps of routes close to employers, higher education facilities and childcare centers; share maps with employers/community/schools
> Investigate ride sharing program
> Ensure re-entry component is part of the workforce summit
> Update the current regional re-entry resource guide
> Apply for ARC Recovery to Work Grant and/or other grants
> Add healthcare, childcare, and other resources to the Quality of Life Portal

Responsible Parties	WPCOG Staff, WPCOG Transportation Division, Greenway, WPCOG Regional Housing Authority, Western Piedmont Workforce Development Board, NC Commerce, and higher education facilities

INFRASTRUCTURE

Infrastructure greatly influences economic development. The availability and overall condition of a region's infrastructure (water, sewer, broadband, roads, sidewalks, and greenways) are critical elements in retaining existing businesses and recruiting new businesses. Infrastructure also significantly impacts community development. The strategies described in this section of the CEDS are designed to ensure that the region has widespread access to high-quality infrastructure. For example, transportation infrastructure strategies include developing and expanding the region's bicycle and pedestrian network; expanding public transportation to municipalities in all four counties; and developing transportation projects that rank well in NCDOT's project prioritization system. Water, sewer, and broadband infrastructure strategies include encouraging and assisting local governments in developing and maintaining asset management and capital improvement plans, exploring opportunities for coordination and consolidation of utility systems, improving broadband access to rural areas, and improving broadband speeds.

Regional Projects Completed, Investments & Jobs 2017-2021

$56 Million
Grant Amount

$342 Million
Private Investment

2,076
New Full-time Jobs Created

135
Grant Projects

Source: WPCOG Annual Reports, 2017 - 2021.

Transportation Projects Completed 2017-2021

> US 64 / NC 16 interchange improvements in Taylorsville
> Hospital Parkway extension from S. Sterling St. (NC 18) to W. Parker Rd. in Morganton
> US 64 / NC 18 intersection in Lenoir
> Duke St. connector to 321A in Granite Falls
> City Walk between L-R University and 9th St. NW in Hickory
> Sweetwater Rd. extension from US 70 to Startown Rd. in Hickory
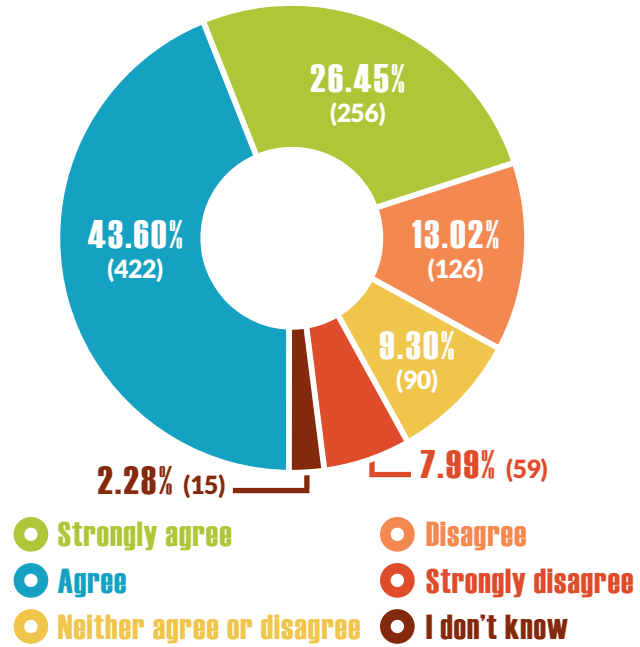

Granite Falls, NC - Duke Street roundabout.

CEDS Public Survey Responses

My town/city promotes investment in its downtown. (965 responses)

- 24.35% (235)
- 14.61% (141)
- 42.07% (406)
- 8.81% (85)
- 5.49% (53)
- 4.66% (45)

- ● Strongly agree
- ● Agree
- ● Neither agree or disagree
- ● Disagree
- ● Strongly disagree
- ● I don't know
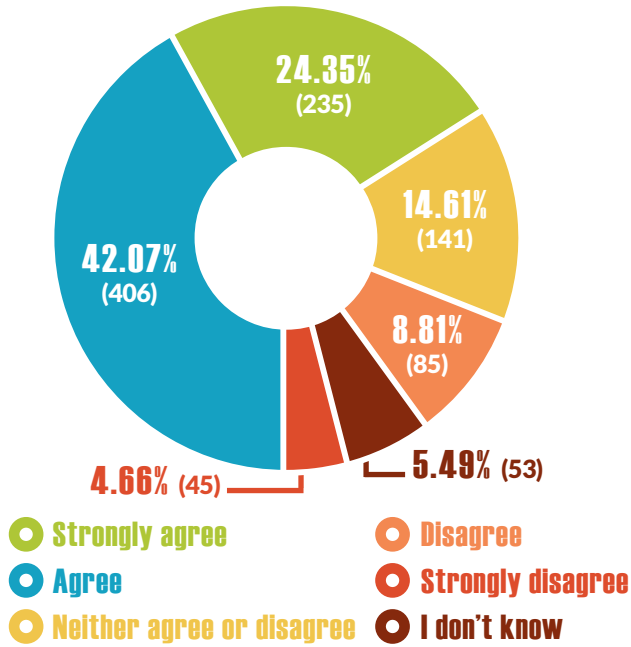
My community invest in walkable infrastructure (ex. sidewalks, greenways, etc). (968 responses)

- 26.45% (256)
- 13.02% (126)
- 43.60% (422)
- 9.30% (90)
- 7.99% (59)
- 2.28% (15)

- ● Strongly agree
- ● Agree
- ● Neither agree or disagree
- ● Disagree
- ● Strongly disagree
- ● I don't know

Granite Falls, NC - water tower.
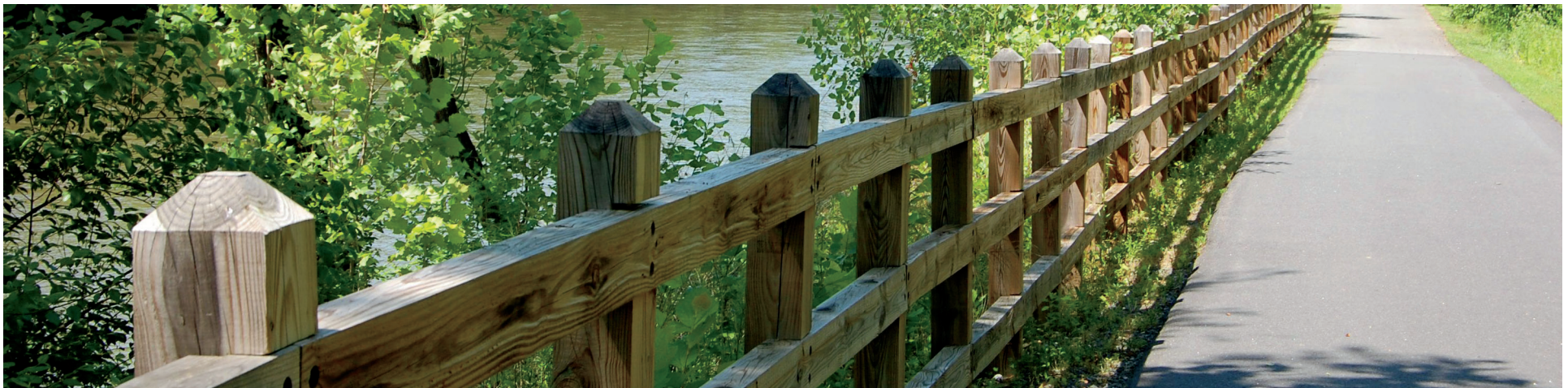
Morganton, NC - Catawba River Greenway.

INFRASTRUCTURE STRATEGIES

Strategy 1	Improve and expand the bicycle and pedestrian network in the region to include greenway opportunities adjacent to existing, connecting to, or creating a connection to economic opportunities

Actions

> Apply for Surface Transportation Block Grant-Direct Attributable (STBG-DA) and Congestion Mitigation Air Quality (CMAQ) funding – annually or biannually when grants available
> Identify gaps in the existing network, opportunities to connect communities and counties to each other through destinations
> Retrofit and add bicycle and pedestrian facilities to existing roads where feasible to allow safe travel for cyclists, pedestrians and automobiles
> Encourage local governments to participate in the Mobility Advisory Committee (MAC)

Metrics

> Additional linear footage of bicycle and pedestrian facilities
> Connection between communities and counties; number of bike, pedestrian, greenway plans adopted
> Number of MAC meetings - regional bike and pedestrian task force

Responsible Parties	Public/private partnerships, Greenway Public Transportation, Greater Hickory MPO, Federal Transit Administration (FTA), local governments and state, and federal grant opportunities

Strategy 2	Extend access and improve service and capacity for necessary utilities, including water, sewer, and broadband, to businesses, schools and community facilities, low income households and other underserved communities

Actions

> Expand and improve existing water and sewer services
> Establish a regional broadband taskforce
> Create a digital inclusion plan for the region
> Identify broadband service providers in the region
> Identify areas lacking sufficient broadband service
> Survey local businesses to determine areas needing increased broadband speed to increase profitability and/or create new jobs
> Work with school systems to acquire a survey of students to identify gaps in broadband availability
> Identify funding sources to implement the digital inclusion plan

Metrics

> Number and funding amounts of water and sewer grants awarded
> Quarterly meetings with stakeholders
> Number of additional businesses, organizations and housing units with water and sewer access or improved service
> Adoption of the plan by county governments
> Complete an GIS map inventory showing areas lacking service and areas requiring added speed
> Number of additional businesses, organizations and housing units with broadband service with added or improved service

Responsible Parties	Local Governments, EDCs, WPCOG, broadband service providers, school systems, NC Information Technology Broadband Infrastructure Office, other federal, and state agencies

Strategy 3 — Encourage & assist local governments to develop & maintain asset management and capital improvement plans

Actions
> Develop a water and sewer asset inventory for the region
> Submit assessment inventory and assessment grant applications to NC Division of Environmental Quality (NCDEQ) for local governments
> Use the WPCOG GIS division to map utilities for better maintenance & planned growth

Metrics
> Completed inventory of water & sewer infrastructure
> Number of grants submitted to NCDEQ
> Number of grants awarded by the NCDEQ
> Number of local government utilities mapped & maintained

Responsible Parties
WPCOG, local governments, other local utility providers, federal, and state agencies

Strategy 4 — Explore opportunities for coordination and improvement of utility systems

Actions
> Convene local governments using a regional task force/committee and other local utility providers to identify solutions for regional needs, issues, and opportunities
> Evaluate cost effectiveness of consolidating smaller systems
> Seek funding to aid utility providers willing to develop cooperative agreements or consolidate systems
> Facilitate cost sharing arrangements for utility providers for specialized equipment, staff, etc.

Metrics
> Completed report for possible consolidation of small and non-government systems
> Number of systems consolidated or cooperative agreements
> Number of grants submitted/awarded
> Number of cost-sharing agreements/ projects

Responsible Parties
WPCOG, local governments, local utility providers federal, and state agencies

Strategy 5 — Promote water and air quality initiatives, erosion mitigation, contaminants and management of water resources to protect drinking water sources, support the outdoor economy, and encourage climate resiliency

Actions
> Provide education and outreach
> Monitor tree canopy to evaluate air quality, soil erosion and water quality/ quantity impacts

Metrics
> Number of municipalities reached through education, training, and workshop opportunities
> Complete a baseline analysis of tree canopy coverage

Responsible Parties
Local governments, National Weather Service, North Carolina Legislature, State, and Federal grant funding sources, and other partners

Strategy 6 — Promote the development of a comprehensive, affordable public transportation network in order to improve labor force participation

Actions
> Apply for funding annually

Metrics
> Maintain Morganton fixed routes
> Explore microtransit possibilities in Caldwell County
> Explore additional fixed-flex routes in Catawba and Alexander counties
> Support the continued development of the same day, on demand passenger service
> Explore the establishment of innovative share ride transportation options in the region
> Fixed route connection between counties

Responsible Parties
Greenway Public Transportation, Greater Hickory MPO, Local Governments, nonprofits, public/private partnerships, NCDOT, and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA)

Strategy 7 — Encourage roadway connectivity to reduce pressures on major corridors

Actions
> Create a regional transportation toolbox of best practices for future development and redevelopment
> Work with local governments to implement the toolbox
> Partner with local governments to develop funding mechanisms/grants
> Encourage connection of existing neighborhoods to reduce traffic pressure on main thoroughfares

Metrics
> Completion of toolbox
> Number of local governments implementing toolbox

Responsible Parties
WPCOG, Greater Hickory MPO, local governments, and NCDOT

Strategy 8 — Explore potential rail and air service improvements for job creation and economic development

Actions
> Evaluate land parcels adjacent to railroads for potential complimentary uses
> Evaluate potential for additional uses & improvement of existing railroads
> Evaluate the existing infrastructure at public airports in the region
> Obtain grant funding for improvements

Metrics
> Assessment of land parcels for future development
> Assessment of potential uses
> Assessment of infrastructure for needed repairs & upgrades
> Amount of grant funds awarded

Responsible Parties
Local governments, WPCOG staff, railroads, airports, NCDOT, and EDCs

Strategy 9 — Support the development of the region's electric vehicle charging infrastructure

Actions
> Apply for grants to install or upgrade electric vehicle charging stations throughout the region
> Install electric charging stations strategically placed through out the counties/municipalities
> Establish a regional clean fuels coalition or similar program
> Establish educational programs related to installation and maintenance of electric vehicle infrastructure

Metrics
> Number of grants awarded
> Number of charging stations installed/upgraded
> Number of alternative energy projects permitted on the county level
> Number of local governments reached through education, training, and workshop opportunities
> Program established

Responsible Parties
NCDEQ, FEMA, public and private power providers, Counties, WPCOG, private alternative power operators, and community colleges

Strategy 10 — Develop transportation projects that rank well in NCDOT's project prioritization system to promote and maximize economic development

Actions
> Work with NCDOT to update the regional list of needed transportation projects to maximize and promote economic in development

Metrics
> List of updated viable transportation projects
> Additional transportation projects that promote economic development in the State Transportation Improvement Plan

Responsible Parties
Local Governments, EDCs, NCDOT, Greater Hickory MPO, and private sector

Strategy 11 — Support the establishment of a weather radar system for the region to improve regional resiliency

Actions
> Work with local governments, and potentially private sector, to obtain funding and install radar system
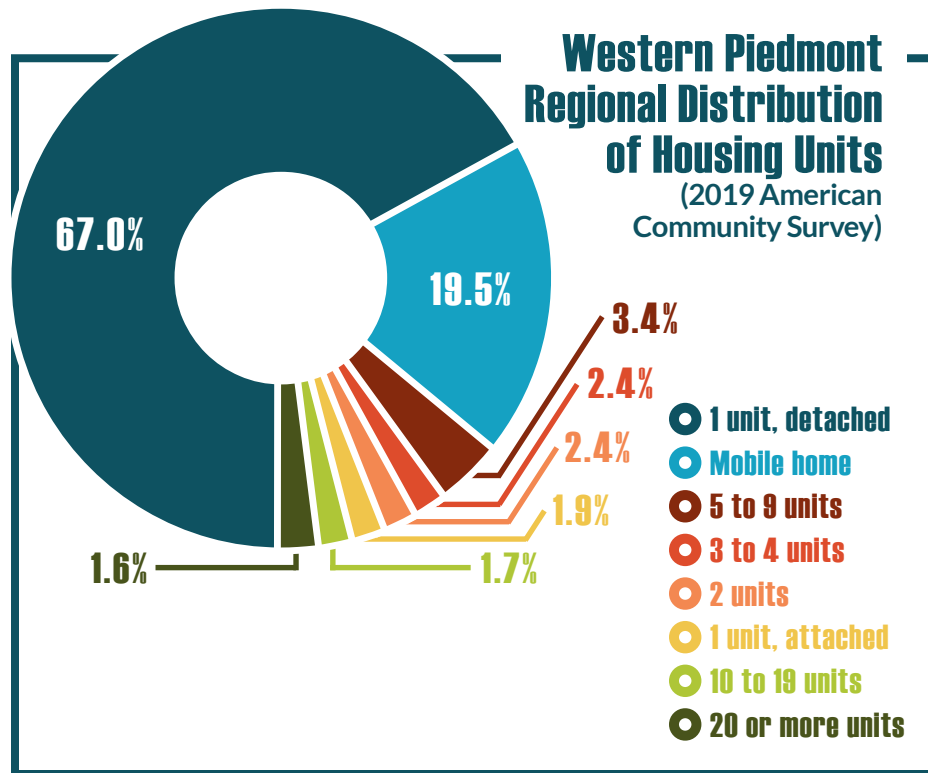> Coordinate efforts with the National Weather Service or other partners

Metrics
> Installation of system and improvement of radar coverage
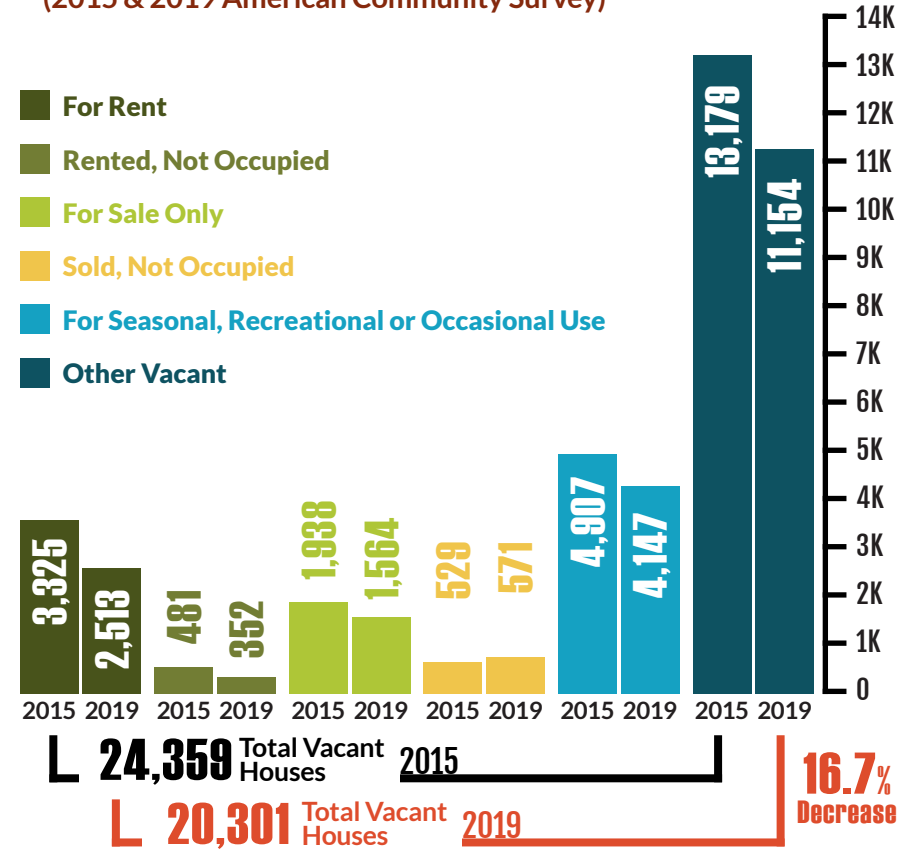
Responsible Parties
Local governments, National Weather Service, North Carolina Legislature, State, and Federal grant funding sources, and other partners

HOUSING

Housing stock plays a key role in a region's overall economic development. When a region offers a wide range of housing options, it becomes more competitive in attracting new residents, businesses, and industries. Providing a variety of housing stock requires the participation and cooperation of many groups, including private developers, the construction industry, realtors, and local governments. Finding the right balance to meet local housing needs and strategies should be a goal in every community. The strategies described in this portion of the CEDS intend to build upon the region's efforts to improve housing conditions. Strategies include reducing the number of vacant/substandard housing units, increasing the number of affordable housing choices, and adding new market-rate housing stock throughout the region, including downtown areas.

Western Piedmont Regional Distribution of Housing Units
(2019 American Community Survey)

- 67.0%
- 19.5%
- 3.4%
- 2.4%
- 2.4%
- 1.9%
- 1.7%
- 1.6%

- 1 unit, detached
- Mobile home
- 5 to 9 units
- 3 to 4 units
- 2 units
- 1 unit, attached
- 10 to 19 units
- 20 or more units

Western Piedmont Total Vacant Housing Units
(2015 & 2019 American Community Survey)

- For Rent
- Rented, Not Occupied
- For Sale Only
- Sold, Not Occupied
- For Seasonal, Recreational or Occasional Use
- Other Vacant

Category	2015	2019
For Rent	3,325	2,513
Rented, Not Occupied	481	352
For Sale Only	1,938	1,564
Sold, Not Occupied	529	571
For Seasonal, Recreational or Occasional Use	4,907	4,147
Other Vacant	13,179	11,154

24,359 Total Vacant Houses **2015**

20,301 Total Vacant Houses **2019**

16.7% Decrease

Western Piedmont Regional Housing Stock Age

County	Median Year Structure Built
Alexander County	1985
Burke County	1978
Caldwell County	1978
Catawba County	1983

CEDS Public Survey Responses

Regarding housing my community needs more... (961 responses)

- 269 — 28% — **Apartments**
- 497 — 52% — **Single-family Housing**
- 173 — 18% — **Multi-family Housing**
- 506 — 53% — **Affordable Housing**
- 93 — 10% — **We have enough housing**
- 99 — 11% — **I don't know**
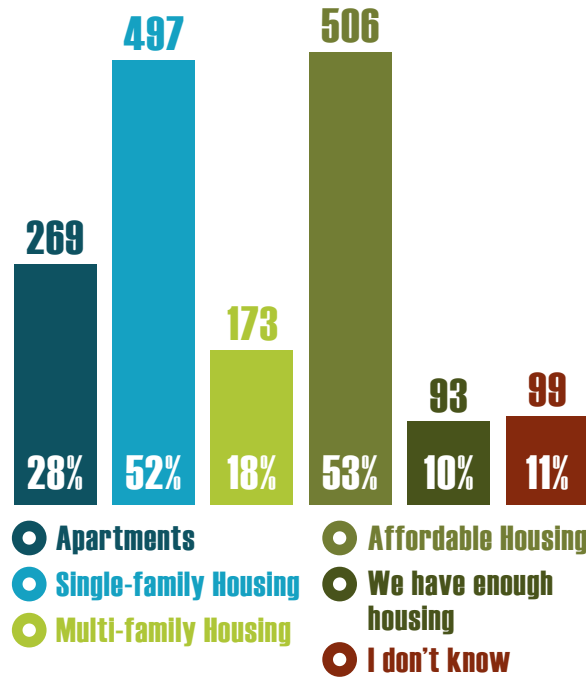
My community is a good place to live and work. (968 responses)

- 41.94% (406)
- 42.36% (410)
- 9.71% (94)
- 1.14% (11)
- 4.86% (47)

Strongly agree — **Disagree**
Agree — **Strongly disagree**
Neither agree or disagree
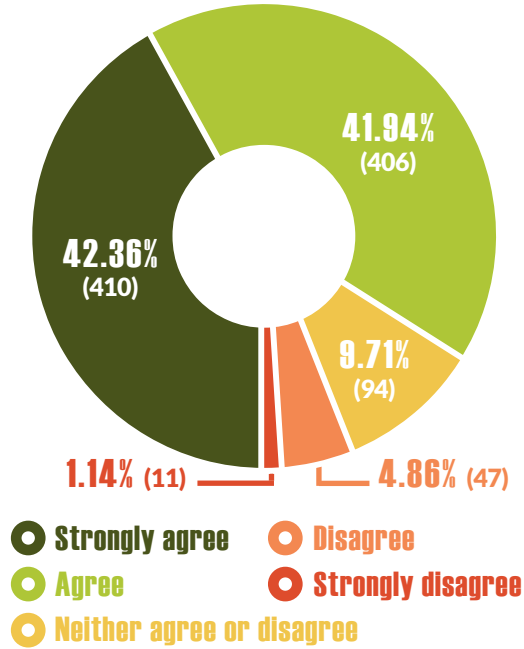
Hickory, NC - Hickory Affordable Housing Initiative.

Claremont, NC - Oxford Crossing apartments.
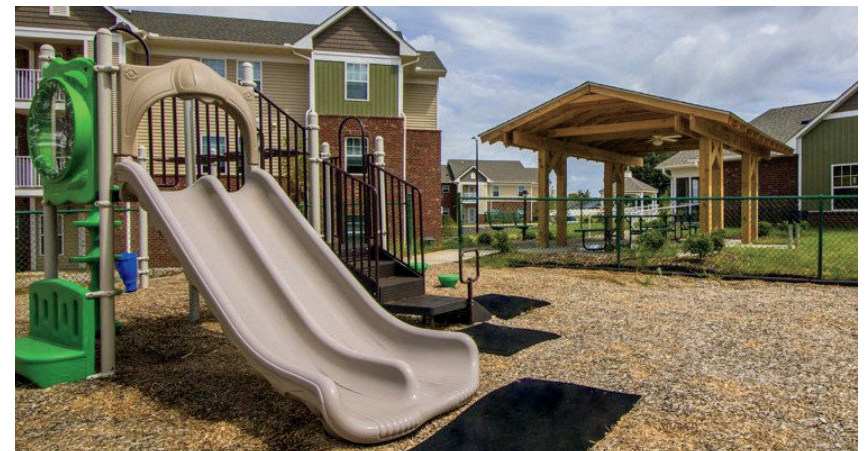
Claremont, NC - Oxford Crossing apartments, playground and picnic area.

HOUSING STRATEGIES

Strategy 1	Increase the amount of all types of housing (market-rate, work force, affordable, rental assistance, aging in place, and mixed-use)

Actions

> Identify strategies and grants to improve the variety and availability of housing options to bolster the health of communities
> Convene regional discussions and training with local governments, developers and lenders to develop market-rate housing and redevelopment
> Identify and leverage federal and state programs, like the HOME Program, to create new affordable housing opportunities
> Encourage housing rehabilitation to help sustain neighborhood fabric
> Promote the opportunity for mixed-use projects - commercial on bottom and condos and apartments above or horizontal planned development that encompasses housing types - apartments, townhomes, condos and single family, and centralized commercial aspects to support neighborhood service needs
> Work with community and regional partners, along with HUD, to expand the housing choice voucher options for the area and alleviate the waiting list of qualified program applicants

Metrics

> Number of housing units created
> Number of workshops, training events and meetings
> Number of affordable homes created through the HOME program tax credit, and other programs
> Number of mixed-use projects
> Secure at least 50 more housing vouchers in the Western Piedmont Region by 2027

Responsible Parties	Local governments, WPCOG, USDA, NC Housing Finance Agency, Habitat for Humanity, HOME Consortium, HUD, area non-profits and community groups, banks, property owners, real estate brokers, and developers

Strategy 2	Reduce the number of vacant and substandard homes throughout the region

Actions

> Continue discussions and increase coordination of efforts to reduce vacant and substandard housing through the Western Piedmont Vacant & Substandard Housing Task Force
> Assist and encourage local governments to seek grants to fund removal of vacant housing Work with local governments to implement model minimum housing codes
> Assess potential legislative actions to fund local efforts to reduce vacant housing

Metrics

> Number of vacant homes removed
> Number of rehabilitated substandard homes
> Reduction in percentage of vacant homes (excluding rental/sale & seasonal homes)
> Completed assessment

Responsible Parties	Local governments, WPCOG, WPCOG Vacant & Substandard Housing Task Force, building inspection departments, banks, property owners, and NC General Assembly

Strategy 3 — Create a Regional Housing Tool Kit and conduct outreach for local governments

Actions
> Identify best practices (processes, legislation, etc.)
> Create generic housing types fact sheets for local governments to distribute

Metrics
> Completed tool kit
> Completed fact sheets

Responsible Parties
WPCOG Staff and local governments

Strategy 4 — Develop a Regional Housing Plan

Actions
> Complete a baseline analysis of current housing types; monitor changes over time
> Identify the properties ripe for residential/mixed use development

Metrics
> Baseline established
> List of properties that are prime for residential/mixed use development

Responsible Parties
WPCOG Staff, local governments, EDCs, Home Builders Association, realtors, human resource professionals, business leaders, planning boards, and financial institutions

Burke County, NC - new housing construction near Morganton, NC.

Caldwell County, NC - new housing construction, neighborhood expansion.

MARKETING

A healthy economy relies on growth in working-age segments of the population to meet the needs of current and future employers. In light of recent out-migration trends in the region's 18 to 45-year-olds, an opportunity and challenge exists to target and attract new members of this age group through our marketing and branding efforts. Strategies described in this portion of the CEDS intend to build upon the region's efforts to convene a regional marketing task force, develop a regional marketing approach, and identify and promote regional attractions, events, and natural resources that appeal to younger age groups.
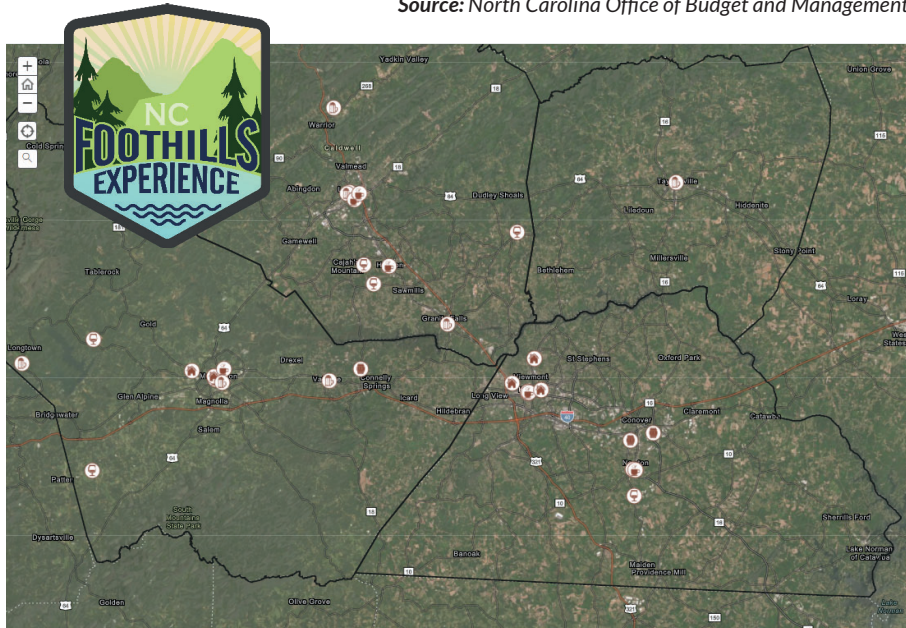
Western Piedmont Region 25 to 34 Age Group Population Change

43,299
2020 Population

46,557
2035 Estimated Population

+7.5%
Estimated Percent Change
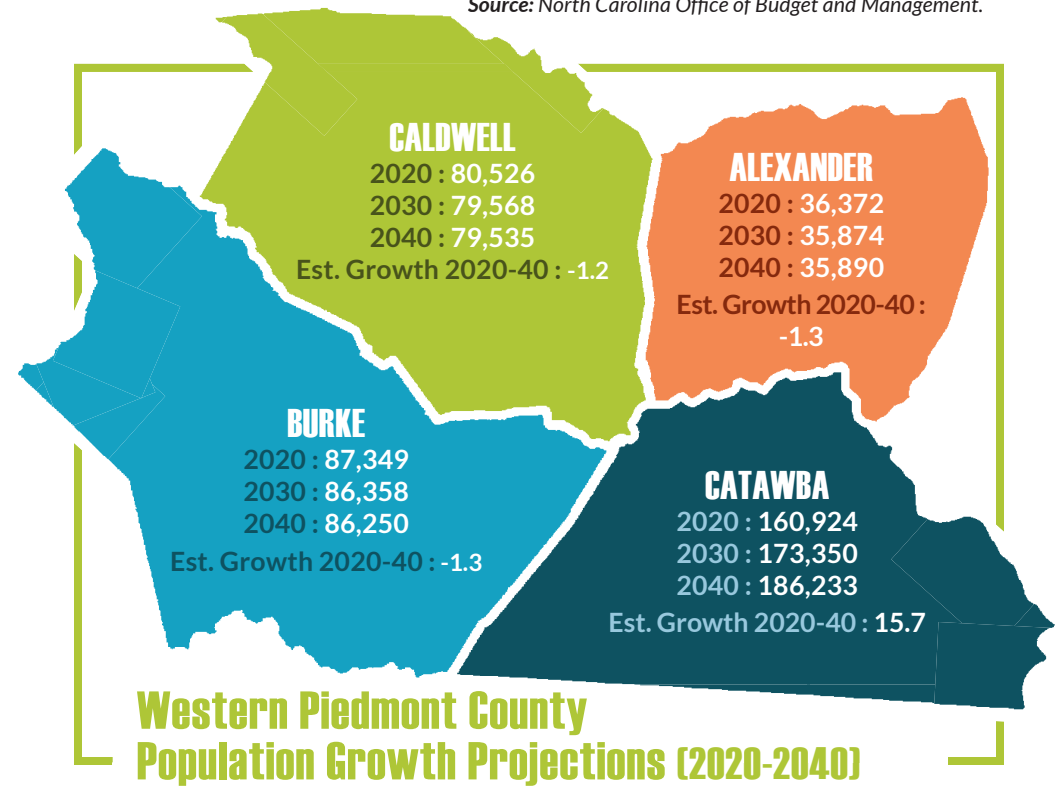
Source: North Carolina Office of Budget and Management.

Western Piedmont Region Population Change by Age Group

AGE GROUP	ESTIMATED POPULATION		ESTIMATED
	2010	2020	% CHANGE
0 TO 17	83,958	73,297	-12.7
18 TO 24	29,973	34,263	14.3
25 TO 44	92,116	83,358	-9.5
45 TO 64	104,137	102,223	-1.8
65 & OVER	55,163	72,030	30.6

Source: North Carolina Office of Budget and Management.

CALDWELL
2020 : 80,526
2030 : 79,568
2040 : 79,535
Est. Growth 2020-40 : -1.2

ALEXANDER
2020 : 36,372
2030 : 35,874
2040 : 35,890
Est. Growth 2020-40 : -1.3

BURKE
2020 : 87,349
2030 : 86,358
2040 : 86,250
Est. Growth 2020-40 : -1.3

CATAWBA
2020 : 160,924
2030 : 173,350
2040 : 186,233
Est. Growth 2020-40 : 15.7

Western Piedmont County Population Growth Projections (2020-2040)

Source: North Carolina Office of Budget and Management.

MARKETING STRATEGIES

Strategy 1 — Host a Regional Marketing Taskforce

Actions

> Discuss regional issues and shared opportunities, integrate communications and marketing efforts
> Develop informational talking points targeting each identified audience regarding the region and regional assets (visitors, current residents and businesses, new and prospective residents, new and prospective businesses) that can be used consistently through out the region
> Emphasize addressing age group preferences and needs 5 to 10 years out, promote inclusion and diversity
> Marketing efforts should focus on engagement via social media platforms, while still providing options for others that do not prefer or can not access broadband
> Link the proximity of the region to the idea that we are a region with everything
> Promote proximity to assets and attractions in Western North Carolina and the Piedmont (Asheville, Boone, Charlotte and Winston-Salem)

Metrics

> Number of participants
> Quantify distribution (electronic & print) and outreach numbers (presentations)
> Complete targeted information for the various audiences
> Develop and distribute survey to age groups to gauge needs/interest in quality of life
> Develop list of targeted markets and demographics, including zip codes for social media marketing efforts

Responsible Parties: Regional Marketing Task force, WPCOG, local governments, chambers of commerce, CVBs, TDAs, federal and state agencies, private and non-profit partnerships, educational facilities, and tourism development resources

Strategy 2 — Maintain & market the NC Foothills Experience

Actions

> Promote and market regional attractions, events and natural resources as a means to attract new businesses and residents and also educate existing population. Update the tool as needed.
> Continue to collaborate with stakeholders
> Seek funding for the expansion of the NC Foothills Experience Tool - partner with local business and industry for employee recruitment purposes
> Seek funding for the expansion of the tool within the school systems: K-12, EC, 2-year and 4-year colleges.
> Investigate potential for developing NC Foothills Tool into a mobile app

Metrics

> Seek continued grant funding
> Meet quarterly or semi-annually with small groups of stakeholders to maintain engagement and generate new ideas
> Partner with EDCs and Chambers to recruit new business to the region and educate the existing residents
> Educate students and parents about regional assets; investigate integration of NC Foothills Experience tool into K-12 curriculum
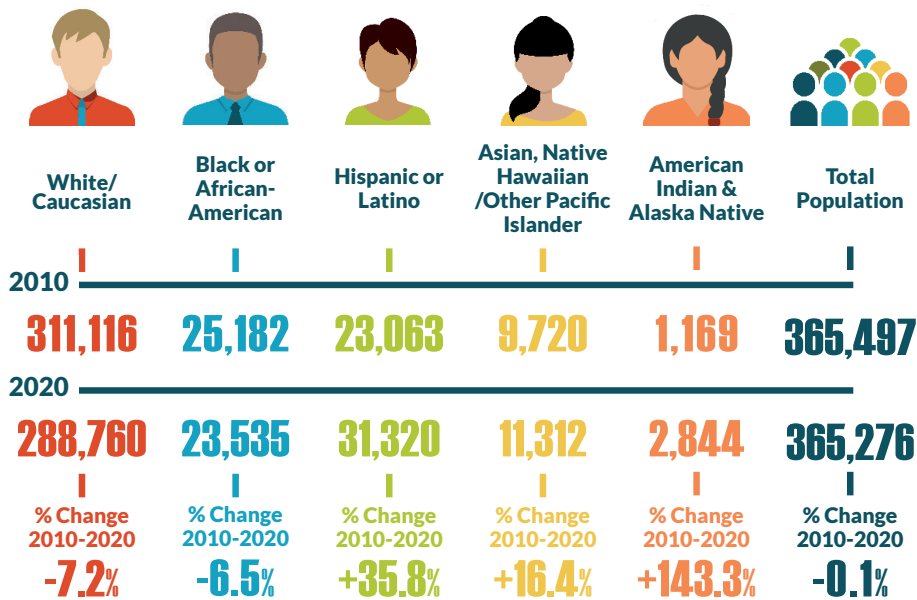
Responsible Parties: Regional Marketing Task force, WPCOG, local governments, state and federal grants, private and nonprofit partnerships, realtors, and tourism development resources

COMMUNITY LIFE

Economic development has a direct relationship to enhancing community life. A growing, healthy economy should offer opportunities for inclusive public participation in decision-making processes, pathways to economic success for all workforce members, downtown revitalizations made with an eye toward the needs of the region's growing senior population, and attracting younger residents. The strategies described in this section of the CEDS intend to build upon the region's efforts to improve community life. These strategies include cultivating the next generation of community leaders, creating robust downtowns throughout the region, promoting healthy living initiatives, and developing methods to encourage active senior citizen participation.

Western Piedmont Region Population Trends by Race (2010-2020)

	White/ Caucasian	Black or African-American	Hispanic or Latino	Asian, Native Hawaiian /Other Pacific Islander	American Indian & Alaska Native	Total Population
2010	311,116	25,182	23,063	9,720	1,169	365,497
2020	288,760	23,535	31,320	11,312	2,844	365,276
% Change 2010-2020	-7.2%	-6.5%	+35.8%	+16.4%	+143.3%	-0.1%

*Source: 2010 & 2020 US Census. **Note:** Race totals will not add up due to US Census respondents' reporting more than one race to indicate their racial mixture.*

Selection of Regional Quality of Life Initiatives (2017-2022)

PROJECTS	TOTAL INVESTMENT
Newton Streetscape Plan	$10,000,000 approximation
Hickory City Walk Project	$90,000,000 approximation
Morganton Downtown Greenway Connector	$910,000
Hickory Meisner Park	$1,200,000
Catawba County Mountain Creek Park	$8,700,000
Alexander County Courthouse Park	$609,560
Town of Catawba Bicycle & Pedestrian Planning Grant	$31,500
Hudson Main Street (321A) Enhanced Pedestrian Crossings	$544,000
Conover - 1st St. East/West & US 70 Bicycle & Ped. Improvements	$990,000
NC PARKS & RECREATION TRUST FUND GRANTS	
Burke - Fonta Flora State Trail- E. Lake James Corridor Acquisition	$600,000
Hildebran - New Town Park Development	$861,754
Morganton - Catawba River Soccer Complex Phase 3	$1,409,210
Rutherford College - Greenway Park Development	$450,500
Valdese - Lake Rhodhiss Park Acquisition	$1,350,822
Valdese - Lakeside Park Phase I	$570,000
Granite Falls Rec Center Activities Expansion	$536,000
Hudson - Optimist Park Redevelopment	$445,160
Conover City Park Expansion	$239,984
Total	**$119,448,490**

*Source: The local governments, NCDOT, and NC PARTF.*

CEDS Public Survey Responses

Where I live, there are opportunities for minority and low-income people to engage in community decisions. (966 responses)

- 19.36% (187)
- 12.73% (123)
- 10.56% (102)
- 7.76% (75)
- 26.50% (256)
- 23.08% (223)
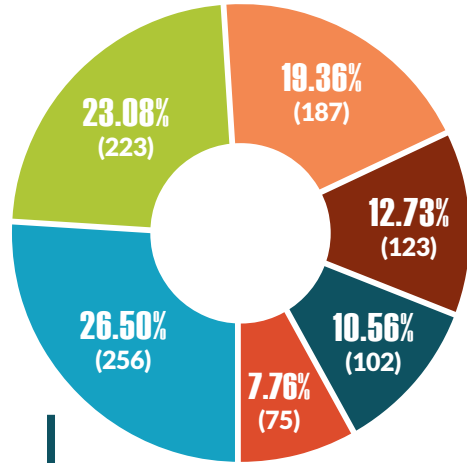
- ● Strongly agree
- ● Agree
- ● Neither agree or disagree
- ● Disagree
- ● Strongly disagree
- ● I don't know

There are gaps in healthcare in my community. (967 responses)

- 25.34% (245)
- 17.48% (169)
- 8.79% (85)
- 6.83% (66)
- 1.34% (13)
- 40.23% (389)
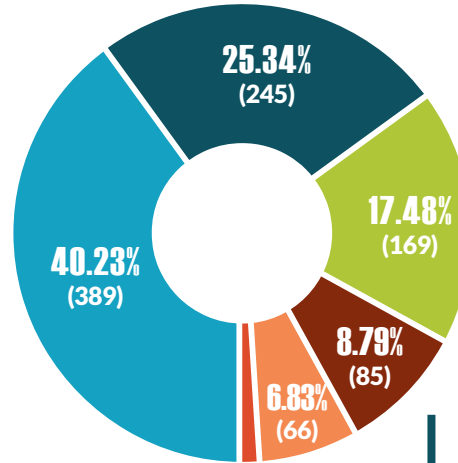
Regarding Covid-19 pandemic, please describe how your household has been affected economically. (961 responses)

- 575 — 59%
- 277 — 29%
- 86 — 9%
- 71 — 7%

Responses
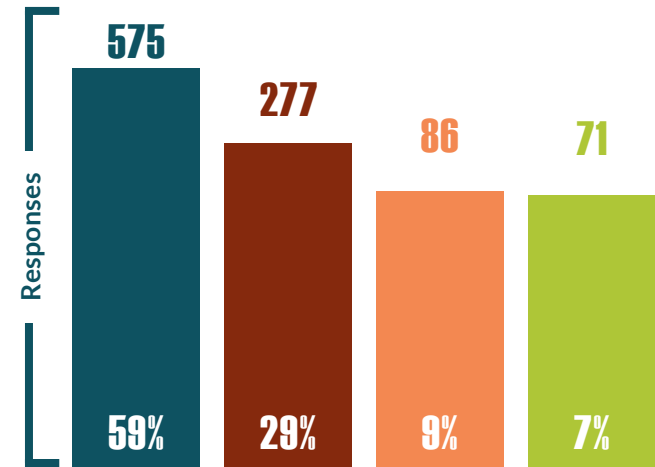
- ● No Change
- ● Worse
- ● Job loss in the home
- ● Improved

Valdese, NC - Annual Waldensian Festival.

Granite Falls, NC - Festival on the Square.

COMMUNITY LIFE STRATEGIES

Strategy 1	Work to achieve 1 to 2 % regional population growth annually to avoid population loss and maintain healthy community growth

Actions
> Develop housing and workforce initiatives to support growth
> Monitor population growth projections
> Determine how many people are needed to replace population losses and also grow by 1-2 percent annually

Metrics
> Completed initiatives
> Distribute population information to local governments

Responsible Parties WPCOG staff, local governments, Workforce Development Board, private developers

Strategy 2	Create robust downtowns throughout the region

Actions
> Determine available resources for downtown development programs/projects/plans (downtown housing, streetscapes, sidewalks, etc.)
> Support community groups in development of new cultural festivals and events

Metrics
> Number of projects and plans completed
> Number of cultural festivals and events added to the NC Foothills Experience tool

Responsible Parties Local governments, downtown development associations, EDCs, tourism agencies, WPCOG, private sector, community groups

Strategy 3	Develop methods to encourage active civic engagement

Actions
> Encourage public participation in recreational, volunteer and civic activities
> Assist member governments with obtaining funding for locally-approved initiatives

Metrics
> Completed marketing materials promoting engagement and active community participation
> Amount of grant funding awarded

Responsible Parties Area Agency on Aging, local governments, civic and non-profit groups

Strategy 4 — Promote regional healthy-living initiatives

Actions

> Determine available resources for recreation, sidewalk, streetscape and farmers market plans/projects
> Expand the Quality of Life explorer application to all four counties to identify regional social determinants of health and promote quality of life
> Assist member governments with locally-approved initiatives
> Support methods to address the region's opioid and illicit drug epidemic
> Work to establish a mentorship program to reduce the number of disconnected youth
> Work to establish program to reduce pre-trial incarcerations
> Assist regional efforts to address unhoused populations, including but not limited to housing and integration of the unhoused into the workforce

Metrics

> Number of projects and plans completed; resources identified
> Expansion of Quality of Life Explorer tool
> Amount of grant funding awarded
> Response to local health department needs for research including grant opportunities, GIS analysis and attending meetings
> Number of mentors; number of student consultations
> Amount of progress in establishing pre-trial program
> Number of people assisted
> Amount of grant funding secured

Responsible Parties

WPCOG, local governments, nonprofits, School systems, NC Department of Agriculture, county public health departments, local mental health agencies, local law enforcement state and federal Department of Human Services (DHS)

Strategy 5 — Support emergency management efforts to enhance community and regional resiliency

Actions

> Maintain geographic information systems (GIS) to aid in pre and post-incident impact assessments
> Provide support with comprehensive hazard mitigation planning efforts
> Encourage employee safe development practices to reduce impacts of extreme weather occurrences
> Conduct pre-disaster recovery planning to define key stakeholders, roles, responsibilities, and key actions
> Establish a process of pre and post-emergency communication
> Establish coordination mechanisms and leadership succession plans for short, intermediate, and long-term recovery needs
> Serve as a data and information resource for emergency managers
> Serve as a convener for emergency managers and elected officials

Metrics

> Update geographic databases
> Number of initiatives supported
> Established best practice guide/training
> Completed pre-disaster recover planning
> Established procedures

Responsible Parties

WPCOG, local, state, and federal governments, emergency management coordinators, and others as needed

Actions

> Encourage diversity and inclusion in community decision making processes
> Work with community group leaders to determine effective outreach methods
> Work with local governments to establish job shadowing programs
> Work with local governments to establish plans for staff transition, training, and retention
> Determine if local governing boards need succession planning assistance
> Work with school systems to identify upcoming talent to retain workforce
> Create opportunities for young professionals to offer development input through lunch and learn meetings, forums or other on-going conversations
> Establish a funding base for outreach and talent identification
> Convene a Regional Leadership Development Task Force

Metrics

> Number of people from historically underrepresented groups on local government and community boards
> Number of community groups contracted and outreach methods identified
> Number of governments participating in job shadow programs
> Number of governments participating in programs.
> Number of local boards contacted and assistance provided
> Number of school systems participating in talent identification efforts
> Number of meetings/forums held
> Number of grants secured/amount of funding received
> Number of semi-annual meetings

Responsible Parties

WPCOG, local governments, community groups, private sector, youth leadership programs, K-12, higher education , chambers, non profits, and consultants

Burke County, NC - South Mountain State Park.

Valdese, NC - McGalliard Falls.

Caldwell County, NC - Lovelady boat access.

Burke County, NC - Lake James.

Strategy 7 | Develop methods to encourage relocation to the region

Actions

> Increase the region's municipal presence on the www.retirenc.com website
> Promote the region as a destination for retirement; create marketing material to attract the retirement age population
> Continue to support the veteran population with jobs, living and healthcare
> Promote the region to encourage young families to relocate - as an affordable place to live with recreation, health care, and educational opportunities
> Promote the region as an opportunity for life long learning - (e.g. strong foundation of schools, community colleges, universities, and STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art/Agriculture, and Math)
> Promote the region as an ideal location to live

Metrics

> Number of local governments/entities listed on site
> Marketing materials created
> Number of veterans supported

Responsible Parties

WPCOG, Convention & Visitors Bureaus, EDCs, Local Governments, Veterans Administration, and educational initiatives

ADDITIONAL AMENDMENTS

WORKFORCE

Strategy 5	Assist communities that experience significant plant closures and job losses due to downturns in the economy and natural disasters

Actions	Metrics
> Deploy rapid response teams to sites experiencing layoffs > Support employee ownership initiatives as a method to employ displaced workers > Provide job training to displaced workers for re-employment within the region > Explore methods to improve access to capital	> Number of rapid response team deployments > Number of workers assisted > Number of identified sources of capital

Strategy 6	Explore locating workforce services into one centralized site

Actions	Metrics
> Complete an analysis of possible accessible site location > Obtain funding and explore grant opportunities not limited to construction and outfitting	> Identified site location > Amount of grant funding and purpose