

GOVERNOR'S RECOVERY OFFICE FOR WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA

Western North Carolina Economic Recovery Plan

State of North Carolina

SEPTEMBER 2026





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Governor's Recovery Office for Western North Carolina (GROW NC)
State of North Carolina

Version 1.0 • September 2026

This plan will be reviewed and updated periodically.

Foreword

Two years ago, Hurricane Helene struck western North Carolina. It took more than 100 lives; thousands more people lost their homes, businesses, and livelihoods.

In the days and weeks that followed, people stepped up to help their neighbors in need, in ways large and small. People pulled each other out of the water and the mud. Churches and fire stations turned into supply depots. Local leaders, small businesses, nonprofits, volunteers, and partners at every level of government showed up and kept showing up for others.

The people of western North Carolina certainly have not relented in their commitment to recovery, and we – their state and federal governments – must match that commitment. That’s why my team and I are working with urgency and focus. In July, I signed a third bipartisan Helene relief package into law – the largest one yet – sending another \$700 million toward recovery. All in, the state has appropriated more than \$3 billion to the recovery effort, substantially more than it has for any other storm. We have awarded \$1 billion to strengthen water infrastructure because people need clean, safe, and reliable water. We got those federal dollars obligated and out the door faster than any other state impacted by Helene. Today, 99% of all drinking water systems damaged by the storm have been fully restored. We have also reopened more than 99% of roads closed or impacted by Hurricane Helene and helped to restore and expand broadband across the region to tens of thousands of homes.

We know that getting families back into safe housing that they can afford is essential to the region’s long-term success. North Carolina stood up Renew NC, our state housing program supported with federal HUD dollars, faster than any state impacted by Helene – in fact, faster than any state impacted by a major storm in more than a decade. So far, we have repaired or rebuilt more than 1,250 homes through Renew NC and with our volunteer partners. And we recently announced funding for 828 new affordable housing units—the biggest single expansion of affordable housing the affected region has ever seen.

We have also supported thousands of small businesses across the region with more than \$100 million in grants and loans and helped retain nearly 15,000 jobs. And to restore downtowns, we have awarded more than \$30 million in grants through the Small Business Infrastructure Program. These funds have gone to repairing water and sewer lines, setting up stormwater controls, relocating utilities, and repairing downtown streets and sidewalks.

Two years later, while the headlines have faded, more work remains. Helene deepened economic challenges these communities had been carrying for years: the loss of traditional industries, uneven job growth, housing costs that push working families out, aging water systems and roads, and long drives to reach a doctor or a classroom. According to the North Carolina Department of Commerce, the region's labor force has shrunk by more than 16,000 people since 2023, mainly in Buncombe County, even as the rest of North Carolina's population has grown. Solving problems of this complexity needs a shared framework that helps communities and their partners from all levels of government, business, and philanthropy to pull in the same direction.

The WNC Economic Recovery Plan is that framework – a vision for a healthy and vibrant economy across western North Carolina. It starts with the priorities communities have already set for themselves and connects them across the areas that will shape the region's future: infrastructure, housing, education, health care, agriculture, tourism, natural resources, and economic development. By enhancing existing assets and matching resources to local priorities, we can make the biggest difference.

No single level of government and no single sector can meet a challenge this size alone. State and federal dollars, local knowledge, private investment, and philanthropy have to reinforce one another to turn good ideas into lasting results. While the state and federal government must provide financial and technical support, the direction for the region's long-term future must come from its communities themselves.

This plan is built to change as conditions change. We will measure progress, learn from what works and what does not, sharpen our approach, and keep listening to the people doing the work. Its worth will be measured by results: families in safe homes, businesses open and growing, water and roads people can count on, good jobs close to home, and communities ready for the next storm.

I am deeply grateful to the Governor's Advisory Committee on Western North Carolina Recovery and its Long-Term Economic Recovery Subcommittee, the Governor's Recovery Office for Western North Carolina, local and tribal leaders, and the many community, nonprofit, business, education, health care, and philanthropic partners who gave their time and expertise to this work.

Western North Carolinians have shown the rest of us what resolve looks like. Our job is to match that grit, do our part, and keep building a stronger western North Carolina, together.

Josh Stein

Governor of North Carolina

Built Together

WNC Economic Recovery Plan was shaped by the knowledge and experience of leaders, practitioners, and community partners across western North Carolina. The Governor's Recovery Office for Western North Carolina (GROW NC) is grateful to everyone who contributed ideas, analysis, source material, subject-matter expertise, review, and production support. Their work made this plan a shared effort rather than a document handed down.

STATE AND ADVISORY LEADERSHIP

Governor Josh Stein

Matt Calabria – Director, Governor's Recovery Office for Western North Carolina

Emily Gangi – Chief Deputy Director, Governor's Recovery Office for Western North Carolina

Members of the Governor's Advisory Committee on Western North Carolina Recovery – Co-chaired by Senator Kevin Corbin and Asheville Mayor Esther Manheimer

LONG-TERM ECONOMIC RECOVERY SUBCOMMITTEE

The subcommittee's 12 members shaped the eight Core Principles that anchor this plan (Appendix D).

David Jackson, Co-Chair – President and CEO, Boone Area Chamber of Commerce

Dr. Laura Leatherwood, Co-Chair – President, Blue Ridge Community College

Dr. Jim Beeler – Executive Director of College Access Partnerships, Appalachian State University

Mayor Preston Blakely – Mayor, Town of Fletcher

Jack Cecil – President, Biltmore Farms, LLC

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Molly Hemstreet – Executive Director, The Industrial Commons

Chuck Kaylor – Chief of Staff, John M. Belk Foundation

Kevin Leonard – Executive Director, North Carolina Association of County Commissioners

Dee Dee Perkins – Business Owner and Community Leader, Transylvania County

Hillary Sherman – North Carolina and South Carolina Economic Development Representative, U.S. Economic Development Administration

Subcommittee staff: Sharon Decker, Senior Advisor, GROW NC; Eliza Edwards, Community Partnerships Director, GROW NC

PLAN LEADERSHIP

Sharon Decker – Senior Advisor for Long-Term Recovery, GROW NC; led the development of this plan

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Eliza Edwards – Director of Community Partnerships, GROW NC; community, philanthropic, and Long-Term Recovery Group partnerships

SOURCE MATERIALS AND CONTRIBUTING ORGANIZATIONS

This plan draws on analysis and source material generously provided by partner organizations, including:

WNC Life Sciences Cluster coalition: RTI International, North Carolina Biotechnology Center, Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute, First Flight Venture Center, NC IDEA, Burke Development Inc., the City of Morganton, and the Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina (Appendix A)

Western North Carolina Futures Factory coalition: advanced-manufacturing innovation center source materials (Appendix B)

Dogwood Health Trust and The Duke Endowment: small-business recovery program data (Appendix C) and supplemental funding for the work of the Tapestry Collaborative in preparation of this plan

North Carolina Department of Commerce: First in Opportunity strategic plan

MADE X MTNS: outdoor-recreation economy analysis

Regional Councils of Government: Land of Sky Regional Council, Southwestern Commission, High Country Council of Governments, Foothills Regional Commission, and Western Piedmont Council of Governments; their Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies anchor this plan's common operating picture

WITH GRATITUDE

This plan also reflects the priorities and experience of western North Carolina's residents; the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians; municipal and county leaders; Long-Term Recovery Groups; chambers of commerce and economic development organizations; educational and health care institutions; businesses; and nonprofit and philanthropic organizations, along with the many people working every day to help the region recover and renew.

Recognition reflects contribution to the planning process and does not necessarily indicate that every individual or organization endorses every recommendation in the plan. Affiliations are listed as of the publication date.

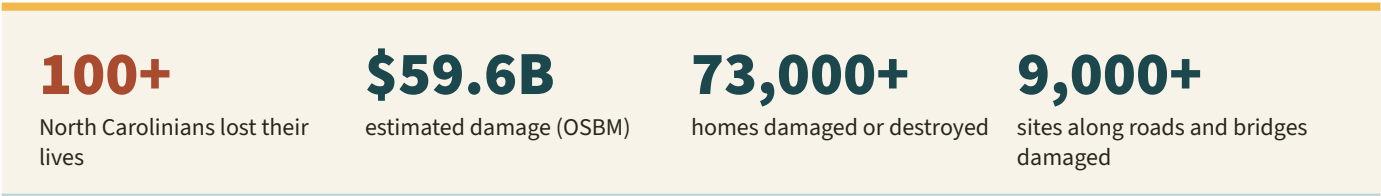
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OPENING SECTION

Purpose

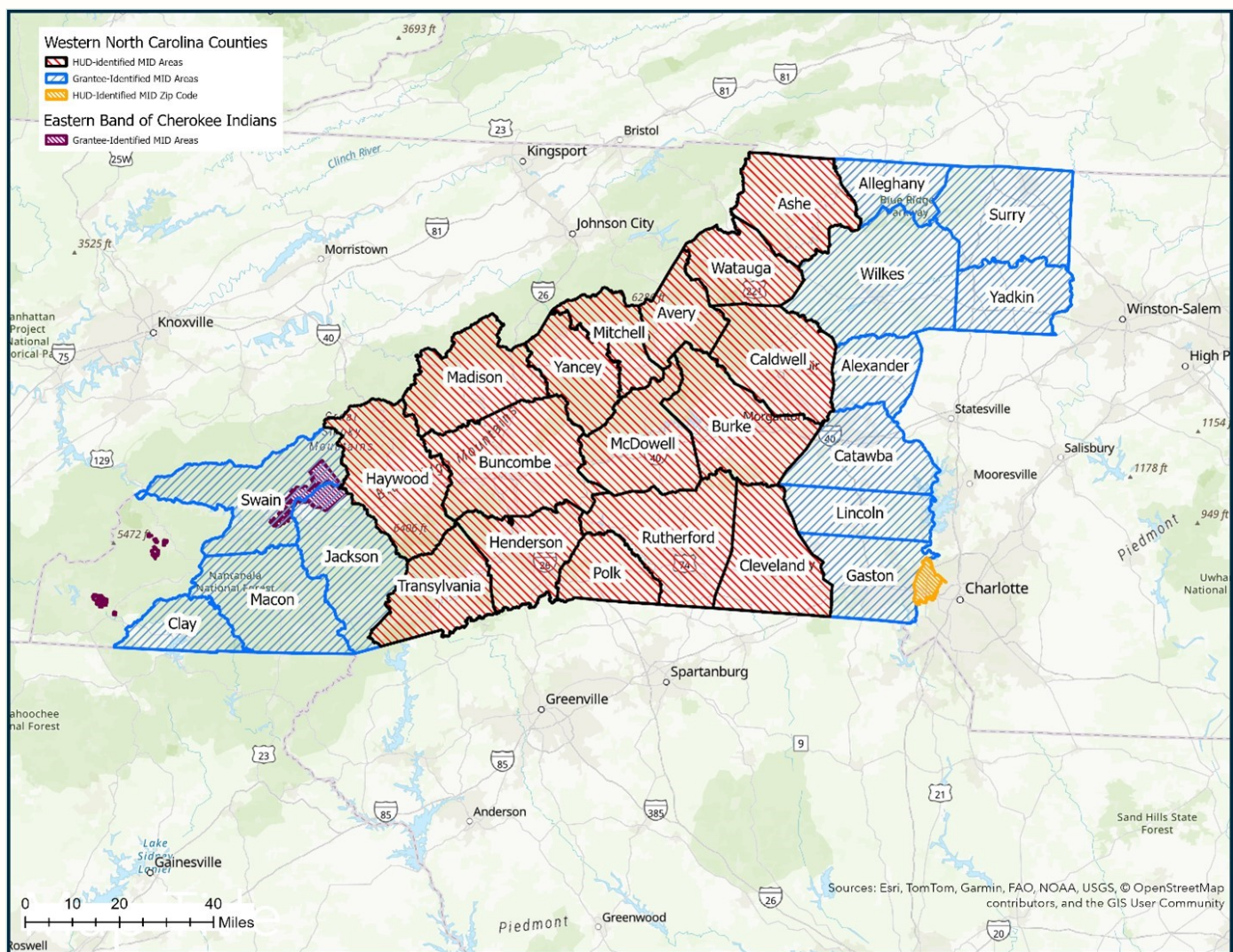
Hurricane Helene struck North Carolina in September 2024 and forever changed western North Carolina. Tragically, more than 100 North Carolinians lost their lives. The NC Office of State Budget and Management (OSBM) estimates more than \$59.6 billion in damage. The NC Department of Commerce estimates that the active workforce lost more than 16,000 workers in the 16 hardest-hit counties from April 2023 to April 2026. More than 73,000 homes were damaged or destroyed, and more than 9,000 sites along roads and bridges were damaged, some destroyed entirely. As the region emerges from the devastation, the State has an opportunity to ensure western North Carolina is not just rebuilt, but revitalized for long-term economic prosperity.



Figures as stated in this plan’s Purpose section.

In the weeks after the storm, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) declared 39 North Carolina counties and the Qualla Boundary disaster areas. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the State of North Carolina designated parts or all of 29 counties and the Qualla Boundary as “most impacted and distressed areas.” This plan focuses on 28 of these counties (excluding Mecklenburg County, where one ZIP code was designated). Throughout this report, they are referred to as “Helene Counties”: Alexander, Alleghany, Ashe, Avery, Buncombe, Burke, Caldwell, Catawba, Clay, Cleveland, Gaston, Haywood, Henderson, Jackson, Lincoln, Macon, Madison, McDowell, Mitchell, Polk, Rutherford, Surry, Swain, Transylvania, Watauga, Wilkes, Yadkin, and Yancey. These Helene Counties will be the focus of the Western North Carolina (WNC) Economic Recovery Plan.





The past two years have seen unprecedented efforts by individuals and public, private, and nonprofit entities to bring relief, restoration, and healing to communities across the region. Nearly \$10 billion has been committed by the federal government, more than \$3 billion has been committed by the State of North Carolina, and more than \$1.4 billion has been committed by philanthropic organizations. These funds have been and are being used to restore crucial infrastructure, employ people, stabilize local governments, remove debris, repair or replace roads and bridges, clear waterways, repair and rebuild homes, revitalize town centers, educate children, provide health care, and help businesses of all sizes regain their footing. It is important to note that these are the dollars that can be documented; there are untold dollars and volunteer hours that positively changed how all of us understand the power of community and place when people are in need.

The work is not done. More financial support is needed, as the needs far exceed the financial commitment to this point. More volunteer and community effort will be needed to ensure communities can be restored and every person has a safe place to live and work. Progress has been made and will continue to be made. The foundational question asked by Governor Stein — as so many people, agencies, and organizations tend to provide relief and recovery in the short term — is: “How do we ensure that western North Carolina’s economy not only recovers from these horrific impacts but can be catalyzed to grow again?”

That question sits inside a larger one the Governor has put to the whole state. North Carolina's First in Opportunity plan sets the goal of an economy where opportunity reaches every county and every family, not only the fastest-growing ones. This document is the western North Carolina chapter of that agenda: how the Helene Counties get there from where the storm left them.

The following plan provides a framework for the community and economic revitalization of western North Carolina. The Governor's Recovery Office for Western North Carolina (GROW NC) contracted with the Tapestry Collaborative to develop this plan and GROW NC will be responsible for identifying the specific actions and measures needed to implement it. Actions, targets, and timelines will be refined as implementation begins. Not every element of this plan will be realized quickly or easily, but that is no reason to delay the work.

Parts of the region have experienced a slow economic decline since the 1990s when textile and furniture manufacturing began to move offshore, followed by the Great Recession of 2007–2009 and the COVID-19 pandemic. More recent closures, including Gerber Foods in Henderson County and the Pactiv Evergreen mill in Haywood County, affecting suppliers as well. Even before Helene, the region increased payroll employment by only 5.4 percent over the previous three decades, while the state as a whole grew by more than 40 percent.

	Change in Employment 1995-2009	Change in Employment 1995-2023
Helene Counties	-9.0%	+5.4%
State Overall	+9.4%	+40.6%

This difference in performance is substantially due to the decrease in manufacturing jobs and the historic reliance of the Helene Counties on manufacturing. From 1995 through 2023, the state lost almost 380,000 manufacturing jobs. The Helene Counties, which accounted for 14.4 percent of the state's total employment in 2023, lost almost 130,000 jobs in manufacturing (34 percent of the state total in manufacturing jobs).

	Manufacturing Jobs as % of Total 1995	Manufacturing Jobs as % of Total 2009	Manufacturing Jobs as % of Total 2023
Helene Counties	36.3%	16.2%	15.6%
State Overall	24.2%	11.4%	9.5%

Helene exacerbated the challenges that the 28 counties faced. Consider the changes in total employment over the past three years:

Total Employment

	2023	2024	2025	2023-25 Change	% Change 2023-25
Helene Counties	708,045	694,859	708,751	706	0.01%
State Overall	4,906,651	4,944,425	4,994,483	87,832	1.79%

If the Helene Counties had grown at the same rate as the rest of the state, they would have added **15,987 jobs** over this period.

A word about what this plan is and is not. It is not a list of promises, nor is it a budget. It is a vision and strategy: a description of what western North Carolina can become, the levers and catalysts that can get it there, and the way the many partners in this recovery can pull in the same direction. Some of the projects described here are funded and underway. Others are proposals that will succeed only if federal, state, philanthropic, and private partners choose to invest in them. The targets in Section 8 are directional; they give the region a shared definition of progress without binding any agency to an outcome it does not control. Where this plan points to a possibility rather than a commitment, it says so.

15,987

jobs the Helene Counties would have added, had they grown at the same rate as the rest of the state



FOUNDATIONS

Core Philosophy: A Place-Based, Asset-Based, Community-Based Approach

The Core Philosophy provides context on how this plan built. Two beliefs shaped every choice that follows: start with what the region already has and let the people closest to the need set the priorities.

The core philosophy of this plan is focused on using and leveraging the existing assets of communities as the foundation of revitalization. Assets include, but are not limited to, agriculture and natural resources, buildings, infrastructure, health care, cultural and other programs, potential economic development sites, and educational and workforce development resources.

The plan also has a community-based approach. western North Carolina does not lack plans or ideas; there are many at the municipal, county, chamber of commerce, business, council of government, regional, and community levels. This plan supports, and does not supersede, the plans communities have developed for

themselves. Better coordination among these planning and implementation efforts would benefit everyone. Special care must be taken to ensure that the benefits of this plan extend to every part of the affected area, not just to those with the most capacity.

This recovery has deep recovery capital and planning capacity: federal Community Development Block Grant-Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) dollars, U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) disaster supplemental funding, Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) support, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) support, NC Department of Commerce programs, Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina (EDPNC) efforts, regional Councils of Governments (COGs), local and regional economic development offices, chambers of commerce, and a remarkable philanthropic sector. Each brings ideas and plans. The challenge is to ensure the recovery is not only robust but unified across all levels. The task is to design a shared framework that recognizes the priorities each of these partners has set, describes the assets the region can build upon, and shows how those priorities and assets connect for the common good of all residents.



1

Relevant Planning Traditions

- Two proven models shape this plan: military campaign planning and the Marshall Plan.
- 1.1 Military Planning Doctrine
- 1.2 The Marshall Plan: Recipients Plan, Outside Capital Supports That Plan



SECTION 1

This plan borrows from two proven approaches for getting many independent actors to work toward one goal without a single boss: campaign planning and the Marshall Plan. Together they gave the plan its structure and its central discipline: Recipients plan, and outside capital supports that plan.

1.1 Military Planning Doctrine

Military planning doctrine offers a clear framework for connecting a desired future to the actions and resources that produce it. Joint doctrine frames any campaign as a relationship among ends (the objectives and desired end state), ways (how the ends will be achieved), and means (the resources available), with risk defined as the gap between the means available and those required.¹



Military planning doctrine offers a clear framework for connecting a desired future to the actions and resources that produce it.

The strategy is organized into lines of effort. These are parallel workstreams, each aimed at part of the objective. Along each line are decisive points — milestones that when achieved unlock disproportionate leverage toward the objective.²

FEMA formally adopted the same vocabulary. Its operational planning doctrine defines an end state as the set of conditions that must exist to conclude an operation, and disaster-recovery practice routinely organizes work into functional lines of effort.³ After Hurricane Sandy, the National Disaster Recovery Framework's Recovery Support Functions operated this way — as parallel, federally coordinated workstreams (housing, infrastructure, economic, health, community planning, and natural and cultural resources) aligned to a common recovery end state.⁴ Applying operational design to WNC's recovery makes that structure explicit and locally owned, managed, and executed.

DECISIVE POINTS

Along each line are decisive points — milestones that when achieved unlock disproportionate leverage toward the objective.

1.2 The Marshall Plan: Recipients Plan, Outside Capital Supports That Plan

The Marshall Plan, which rebuilt Europe after World War II, offers valuable structural lessons for our planning. The European Recovery Program channeled about \$13.3 billion (roughly \$143 billion in today's dollars) to 16 countries from 1948 to 1951.⁵ The U.S. required recipient nations to come together through the Organization for European Economic Cooperation and jointly plan how aid would be used — a collective, recipient-driven process rather than a top-down allocation.⁶

1. Joint Publication 5-0, Joint Planning (2020) ends/ways/means/risk, lines of effort, decisive points. [esd.whs.mil — JP 5-0 \(2020\)](https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/59/Documents/J5/J5-0/J5-0_2020.pdf)

2. Joint Publication 5-0, Joint Planning (2020) ends/ways/means/risk, lines of effort, decisive points. [esd.whs.mil — JP 5-0 \(2020\)](https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/59/Documents/J5/J5-0/J5-0_2020.pdf)

3. FEMA Operational Planning Manual (IS-2002) end state and operational design vocabulary. [emilms.fema.gov — Operational Planning Manual](https://www.fema.gov/emilms/fema.gov—OperationalPlanningManual)

4. USDA Forest Service / NDRF Recovery Support Functions after Hurricane Sandy. [fs.usda.gov — NDRF after Sandy](https://www.fs.usda.gov/ndrf-after-sandy)

5. U.S. State Dept., Office of the Historian — The Marshall Plan; CRS Report R45079. [history.state.gov — Marshall Plan](https://www.history.state.gov/marshall-plan) · [everycrsreport.com/R45079](https://www.everycrsreport.com/R45079)

6. U.S. State Dept., Office of the Historian — The Marshall Plan; CRS Report R45079. [history.state.gov — Marshall Plan](https://www.history.state.gov/marshall-plan) · [everycrsreport.com/R45079](https://www.everycrsreport.com/R45079)

The World Bank’s description of the plan distills the ingredients of success: extensive recipient input, decentralized administration, public-private partnership, encouragement of competition, regional coordination, a defined end to aid, and strong institutional capacity in recipients.⁷ Every one of those ingredients relates to western North Carolina today. The region already has the institutions — councils of government, community colleges, chambers of commerce, philanthropies, local governments, health care institutions, nonprofit organizations, public and private universities, and public and private schools — and the planning capacity. The long-term recovery needs the Marshall Plan’s discipline: Communities plan together; federal, state, philanthropic, and private capital align to that plan; and the effort has a defined path toward self-sustaining resilience.

\$13.3B

channeled to 16 countries by the Marshall Plan’s European Recovery Program — roughly \$143 billion in today’s dollars



7. World Bank — Lessons from the Marshall Plan (Eichengreen, 2010). [openknowledge.worldbank.org — Lessons from the Marshall Plan](https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/lessons-from-the-marshall-plan)

2

The Plan

- Build on the region's resources, and let communities lead.
- 2.1 Vision
- 2.2 Core Principles of the Plan
- 2.3 Visual Depiction of the Plan: The WNC Economic Recovery Engine
- 2.4 How to Use the Engine



SECTION 2

Section 1 explained the plan’s structural origins. This section explains the plan itself: the vision, the eight core principles the region’s own leaders helped shape, and the recovery engine, a single picture of how community priorities become lines of effort, resources, catalysts, and measurable outcomes.

2.1 Vision

THE VISION

To create a healthy, vibrant western North Carolina that fosters an improved quality of life through environmental stewardship, community-driven initiatives, ample educational resources, and a diverse jobs base that builds on the region’s traditional leadership in advanced manufacturing, agriculture, health care, arts, tourism and culture, and education.

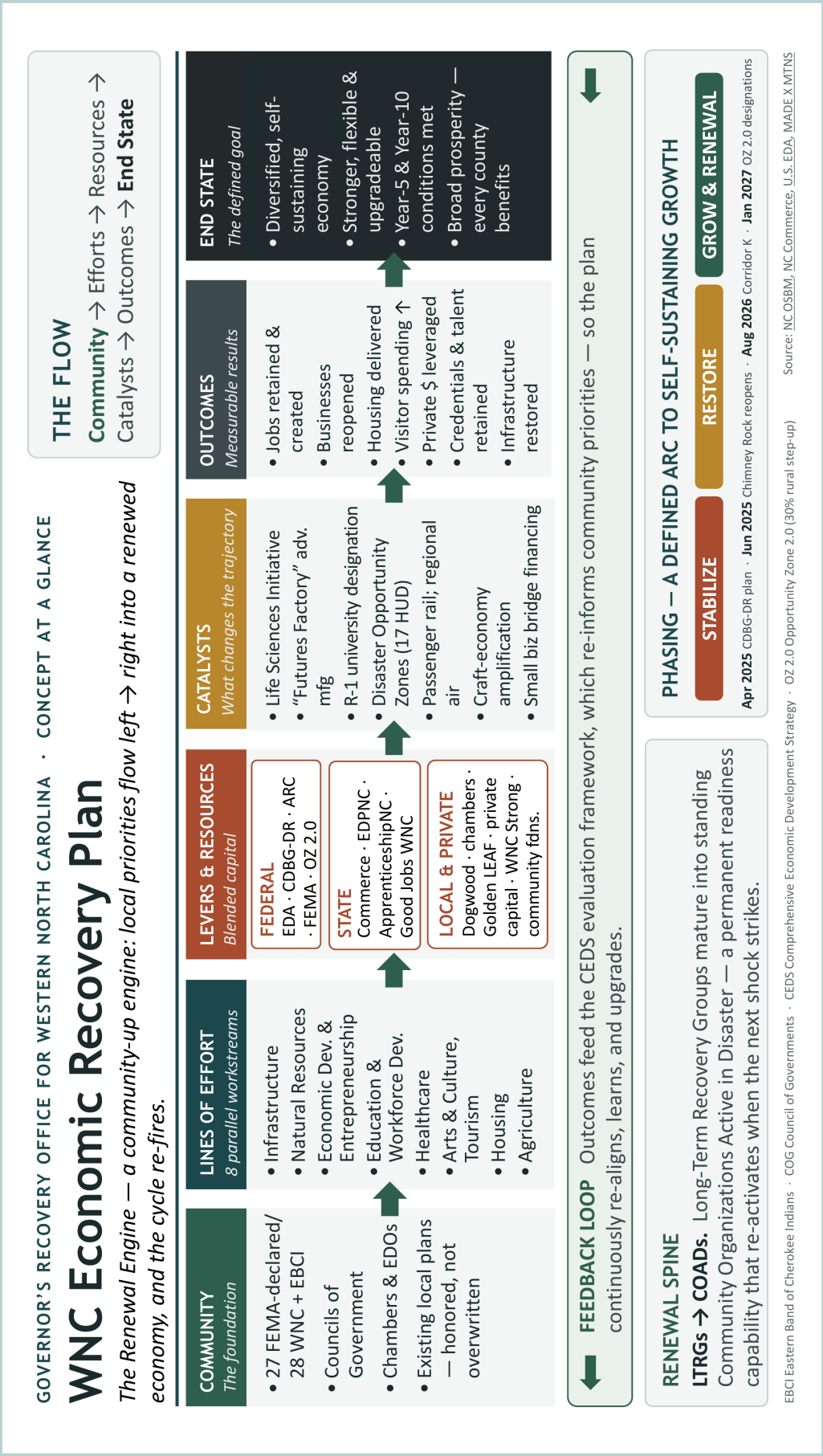
The vision is deliberately aligned with the Governor’s priorities for North Carolina as a whole. western North Carolina’s recovery is where those priorities meet their hardest test and where the State can show what they look like in practice.

2.2 Core Principles of the Plan

- Build and enhance efficient, resilient **infrastructure** to move ideas, goods and services, resources, and people.
- Protect **natural resources**, preserve WNC’s scenic beauty through environmental stewardship, and ensure a healthy environment.
- Foster a diverse range of **employment opportunities and business creation**, expansion, and relocation, with special focus on advanced manufacturing, notably life sciences and aerospace.
- Repair, replace, and restore **housing** stock by developing creative solutions to ensure adequate affordable housing.
- Support robust **early child care, education, and workforce development** institutions and initiatives.
- Provide access to affordable, quality **health care** throughout the region.
- Elevate local **arts, heritage, and cultural institutions** to further their success in WNC and boost the region’s creative and tourism economy.
- Ensure **farmers and growers** maintain their livelihoods and fortify **agriculture** production, processing, tourism, and manufacturing as vital parts of the WNC economy.

2.3 Visual Depiction of the Plan: The WNC Economic Recovery Engine

The plan is best understood as an economic engine. The diagram below shows how the framework operates as a single, self-reinforcing system: Community priorities enter on the left and flow through lines of effort, resources, and catalysts into measurable outcomes and a defined end state, with a feedback loop that continuously realigns the plan.



SECTION 2

Figure 1. The WNC Economic Recovery Engine. A community-up model in which local priorities (Community) are organized into nine parallel Lines of Effort, powered by blended federal, state, and private Levers & Resources, that ignite trajectory-changing Catalysts, producing measurable Outcomes that accumulate into a defined End State. A Resilience Spine and Feedback Loop keep the system continuously realigning toward self-sustaining growth.

2.4 How to Use the Engine

The concept reads left to right in six layers. Community priorities enter on the left; they are organized into lines of effort; levers and resources empower those lines; the levers ignite catalysts; catalysts produce measurable outcomes; and the outcomes accumulate into a defined end state. The resilience concept suffuses the whole engine, and a feedback loop returns outcomes to the community, so the plan continuously realigns, readapts, and expands.

Layer 0 — Community (the Foundation)

The engine is explicitly community-up. The base layer includes the 28 most affected and distressed (MID) counties and the Qualla Boundary, the five regional Councils of Government that serve the hardest-hit counties (Foothills Regional Commission, High Country Council of Governments, Land of Sky Regional Council, Southwestern Commission, and Western Piedmont Council of Governments), local chambers, economic development organizations, municipal and county governments, and residents. Their existing plans are not overwritten; rather, they serve as inputs. The same is true with North Carolina’s “First in Opportunity” Strategic Economic Development Plan, which also provides input into this plan. The Marshall Plan’s recipient-driven principle made concrete: The people closest to the need define the priorities. Similarly, a long-term economic recovery subcommittee of the Governor’s Advisory Committee on Western North Carolina Recovery co-chaired by David Jackson and Dr. Laura Leatherwood provided input on each of the core principles.

While the engine begins in community, coordination and harmonization are needed over the duration of the plan. The Governor’s Recovery Office for Western North Carolina, known as GROW NC, is well positioned to coordinate and oversee recovery efforts as the convener that harmonizes the community plans and other inputs into one shared operating picture — the engine described here. This way, each community retains ownership of its own priorities.

Layer 1 — Lines of Effort

There are nine lines of effort, drawn directly from our original concept and existing federal and state program structure:

- **Infrastructure** – develop economic development sites, water and sewer, broadband, telephone, transportation, dams, and gas and electric grid, all sized for growth, built to last, and designed on a regional basis;
- **Natural Resources** – protect the region’s natural assets and scenic beauty through environmental stewardship, and put its forests and minerals to productive, sustainable use;
- **Economic Development & Entrepreneurship** – promote diverse employment opportunities, vibrant small businesses, business growth focused on export industries such as life sciences, aerospace, and advanced manufacturing;

- **Housing** – rebuild and expand access to affordable, accessible, and safe housing of all types;
- **Education & Workforce Development** – support robust early child care and educational institutions, and engage employers to serve current and future labor force needs;
- **Health Care** – strengthen health care services that are high-quality, affordable, and accessible throughout the region;
- **Arts & Culture** – coordinate and champion a resilient creative economy to strengthen cultural infrastructure;
- **Tourism** – attract new and returning visitors to WNC; and
- **Agriculture** – ensure farmers and growers can thrive through strong agricultural production, processing, agritourism, and manufacturing.

Three components undergird these lines of effort: resilience, telecommunications infrastructure, and leveraged capital.

Resilience strategies better prepare the region to absorb the next disaster with less disruption and damage than before. Recovery efforts provide a unique opportunity for the region to reduce its risks with future natural disasters, not just restore what was lost — by closing funding gaps and improving government services like permitting. Rebuilding with resiliency is an investment that protects people and communities while reducing future disaster recovery costs for individuals and government. The federal Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) guidelines treat climate and economic resilience as core planning content.⁸

Second, telecommunications infrastructure is the foundation of a digital and innovation economy: telework hubs, small-business e-commerce, and university research partnerships that encourage WNC to grow and retain younger talent and capture knowledge-sector jobs. Digital opportunity includes access to affordable high-speed internet, high-quality large-screen computers, and the digital skills training necessary to safely navigate the internet. It ensures people have the skills and technology needed to compete for jobs. Plans led by the NC Department of Information Technology (DIT) are making progress towards full coverage of broadband internet connection across all WNC counties by 2030.

Finally, leveraged capital supports each line of effort. Our ability to coordinate, combine, and stack public and private dollars, particularly around regional priorities, will unlock progress and deepen impact across these lines of effort.

Layer 2 — Levers and Resources

As mentioned earlier, federal, state, local, and philanthropic resources have been dedicated to Helene relief and recovery. Some of these resources can be used as levers for the lines of effort above. More support will be required. Examples of financial and planning resources include but are not limited to:

- **Federal:** EDA and its CEDS process; the \$1.653 billion CDBG-DR allocation to North Carolina (with \$1.428 billion to the NC Department of Commerce and \$225 million provided directly to the City of Asheville);⁹ the Appalachian Regional Commission; FEMA Public Assistance; and the federal Opportunity Zone (OZ) program, with a new round of designations effective January 1, 2027, and an enhanced 30 percent basis step-up for Qualified Rural Opportunity Funds investing in rural tracts.¹⁰

8. U.S. EDA — 2023 CEDS Content Guidelines: recommended Equity, Climate/Economic Resilience, and Workforce Development sections. [eda.gov — CEDS Content Guidelines](https://eda.gov/ceds-content-guidelines) · nado.org — [The ABCs of the CEDS](https://nado.org)

9. HUD / NC Commerce — CDBG-DR allocation and Action Plan (approved Apr. 25, 2025). commerce.nc.gov

- **State:** the Department of Commerce, Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina (EDPNC), ApprenticeshipNC, Good Jobs WNC, the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), the Department of Natural and Cultural Resources (DNCR), the Office of the State Treasurer, the Division of Emergency Management, and the Department of Transportation (DOT).

- **Local, private, and philanthropic:** Dogwood Health Trust, which committed more than \$80 million in Helene relief and more than \$365 million in total 2024–2025 investment;¹¹ state and regional funders; community foundations; chambers of commerce; and private capital.

No level of government can cover all the needs, nor can philanthropic/private capital funds work at the scale of government. This model treats these as counterpart capital (in the Marshall Plan sense), with public, private, and philanthropic dollars leveraged around shared priorities.

\$1.653B

CDBG-DR allocation to North Carolina

\$365M+

committed by Dogwood Health Trust in total 2024–2025 investment, including more than \$80 million in Helene relief

Layer 3 — Catalysts

Levers help the catalysts. These are moments that transform the region’s trajectory for the better rather than patch it, which is essential for strong economic recovery. Some examples include:

Infrastructure

- Investment in resilient infrastructure across the region expands the capacity for growth and better connects the region to outside markets and geographies in efficient ways;
- Endorsement of passenger rail connection from a central WNC location (Asheville) to the primary north-south rail corridor in Salisbury;
- Completion of the Interstate 40 and Interstate 26 highway improvements;
- Activation of a regional air-access plan;
- Recruitment of more direct national flights from and to the Asheville Regional Airport;
- Development of a response plan for future disasters, including established quick-release cashflow mechanisms to ensure counties and municipalities can restore normalcy as quickly as possible;

Natural Resources

- Protection and expansion of the Spruce Pine high-purity quartz supply chain, including hardening it against future disasters and recruiting downstream processing and manufacturing to the region;
- New markets for Appalachian hardwoods and Helene-downed timber, including mass timber, bio-based materials, and biochar production;

Economic Development & Entrepreneurship

- Coordination of actors working on building a value-added manufacturing sector rooted in innovation and purposeful strategy;

¹⁰. Opportunity Zones 2.0 (OBBBA, signed Jul. 4, 2025): new designations effective Jan. 1, 2027; 30% basis step-up for Qualified Rural Opportunity Funds; reduced 50% substantial-improvement threshold for rural property. tax.thomsonreuters.com — [OBBBA OZ changes](https://obbba.oz.changes) · pillsburylaw.com — [OZ reform](https://ozreform.com)

¹¹. Dogwood Health Trust — Helene relief and 2024–2025 investment. dogwoodhealthtrust.org

- Small business bridge financing that closes the unmet capital gap, with special focus on emerging industries and anchoring corridors;¹²
- Succession planning to ensure that businesses remain profitable, plentiful, and rooted in the region and that local governments maintain capacity to respond to disasters and lead recovery efforts;
- Implementation of specific assistance for predevelopment wraparound assistance such as that provided by Opportunity Appalachia;¹³
- Pursuit of congressional declaration of “Disaster Opportunity Zones” in the HUD-designated most-impacted counties of WNC and creation of regionwide project development financing (TIF) opportunities;
- Creation of an Economic Development Administration cofunded WNC Life Sciences Initiative rooted in innovation infrastructure, industry engagement, and life sciences career preparation;¹⁴
- Creation of an Economic Development Administration co-funded “Futures Factory” for the express purpose of catalyzing an advanced-manufacturing hub in WNC;¹⁵

Housing

- Rehabilitation and renovation of as many of the 56,000 remaining Helene-damaged homes and rental units as possible and reduce the nearly 60 percent of rental households that lack the resources to afford housing without being financially overburdened;

Agriculture

- Restoration of farms affected by the disaster across the region, with support for production and conservation of farmland, marketing and branding support, agritourism support, and more value-added processing in the region;

Arts & Culture

- Amplification of the creative economy — engaging craft, cultural, art, and natural resources, supporting creative businesses and industries and their markets and supply chains;

Tourism

- Development of new tourism hubs through investments in the revitalization of historic downtowns;

Health Care

- Development and implementation of region-wide strategies to meet workforce retention and development needs for a growing and evolving health care sector;
- Improved health care access and quality without geographic limits, including more access to specialty care and coordination across systems;

12. See “Status of Small Business Recovery in WNC” (GROW NC, Sharon Decker). Available in the project Drive folder; included as Appendix C.

13. <https://appalachiancommunitycapitalcdfi.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/Opportunity-Appalachia-for-WNC-Recovery.pdf>

14. See “Western North Carolina Life Sciences Cluster — Overarching Narrative, FY 2025 EDA Disaster Supplemental.” Available in the project Drive folder.

15. See “Western North Carolina Futures Factory — Rebuild. Reshore. Reshape the Future.” (Leave-behind, October 2025). Available in the project Drive folder.

Education & Workforce Development

- Improved coordination and collaboration across the region to recruit and retain teachers, encourage work-based learning at all levels and institutions of education, reduce transportation barriers, and improve data sharing and transparency;
- Strengthen and serve with purpose remote workers who relocated to or remained in the region after Helene;
- Expansion of the National Science Foundation Regional Innovation Engine grants already at work in the state, including one led by The Industrial Commons in Morganton to spark innovation, jobs, and capital investment in modern textile manufacturing. Other North Carolina grants focus on grid modernization and regenerative medicine, both relevant for the region;
- Support for stabilization and growth of child care and afterschool care; and
- Exploration of at least one of our WNC public universities achieving designation as a R-1 (very high research activity) university.

Layers 4 and 5 — Outcomes and the End State

Catalysts produce measurable outcomes: jobs retained and created; businesses reopened, created, and/or expanded; housing units repaired and built; visitor spending restored; private and philanthropic dollars leveraged per public dollar; workforce credentials earned; talent retained and enhanced; and roads, bridges, and broadband restored and expanded in capacity.

Outcomes accumulate into the end state — a diversified, self-sustaining, and disaster-resilient WNC economy. A region rebuilt stronger, more flexible, and scalable, always with respect to the natural environment. In the words of our vision:

“

To create a healthy, vibrant western North Carolina that fosters an improved quality of life through environmental stewardship, community-driven initiatives, ample educational resources, and a diverse jobs base that includes advanced manufacturing, agriculture, health care, arts, tourism and culture, education, and entrepreneurship.



3

The Catalysts in Detail

- The specific projects and opportunities with the power to change the region's economic trajectory.
- 3.1 Innovation: Life Sciences and Futures Factory
- 3.2 Small Business
- 3.3 Connectivity: Rail, Highways, and a Regional Air Concept
- 3.4 Tourism Nodes That Double as Infrastructure
- 3.5 Creative Economy
- 3.6 Workforce
- 3.7 Agriculture and Food/Beverage Manufacturing
- 3.8 Natural Resource Industries
- 3.9 Leadership



SECTION 3

The engine described in Section 2 runs on catalysts. This section looks at nine of them in detail. Each is real rather than hypothetical: an active project, a funded award, or a documented opportunity that communities in the region have already put forward.

We offer several catalytic ideas that convert levers into trajectory-changing outcomes — each grounded in an active project or a documented opportunity in the region. In accordance with our engine framework, these originated in communities.

3.1 Innovation: Life Sciences and Futures Factory

Manufacturing, long a core of the economy of the region, must be part of the region's future. The path forward involves thoughtful collaboration and innovation.

On July 27, 2026, the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) announced that it would award a \$29.2 million grant to the Western North Carolina Futures Factory. The funds will support a 70,000-square-foot facility in Buncombe County to develop the workforce and technology that will support the region's advanced manufacturing sector. Community colleges, universities, and economic development entities will add their own particular experiences and strengths to the Futures Factory, maximizing opportunities for cutting-edge human and technology development. More details on the Futures Factory can be found [here](#).

Over the past 40 years, the State of North Carolina has dedicated effort to growing the life sciences sector, including the renowned North Carolina Biotechnology Center (NCBC). There are over 850 life sciences companies in the state employing more than 75,000 statewide. The Helene-affected counties have not experienced as much of this growth as other regions, such as the Research Triangle Park. Spurred by a planning proposal from the NCBC, entities across the state and region, led by the Research Triangle Institute (RTI), developed a \$62.5 million plan seeking EDA support to spur the sector's growth with companies large and small across the region. The proposal includes strategic planning and coordination; marketing; industrial site development; wet lab space; and life sciences startup training and business support. Details on this proposal can be found [here](#).

There are numerous other examples of advanced manufacturing progress in the Helene region, including National Science Foundation Engine grants awarded to change and develop innovations in textile production throughout the Southeast.

3.2 Small Business

While businesses of all sizes experienced hardship from Helene, locally owned and operated small businesses were exceptionally vulnerable. Just emerging from the loss of economic activity during the COVID-19 global pandemic, businesses that took on additional debt and risk to stay open, keep workers employed, and stabilize working families found their challenges compounded by Helene. A key lesson learned is that providing immediate cash to businesses following disasters is a necessity.

There are no current federal or state programs to provide direct grant assistance to businesses recovering. Moreover, there is a need for commercial space that is safe, resilient, and modern. Discussions with local Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs), based on ongoing work with small business owners throughout the region, resulted in concrete proposals that merit development for small business survival and space. Details can be found in Appendix C.

3.3 Connectivity: Rail, Highways, and a Regional Air Concept

Strong connectivity makes less-traveled places reachable. For example, three highway and rail decisive points are already on the calendar: the I-26 Connector in Asheville broke ground in April 2026 as a \$1.8 billion project scheduled for completion in 2031;¹⁶ Corridor K (Robbinsville–Stecoah), a \$681 million Appalachian Development Highway segment, is expected to finish around August 2026;¹⁷ and the studied Salisbury–Asheville passenger rail corridor (139 miles, an estimated cost of \$650 million to \$665 million, three daily round trips) carries a 2035 target and projected ongoing economic impact near \$59.8 million a year.¹⁸

On aviation, Asheville Regional Airport is the region’s dominant commercial gateway, handling 2.24 million passengers in 2025 with a \$3.9 billion economic footprint.¹⁹ While it currently draws visitors who tend to stay near Asheville, there is potential that these visitors could be encouraged to travel more broadly. The region also holds a network of smaller general-aviation and regional airports (Hickory, Rutherford, Jackson, Avery, Macon/Franklin, Ashe, and Western Carolina Regional), each with measurable economic output.²⁰ A regional-air concept is worth a formal feasibility study to distribute visitor demand and economic activity beyond the Asheville core. Aviation-linked tourism packages that connect smaller regional airports to trailheads and creative clusters could help extend the “WNC Airways” concept from scheduled flights into a visitor-distribution strategy.

3.4 Tourism Nodes That Double as Infrastructure

Outdoor recreation is a \$17.8 billion economic engine for WNC,²¹ built upon a network of publicly owned lands, including North Carolina’s state parks and trails. Statewide tourism spending set a record \$37.2 billion in 2025, and this plan’s aim is to expand and spread that demand beyond heavily traveled tourism spots into the more geographically remote areas.²² Helene devastated gateway communities across the region and caused tens of millions in damage to state parks. The economies of gateway communities surrounding state parks like Chimney Rock, Mount Mitchell, Grandfather Mountain, and South Mountains suffered from the closures of parks and trails following the storm. While all state parks in the region are now reopened, these gateway communities continue to struggle. This plan will harness the transformative power of parks and trails to stimulate business development, tourism, and community investment.

Deliberately making more public investments in state parks – maintaining existing assets and building new infrastructure such as visitor centers, trails, and revenue-generating assets like campgrounds and lodging – can increase visitation to the geographically remote areas of WNC where state parks are located. This increased visitation can then serve as a catalyst for private investment in gateway communities.²³

\$17.8B

outdoor recreation — an economic engine for WNC

16. NCDOT — I-26 Connector project (groundbreaking Apr. 2026; completion 2031). ncdot.gov/projects/i26-connector

17. NCDOT / FHWA — Corridor K (Appalachian Development Highway System), Robbinsville–Stecoah. ncdot.gov

18. NCDOT — Salisbury–Asheville (Western) passenger rail corridor study. ncdot.gov — Rail Division

19. Asheville Regional Airport (AVL) 2025 passenger volume and economic impact. flyavl.com

20. NCDOT — North Carolina airport economic-impact study (regional/GA airports). ncdot.gov — Aviation Division

21. US Bureau of Economic Analysis / Outdoor Recreation Economic Statistics: North Carolina 2024 — <https://www.bea.gov/data/special-topics/outdoor-recreation> <https://madexmtns.com/>

22. Visit NC / NC Commerce — 2025 record statewide tourism (\$37.2 billion). partners.visitnc.com — economic impact

23. State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) 2025-2030 <https://www.ncparks.gov/final-scorp-version-32726/download?attachment>

Central to the success of gateway communities are strong systems of connectivity between those communities and the natural resources they benefit from. Helene dealt a blow to western North Carolina's tourism industry not only by shutting down the anchor destinations that drove people to the area, but also by destroying existing systems of connectivity that fostered entrepreneurship in nearby communities. Future investment in the region's infrastructure must strengthen that connectivity by, for example:

- coordinating and scaling marketing efforts;
- creating regional wayfinding signage to help visitors find their way between destinations;
- incentivizing investments for business start-ups and historic preservation (such as tax credits);
- building and maintaining a network of trails that literally and physically connect communities with their natural resources.

These public-private collaborations can build upon existing partnerships around state trails in the region such as the Ecusta Trail, Fonta Flora Trail, and Northern Peaks Trail.²⁴

The General Assembly provided support for tourism marketing in the region since Helene. While generous by previous state standards, North Carolina's investment in marketing is historically low compared to that of other states. Moreover, some of the state's investment in business marketing could be used to target the region.

3.5 Creative Economy

The creative economy in western North Carolina generated approximately \$3.05 billion in sales and supported 34,796 jobs across the region in 2025.²⁵ Within the creative economy, craft is a distinctive, exportable asset. Helene hit craft hard: An estimated 80 percent of the River Arts District in Asheville was destroyed, and Penland School of Craft, the Southern Highland Craft Guild, and the Center for Craft were all affected. The region's leadership in craft is recognized and validated far beyond its borders. On July 14, 2026, online global craft marketplace Etsy and the Center for Craft announced a three-year \$10 million investment in regional craft ecosystems. Asheville served as the site of the announcement, and western North Carolina was named one of five such ecosystems in the nation.²⁶ The complex craft ecosystem needs support to connect makers, creative businesses, manufacturers and suppliers, education, and workforce development.²⁷

Music is also critical to the creative economy in WNC. The region boasts 2,546 musicians and singers.²⁸ The Come Hear NC Music Office (CHNC), part of the North Carolina Arts Council, works to highlight the musicians and music traditions that western North Carolina is known for. In addition, as part of the CHNC communities program, research led to individual toolkits in Asheville, Marshall, and Lansing to encourage building stronger local music infrastructure and to increase tourism.

Marketing, business development, and access to equipment are vital to support and grow the music industry in the region.

\$3.05B

generated by the creative economy in western North Carolina, supporting 34,796 jobs in 2025

24. <https://mountainbizworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/Outdoor-Economy-Growth-Opportunities.docx.pdf>

25. [ArtsAVL Releases 2026 Creative Economy Snapshots for 28 Western North Carolina Counties | ArtsAVL](#)

26. <https://www.centerforcraft.org/news/center-for-craft-and-etsy-partner-to-invest-10-million-in-craft-communities-nationwide>

27. WNC craft economy — Handmade in America, Asheville brewery impact, River Arts District. handmadeinamerica.org · centerforcraft.org

28. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1PRqY4WqGGUu0Cikvh33Ahqbx8_Peh4V_/view?usp=sharing

The Department of Commerce and the Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, along with the Appalachian Regional Commission are developing a statewide strategic plan for the creative economy. This work emanated from recovery planning, and the plan should be available in 2027.

At a more local level, the Asheville-Buncombe Arts Recovery Framework, finalized in late summer 2026, details a collaborative commitment by partner organizations to support the arts ecosystem. The Framework “positions arts and culture as essential economic and community infrastructure—connected to economic development, tourism, workforce, public space, infrastructure, and long-term regional recovery,” a vision shared in this plan.²⁹

This plan’s goal is to amplify and enrich the creative economy built on the incredible cultural heritage and natural landscape of WNC. This is potentially one of the highest-leverage, most authentic WNC catalysts available. Community colleges should continue to play roles in supporting the creative economy, including the use of Small Business Center assets. A region-wide artisan cooperative and e-commerce platform that markets WNC creativity to a national and global audience while pooling fulfillment and marketing costs and handheld-device trail maps would make it operational.

3.6 Workforce

One concern amid disaster recovery is that people decide to leave the area and never return. A decline in the region’s labor force could result in a downward cycle. Businesses, large and small, need a sufficient quantity of suitably trained and high-quality workers.

From April 2023 through April 2026, the region witnessed a decline in its labor force by more than 16,000 people (-2.2 percent). The state’s labor force grew 0.3 percent over this period.

The region boasts strong educational partners from early childhood to K-12 through community colleges and universities. Additional workforce partners, including NC Works, ApprenticeshipNC, and community based-organizations are vital to strengthening work-based learning, preparing individuals to enter employment, and supporting wrap-around services. Together, the education and workforce ecosystem forms a ready pipeline from pre-K through university and into lifelong, regionally adaptable continuing education.³⁰

The Good Jobs WNC initiative (an 11-college, 23-county effort pursuing roughly 1,200 jobs with a \$12 million fundraising goal) is a developing strategy to address these challenges. In terms of leveraging federal dollars, the EDA awarded \$1.7 million to Cleveland Community College for health care workforce training in addition to the Futures Factory mentioned above. The EDA also granted \$2.6 million to Southwest Community College in Sylva for infrastructure improvements to support a new workforce development and small business center.

Statewide initiatives identified in the Governor’s Council on Workforce and Apprenticeship, AI Strategic Roadmap, and First in Opportunity Plan will help address the challenges.

²⁹. Asheville-Buncombe Arts Recovery Framework. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/16BpeLFEZEvU5kUM67-kwfwZJBf43RTUu/view>

³⁰. Good Jobs WNC; Apprenticeship NC; WNC community colleges. nccommunitycolleges.edu · apprenticeshipnc.com

3.7 Agriculture and Food/Beverage Manufacturing

The General Assembly funded the NC Agricultural Manufacturing and Processing Initiative (NCAMPI) to support private businesses seeking to create or expand processing of farm and ranch products to add value close to the source. In a complementary fashion, a coalition of business support providers met and partnered to focus on developing supply chain and production infrastructure, scaling and leveraging bulk processing, and coordinating business support for retail readiness and scale.³¹

ASSET

The General Assembly funded the NC Agricultural Manufacturing and Processing Initiative (NCAMPI) to support private businesses seeking to create or expand processing of farm and ranch products to add value close to the source.

3.8 Natural Resource Industries

Western North Carolina offers vital natural resources that position the region for growth. Among them are earth minerals and forest products found in the region.

The area around Spruce Pine is the world's leading source of ultra-high-purity quartz and high-purity silica. This specific pegmatite deposit is globally important for manufacturing the fused-quartz crucibles required to produce silicon computer chips and solar panels. No comparable deposit is known in the world, making this small mountain town a critical link in the global semiconductor and solar supply chains. Building on this resource is a regional opportunity. The vertical integration of this industry in North Carolina is a unique opportunity for economic development. Quartz is currently mined and refined in the region but largely exported and turned into finished products elsewhere. Attracting the next steps in the chain, from crucible manufacturing to materials science, would positively impact the workforce economics.

Appalachian hardwoods support a network of sawmills, lumber yards, and specialty wood product manufacturers across the region. Forest products are an agricultural resource that will be a focus of economic development efforts in the region. The 2023 closing of the Pactiv Evergreen paper mill in Canton removed a major buyer of that wood and left an abundance of product in search of new markets. Advanced manufacturing and green technology are driving innovative uses for hardwoods, transforming traditional timber into high-strength structural materials, eco-friendly chemical alternatives, and sustainable mass timber components. In addition, partners in the region are actively researching and manufacturing biochar from timber on the forest floor that Hurricane Helene brought down. Forest products offer a path for economic growth that works with the region's environment instead of against it.

3.9 Leadership

The state and the region have long valued leadership development, including programs such as Leadership NC, the Rural Center's Homegrown Leaders and Rural Economic Development Initiative (REDI), and other more local initiatives. Providing avenues of support for regional, cross-sector conversation and learning will be crucial to the success of long-term recovery while developing the next generation of leaders.

31. <https://mountainbizworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/Food-and-Beverage-Manufacturing-WNC-Regional-Growth-Strategy.docx.pdf>



4

The Resilience Spine: Long-Term Recovery Groups as a Standing Capability

— How recovery groups become a permanent capability, ready to activate when the next disaster hits.



SECTION 4

Catalysts drive growth. This section covers what keeps the region standing when the next disaster comes: the network of Long-Term Recovery Groups already at work across the Helene Counties and the ways they become a permanent capability rather than a temporary one.

The forward-looking, “upgradeable” character of the design lives in its resilience spine. Long-Term Recovery Groups (LTRGs) are cooperative, multi-sector coalitions (faith, nonprofit, government, and business) convened after a disaster to coordinate unmet needs, disaster case management, volunteers, and rebuilding.³² They are the connective tissue between community-level recovery and county, state, and federal resources, operating within the National Disaster Recovery Framework’s Recovery Support Functions.³³



The forward-looking, “upgradeable” character of the design lives in its resilience spine.

In the aftermath of Helene, 19 LTRGs serve 20 counties, primarily supported by grants from philanthropic organizations like the American Red Cross, the Dogwood Health Trust, and the North Carolina Community Foundation. Several LTRGs received grants from a \$28 million state appropriation for nonprofit home repair and rebuild organizations, and Senate Bill 257 included funding for LTRGs in the HUD MID counties for unmet needs assistance.³⁴

National practice treats the maturation of a LTRG into a standing Community Organization Active in Disaster (COAD) as a best practice for building permanent community resilience. This infrastructure persists between disasters and reactivates immediately when the next shock strikes. COADs are closely aligned with or integrated into local emergency management operations to maximize continuity and effectiveness during response and recovery.³⁵ Embedding the LTRG-to-COAD transition into the recovery plan is what turns recovery from a one-time event into a permanent regional capability.

³². National VOAD — Long-Term Recovery Guide (2023); FEMA NDRF & Recovery Support Functions. nvoad.org — LTR Guide (2023) · fema.gov — NDRF

³³. National VOAD — Long-Term Recovery Guide (2023); FEMA NDRF & Recovery Support Functions. nvoad.org — LTR Guide (2023) · fema.gov — NDRF

³⁴. WNC Helene LTRG activity and NC General Assembly rebuilding appropriation. ncvoad.org

³⁵. National VOAD — Long-Term Recovery Guide (2023); FEMA NDRF & Recovery Support Functions. nvoad.org — LTR Guide (2023) · fema.gov — NDRF



5

The How: Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) as the Alignment Mechanism

- Using the region's existing economic development strategies to align local plans without replacing any of them.



SECTION 5

Sections 2 through 4 describe what the plan does. This section describes how the pieces stay aligned. The region already has dozens of plans; the question is how to line them up without overwriting any of them. The answer is a tool the region already uses: Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS).

A key question is how to align the many independent plans without overwriting them. The federal Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) provides an answer. A CEDS is the regionally owned, locally driven strategy that the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) requires as the basis for most of its investment, and the strategy's action-plan section is required by regulation to integrate other regional plans, with county-level plans nesting inside a region's CEDS.³⁶ Every regional council of governments maintains one, and the EDA added a mandatory economic resilience component that aligns naturally with recovery framing.³⁷ The Appalachian Regional Commission uses the same Local Development District structure, making the CEDS the de facto master alignment document for both EDA and ARC investment.³⁸

DEFINITION

A CEDS is the regionally owned, locally driven strategy that the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) requires as the basis for most of its investment

The move, then, is to position a state organization tasked with coordinating and overseeing recovery efforts (such as GROW NC) as the convener that harmonizes the five Helene-region CEDS documents and the ARC strategy into one shared operating picture — the engine described here. Each community retains ownership of its own priorities. The CEDS represent the military doctrinal “common operating picture” and the Marshall Plan’s collective-planning requirement, expressed through a mechanism within the region that already exists.



³⁶. U.S. EDA — Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) guidance and Economic Resilience requirement. [eda.gov — CEDS](https://www.eda.gov/ceds)

³⁷. U.S. EDA — Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) guidance and Economic Resilience requirement. [eda.gov — CEDS](https://www.eda.gov/ceds)

³⁸. Appalachian Regional Commission — NC Local Development Districts and FY2025 NC strategy. arc.gov · commerce.nc.gov — NC ARC Strategy

6

A Cycle, Not a Chart

- How the plan adjusts over time and moves the region from emergency support to self-sustaining growth.



SECTION 6

Alignment is not a one-time act. This section explains how the plan is built to learn, adjust, and eventually render itself redundant.

Just like a combustion engine, this economic engine is a cycle. Outcomes feed the CEDS evaluation framework, which reinforms community priorities, so the plan continuously realigns, learns, and upgrades. The design carries a defined arc — Stabilize, Restore, then Grow and Renew — that transitions WNC from emergency support to self-sustaining regional growth, not open-ended dependency. This matches the auto-extinguishment principle from the Marshall plan. The diagram's milestone ribbon anchors that arc to real, scheduled decisive points already on the regional calendar.

KEY POINT

Just like a combustion engine, this economic engine is a cycle.



7

Making the Engine Last: Prosperity, Ownership, and Financing Readiness

- Three commitments: gains shared across every county, a steering body that owns the plan, and financing tools ready to use.
- 7.1 Broad-Based Prosperity
- 7.2 Who Owns the Engine: A Convening Steering Body
- 7.3 Disaster Opportunity Zone Designation



SECTION 7

A plan can be well-designed and still fade away. This section names three commitments that keep the engine running after emergency funding ends: prosperity that reaches every county, a body that owns the plan, and financing tools ready before the money arrives.

Three design commitments determine whether the engine produces a recovery that lasts and that reaches everyone.

7.1 Broad-Based Prosperity

A recovery succeeds only if its gains are widely shared. The engine is therefore designed so that every affected county, the rural and small-town tracts that anchor the region, lower-income households, and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians benefit measurably from the catalysts — in addition to the larger metropolitan cores around Asheville and Hickory. The enhanced 30 percent rural step-up for Qualified Rural Opportunity Funds, the regional-air and craft-cooperative catalysts, and the LTRG-to-COAD spine all push activity toward the underserved parts of the region by design and action. Although this plan focuses on the 28 counties most impacted by Helene, the economic flywheel created within the region will impact all counties in western North Carolina. Framing broad-based economic prosperity keeps the commitment durable and locally owned and aligns with the resilience and workforce content the federal CEDS framework treats as core.³⁹

7.2 Who Owns the Engine: A Convening Steering Body

A shared logic needs a steward, or it reverts to the fragmentation it was meant to solve. The engine should not be governed by a new authority that displaces existing organizations but by a light convening steering body — a state entity such as GROW NC at the table with the Governor’s Advisory Committee on Western North Carolina Recovery, regional councils of government, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, EDPNC, and the Department of Commerce, philanthropic anchors, and chamber representation. Its job is narrow and Marshall Plan-like: Harmonize the Helene-region CEDS documents and the ARC strategy into the common operating picture described here and track the scorecard across all communities. Each community retains ownership of its own priorities; the steering body ensures alignment.

7.3 Disaster Opportunity Zone Designation

The newly permanent Opportunity Zone 2.0 program is a powerful lever, but only for communities where it is available and where communities are ready to use it. With the new round of designations effective January 1, 2027, and the enhanced 30 percent basis step-up for Qualified Rural Opportunity Funds investing in rural tracts, we are placed in a better position for attracting private investment in WNC.⁴⁰ However, it is not nearly enough, as the Governor can designate only 25 percent of the eligible census tracts statewide for Opportunity Zone credits. Advocates will pursue **Disaster Opportunity Zone designation** for the entirety of the 16 counties HUD designated most impacted and distressed.⁴¹ This plan calls for two additional concrete moves: a **WNC-wide**

³⁹. U.S. EDA — 2023 CEDS Content Guidelines: recommended Equity, Climate/Economic Resilience, and Workforce Development sections. [eda.gov — CEDS Content Guidelines](https://eda.gov/CEDS-Content-Guidelines)

⁴⁰. Opportunity Zones 2.0 (OBBBA, signed Jul. 4, 2025): new designations effective Jan. 1, 2027; 30% basis step-up for Qualified Rural Opportunity Funds; reduced 50% substantial-improvement threshold for rural property. tax.thomsonreuters.com — [OBBBA OZ changes](https://www.obbba.com) · [pillsburylaw.com](https://www.pillsburylaw.com) — [OZ reform](https://www.opportunityzonereform.com)

⁴¹. Ashe, Avery, Buncombe, Burke, Caldwell, Cleveland, Haywood, Henderson, Madison, McDowell, Mitchell, Polk, Rutherford, Transylvania, Watauga, and Yancey

Qualified Opportunity Fund (QOF) that pools investor capital around regional priorities rather than leaving each county to compete alone and a county-level **technical-assistance program** that helps smaller and rural communities structure investable projects and capture the rural step-up before the designation window opens. Doing so converts a federal tax incentive into a deliberately steered regional financing engine. Also, a region-wide project development district (tax increment financing) should be implemented.

Jan 1, 2027

new round of Opportunity Zone 2.0 designations takes effect, with the enhanced 30 percent basis step-up for Qualified Rural Opportunity Funds



8

A Quantitative Scorecard

— Baseline conditions and Year 5 and Year 10 targets for each line of effort, with a responsible lead.



SECTION 8

. This section offers a sample scorecard for measuring impact: baseline conditions, Year 5 and Year 10 targets for each line of effort, and a responsible lead for each.

The end state is defined as measurable conditions, which require metrics. The sample scorecard below establishes a baseline and Year 5 and Year 10 targets for each line of effort, with a responsible lead, and the scorecard is designed to be maintained inside the CEDS evaluation framework so that progress reinforms community priorities in each cycle. The targets below were informed in part by substantive and valuable input from members of the Long-Term Economic Recovery Subcommittee of the Governor’s Advisory Committee on Western North Carolina Recovery (Appendix D).

DEFINITION

The end state is defined as measurable conditions, which require metrics.

Each line will require a directly responsible individual, and the plan identifies the agency with overall authority and accountability. The steering committee will need to plan carefully for crossline strategies and tactics and be prepared to build and sustain the capacity to carry out the work.

As work continues, several targets depend on decisions by federal agencies, the General Assembly, or private investors. They are included because a plan that measures only what the State controls would understate what the region can cooperatively achieve. The steering committee will validate these initial targets, set additional ones, and revise them as implementation gets underway.

Table 1. WNC Economic Recovery Scorecard. Baseline, Year 5, and Year 10 targets by line of effort, each with a responsible lead. Maintained within the CEDS evaluation framework so that measured progress reinforms community priorities in each planning cycle.

Line of effort	Baseline (post-Helene)	Year 5 target	Year 10 target	Responsible lead
Infrastructure	Water, sewer, grid & broadband damaged	Critical systems restored, increased connectivity & efficiency, flood-resistant & redundant	Micro-grid/hardened grid regionwide	NCDOT, utilities, NC Broadband, NCDEQ, MCNC
	Hundreds of roads damaged/closed	Roads/bridges (including private roads & bridges) open to pre-Helene levels	Salisbury-Asheville rail operating; regional air	NCDOT; NCDEM
	No western passenger rail; single air gateway	Corridor K open; rail design funded		NCDOT



Line of effort	Baseline (post-Helene)	Year 5 target	Year 10 target	Responsible lead
Natural Resources	More than a dozen state parks closed	All state parks reopened	Public Private Partnerships with Parks	DNCR
	Debris-stricken waterways (streams, rivers, lakes)	completely and accessible	Additional trail development	NCDEM
	Blue Ridge Parkway closed at several sections	Waterway debris removal complete; stream restoration programs underway	Quartz supply chain hardened against flooding	NC Commerce
		Full reopening of the Blue Ridge Parkway in WNC	Downstream mineral and forest-product manufacturing	EDPNC
Economic Development & Entrepreneurship	68% of businesses at/below break-even	<20% below break-even	Business creation positive	NC Commerce, EDPNC, chambers of commerce, local economic development organizations
	Business closures	Net business creation positive	Increased sector diversity	
	Lack of industrial sites	Increased certified sites	Fewer vacancies and eyesores	
	Business physical capital destroyed	Business buildings built to resilient standard	More EDPNC projects selected	
	No overall regional strategy	Regional strategy and coordination	Use regional assets (plan, natural products) as basis for sector growth	
	Smaller life sciences and advanced manufacturing concentration than rest of state	Implementation of EDA-funded Transformation Grant		
	Wages below state averages	Increased life sciences startup businesses and support capital		
		Increased advanced manufacturing jobs		
		Wages closer to state average		

Line of effort	Baseline (post-Helene)	Year 5 target	Year 10 target	Responsible lead
Education & Workforce Development	Disrupted pipeline; outmigration risk	\$20M committed to Good Jobs WNC;	Self-sustaining pre-K–university pipeline	Local education agencies (LEAs), Community colleges, Apprenticeship NC, NCDPI, DHHS, Smart Start Department of Commerce, EDPNC, chambers of commerce, private employers
	Attendance impact	Recovered labor force	Reduced child care subsidy waiting lists	
	Test scores impact	Test scores above pre-Helene	Ability to track credentials and outcomes	
	Child Care programs closed	Additional child care slots	Increased work-based learning access	
	Labor force decline; jobs down	Labor force and jobs growing at state rate	Job growth and wage growth sustained	
Health Care	Inadequate health care access	Increased health care jobs	Increased health care research	DHHS; Rural Health Transformation; hospital systems, MAHEC
	Lack of specialty providers	Greater health care access	Improved health care outcomes	
	Loss of health insurance coverage	Reduced job vacancies		
		Increased primary and specialty care access		
		Reduced uninsured population		

Line of effort	Baseline (post-Helene)	Year 5 target	Year 10 target	Responsible lead
Arts & Culture	River Arts District ~80% destroyed	Craft cooperative live		DNCR; Mountain BizWorks; various Craft Centers; other partners
	Significant losses in facilities, revenue, and infrastructure	Creative sector employment and revenue restored to pre-disaster levels		
		Regional creative economy and craft industry strategy implemented		
		Creative sector infrastructure restored		
Tourism	Tourism employment and dollars down	Visitor spending restored	Visitor demand increased and spread throughout region	Visit NC, TDAs
		Hospitality employment restored		
Housing	Thousands of units damaged or destroyed	All damaged units rebuilt to resilient standard	Net new affordable and workforce housing added	NC Commerce (CDBG-DR); Housing Finance Agency; nonprofit housing organizations
	Lack of affordable single-family homes and rental units	County composite housing stress indicator completed		
Agriculture	Apple and Christmas tree crops destroyed	Increased agriculture output	Reduced rate of farmland loss	NC Dept of Agriculture and Consumer Services, land grant universities, commodity groups, TDAs
	Substantial infrastructure damage	Increased agritourism	Consistent increase in local product	
	Loss of agritourism	Value-added infrastructure		
Leveraged capital	Public dollars largely uncombined	≥\$2 private/philanthropic per \$1 public	WNC-wide QOF self-sustaining	State gov't (GROW NC) steering body



9

Risk Register

— The main threats to the recovery, and how the plan manages them.



SECTION 9

The scorecard says what success looks like. This section is honest about what could get in the way, and how the plan seeks to account for these barriers.

In operational terms, risk is the gap between the means available and the means required.⁴² The engine names that gap explicitly so it can be managed rather than discovered later. The register below tracks the principal risks to the recovery, the risks' effects if unmanaged, and the mitigation built into the design.

KEY POINT

The engine names the gap between the means available and the means required explicitly so it can be managed rather than discovered later.

Table 2. WNC Recovery Risk Register. The principal risks to the recovery, their effects if left unmanaged, and the mitigation already built into the engine's design. Maintained by the convening steering body as a live scorecard item.

Risk	Effects if unmanaged	Mitigation built into the engine
Workforce & labor shortages	Rebuilding and growth stall for lack of qualified skilled workers and returning talent	Workforce LOE prioritized as the center of gravity; Good Jobs WNC, NCCCS, UNC System, Apprenticeship NC, and talent-retention catalysts
Permitting & regulatory delay	Decisive-point projects slip past their windows	Phased milestone ribbon; steering body tracks permitting as a scorecard item and escalates blockers
Construction-cost inflation	Fixed allocations buy less; projects shrink or stall	Matched-capital model pools public, private, and philanthropic dollars; staged Stabilize–Restore–Grow sequencing; locally sourced materials
Match-funding & absorption capacity	Smaller and rural communities struggle to provide local match and structure projects, so capital flows only to the metropolitan core	County-level OZ technical assistance; WNC-wide QOF; chambers as match conveners; broad-prosperity design objective; Project Development; and other EDA funds
Insurance & fiscal resilience	The next shock recreates the same losses and drains local budgets	Resilient-infrastructure standard; LTRG-to-COAD standing spine; exploration of parametric insurance for critical assets; quick access fund for cities and counties to address cashflow needs
Federal-priority shifts	Equity/climate framing rises or falls with each administration	Durable “economic resilience” and “broad prosperity” framing anchored to CEDS, which both EDA and ARC require
An additional natural disaster	Risks delays, setbacks, and possible loss of confidence and growth in anxiety	Learning lessons to reduce impact of future events

42. Joint Publication 5-0, Joint Planning (2020) risk defined as the gap between means available and means required. [esd.whs.mil — JP 5-0 \(2020\)](https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/59/Documents/J5/J5-0/J5-0%20(2020).pdf)



10

Recovery Continues While Momentum Builds

— Urgent recovery work continues at full speed while long-term growth efforts get underway.



SECTION 10

Long-term growth and immediate recovery must run at the same time, not in sequence.

This plan underscores that the fundamentals of Helene recovery continue at an accelerated pace and without hesitation across western North Carolina. In parallel, it clarifies the drivers that will reinvigorate the region's economy over the coming years, the mechanisms by which that reinvigoration will be propelled, and the targets that will guide and measure progress. We know that technology and innovation may help speed and strengthen this recovery in ways we cannot yet determine. When successful, this model can be refined and replicated for the rest of the state.



11

Conclusion

— Back to the vision: a western North Carolina rebuilt for lasting prosperity.



SECTION 11

Hurricane Helene forever changed western North Carolina, but not the grit and resiliency of its people. From the devastation, the State of North Carolina has an opportunity to chart a new future for the region. This future is rooted in the vision of this economic recovery plan:

“

“To create a healthy, vibrant western North Carolina that fosters an improved quality of life through environmental stewardship, community-driven initiatives, ample educational resources, and a diverse jobs base that builds on the region’s traditional leadership in advanced manufacturing, agriculture, arts, tourism and culture, and education.”

By investing in its infrastructure, empowering its innovators and local leaders, and ensuring opportunity reaches every part of the region, the state lays the foundation for a western North Carolina that is not only recovered but also renewed.



A-D

Appendix

The following source documents are referenced within this plan.

A WNC Life Sciences Initiative	55
B WNC Futures Factory and NSF Engines	56
C Status of Small Business Recovery in WNC	59
D Input on Core Principles from the Long-Term Economic Recovery Subcommittee	65

A

WNC Life Sciences Initiative

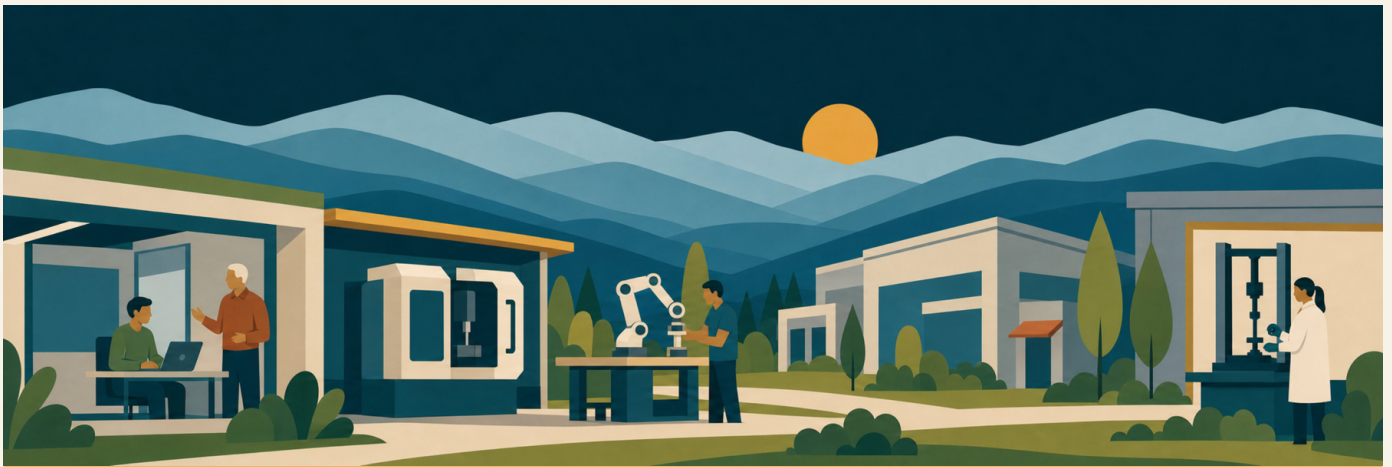
Overarching narrative for the proposed Economic Development Administration–funded Western North Carolina Life Sciences Cluster, prepared as part of the FY 2025 EDA Disaster Supplemental. Reference document: [Western North Carolina Life Sciences Cluster — Overarching Narrative, FY 2025 EDA Disaster Supplemental](#).



B

WNC Futures Factory and NSF Engines

Leave-behind summary for the proposed Economic Development Administration co-funded “Futures Factory,” a 70,000-square-foot advanced-manufacturing innovation center for Western North Carolina. Reference document: [Western North Carolina Futures Factory — Rebuild. Reshore. Reshape the Future.](#)



APPENDIX B

North Carolina is home to three NSF Engine grants including:

The **NSF Textile Innovation Engine of North Carolina**, led by The Industrial Commons, is advancing breakthrough technology and skills-based training to revitalize textile research, development and production in the U.S. Southeast.

Building on the region's deep textile heritage, the NSF Textile Innovation Engine brings together growers, manufacturers, major U.S. brands and partners across research, education and government.

This growing ecosystem is leveraging advances in artificial intelligence, circular textile technology and shifting market demand to develop solutions that de-risk textile investments and translate research into measurable economic impact.

Technologies of focus include:

- Advanced textile materials for high-tech and extreme environment applications, including first responders, healthcare and national defense.
- Processes for circular and natural materials development to extend textile life cycles.
- Biobased materials discovery to strengthen domestic supply chains and reduce harmful byproducts.
- Technologies for supply chain traceability and materials demand-supply match, increasing industry resiliency and market responsiveness.
- Advanced manufacturing, fiber identification and automation technologies that boost productivity and domestic competitiveness.

The **NSF Grid Modernization Engine in the Carolinas**, led by the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, aims to advance critical grid technologies to strengthen U.S. energy security and meet rapidly increasing energy demand. The NSF Grid Modernization Engine will connect local utility providers, the region's advanced manufacturing base and world-class test beds. Working collaboratively, these partners will help create co-development pathways that decrease time-to-market and accelerate the deployment of critical grid infrastructure. Combined with new training programs and career pathways, the Grid Modernization Engine will help strengthen U.S. energy security, support AI and manufacturing growth, and increase economic stability across the region.

The **NSF Regenerative Medicine (Regenmed) Engine in North Carolina** is transforming how the United States translates, manufactures and commercializes regenerative medicine technologies. The NSF Regenmed Engine equips innovative research teams and technology startups with the resources, infrastructure and partnerships needed to drive product development and accelerate economic growth. Its activities directly support national priorities around **innovation-driven economic expansion, domestic manufacturing capacity, workforce development and emerging technologies**.

The Regenmed Engine is strengthening a first-of-its-kind ecosystem anchored in North Carolina and attracting companies from across the U.S. and around the world. This rapidly maturing network brings together partners in industry, government, nonprofit, academic and regulatory sectors to translate and manufacture use-inspired regenerative medicine technologies into commercially available products.

Technologies of focus include:

- Manufacturing of key raw materials required for cell and gene-based therapies.
- Universal growth media that support multiple cell types, making therapies easier to produce at scale.
- Systems that support the secure, temperature-controlled transportation of living cells, tissues and organs.
- A standardized modular bioreactor for manufacturing a wide range of regenerative medicine products.
- Modular work environments that allow for the manufacturing of products using living cells and tissues.

Technology focus areas address industry needs in advanced manufacturing, AI, disaster risk and resilience, and energy technology.



Status of Small Business Recovery in WNC

Status update on small business recovery and a framework for additional support, prepared by GROW NC (Sharon Decker). Reference document: Status of Small Business Recovery in WNC.



APPENDIX C

According to Mountain BizWorks' Local Business Impact Survey released in July 2025, respondents shared that 86% of businesses were still performing at or below pre-Helene levels. That number appears to have improved substantially since then. However, it doesn't supplant the average loss of \$322,000 for WNC small businesses. For perspective, the average loss will require a business to put 100% of profits toward their recovery costs for 6+ years in order to return to their pre-Helene-level value.

Access to capital remains the number one problem facing small businesses as they try to recover. As of February 2026, there are no remaining Helene-specific state programs that can support small businesses directly. The small business grant program that supported 2,182 businesses exhausted funding early in 2025, and the WNC Strong Small Business Loan program exhausted funds in January after serving more than 800 small businesses. Many federal programs have expired as well, including the Small Business Administration loan programs and FEMA Individual Assistance support programs.

86%

of businesses were still performing at or below pre-Helene levels — Mountain BizWorks Local Business Impact Survey, July 2025



Access to capital remains the number one problem facing small businesses as they try to recover.

A number of components play into the lack of access to capital, including increasing loan interest rates and outside investors purchasing property and raising rents, as well as a lack of affordable commercial space.

GROW NC

GROW NC has worked with partners on the ground to identify two potential solutions for your feedback:

- Additional small business grants
- A public-private partnership fund to help improve access to limited commercial space

Ultimately, we recommend pursuing both strategies simultaneously as they fill different needs in the small business community, and propose both options for your feedback.

Commercial Space Fund

GROW NC has spoken with Mountain BizWorks about a proposal for a \$60 million fund as a public-private partnership to answer the need for additional, affordable commercial space for small businesses. This plan includes \$10million in public sector

regional recovery commitments, leveraging up to \$50 million in bank, philanthropic, and impact investor contributions. The fund will provide patient, low-cost capital to commercial building owners that agree to pass cost savings through to the small business tenants in the form of affordable lease rates. Federally approved Disaster Opportunity Zone status could incentivize additional private sector investments and State approved TIFs could further leverage public dollars supporting the necessary infrastructure upgrades/improvements for the community.

\$60M

proposed Commercial Space Fund — a public-private partnership for affordable commercial space

Table C-1. Proposed Commercial Space Fund structure

Proposed \$60 Million Fund Structure	
Public sector regional recovery commitments	\$10 million
Bank, philanthropic, and impact investor contributions (leveraged)	up to \$50 million
Total fund target	\$60 million

We anticipate the fund will help support a range of needed project types, ensuring Helene recovery dollars contribute to present challenges as well as position the region for long-term economic competitiveness. Creating an effective mix of attainable commercial spaces, with a focus on varied small business sectors, is a strategy with deep support from local community and economic development partners. This mix and focus will vary in order to harmonize with the character of the community.

The fund would support the following use cases, for all of which Mountain BizWorks has received concrete requests:

- Renovation and reopening of commercial properties, especially multi-tenant properties, damaged by Hurricane Helene
- Development of new affordable commercial spaces for displaced businesses
- Restructuring financing of owner-occupied mortgages for anchor rural small businesses that need financial flexibility due to Helene damages and revenue losses
- Helping rural communities address the shortage of smaller and mid-sized manufacturing and commercial production spaces
- Redevelopment and reactivation of vacant or underutilized rural Main Street properties



The fund will use a flexible approach to financial structuring towards the ultimate goal of more affordable commercial square footage. We anticipate some projects will be financed solely by the fund, while for others the fund will serve as a patient funding partner alongside a bank, a CDFI, or other lead funder. This blended approach will help extend the overall impact, leverage additional private funding, manage fund risk, and support regional collaboration and capacity.

Small Business Grant Framework

After Hurricane Helene devastated businesses across Western NC, Governor Stein invested \$20 million of state funds through executive order into the WNC Small Business Initiative. This \$20 million, when combined with \$35 million in philanthropic and private funding from the Dogwood Health Trust and the Duke Endowment among others, served 2,182 small businesses.

\$20M

invested by Governor Stein through executive order into the WNC Small Business Initiative

Table C-2. WNC Small Business Initiative grant framework: amounts

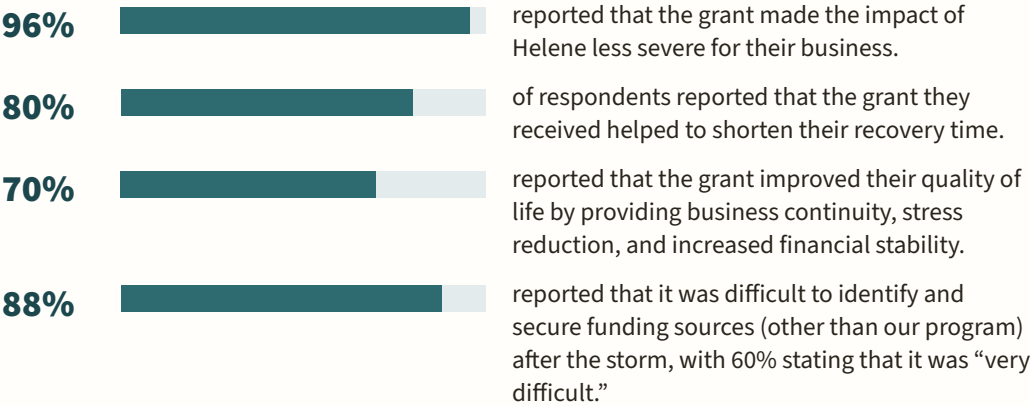
WNC Small Business Initiative — Round 1		Amount
State funds (Governor Stein, executive order)		\$20 million
Philanthropic and private funding		\$35 million
Total deployed		\$55 million → 2,182 small businesses served

A survey of 200 of those small businesses after the conclusion of the program showed:

The NC General Assembly has continued to share that funding small business grants is, in their opinion, not an allowable use of NCGA funds and they will not be funding them. To address the remaining need in WNC, GROW NC is working together with philanthropy and external partners to address the need.



IMPACT



FUTURE NEEDS

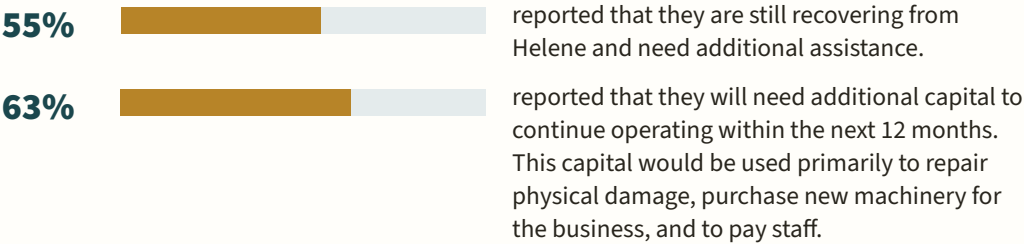


Figure C-1. Post-program survey of 200 grant recipients (Impact in teal; Future Needs in amber). All values reproduced exactly from the source figure.

Table C-3. Grant format

Format
Relief grants of up to \$50,000 for businesses with \$2.5 million in revenue or less; up to \$25,000 for businesses with \$1 million in revenue or less
Administered by a CDFI like Mountain BizWorks or Appalachian Community Capital

Who IsEligible:

Based on criteria from the first round of small business grants and feedback from the Governor, eligibility criteria should include:



Table C-4. Eligibility criteria

Eligibility Criteria
Businesses must have both a demonstrated loss due to or as a result of Hurricane Helene
Must be a for-profit business actively registered with the North Carolina Secretary of State (or a sole proprietorship with an active DBA filing) or a Certificate of Registration from the North Carolina Department of Revenue)
Must be physically located in the federally declared disaster zone (may need to shift depending on philanthropic interest)
Business was formed and in operation on or before Sept. 27, 2023
Must have had \$2.5 million or less in 2023 annual gross revenue
Must have sustained physical or economic damage (not covered by insurance or other funding sources) from Hurricane Helene
Must be currently operating and can demonstrate a plan for success.

Table C-5. Funding sources and notes

Funding Source	Notes
Philanthropy	Round 1 was funded by the Dogwood Health Trust. Round 2 was funded by the State of North Carolina, the Dogwood Health Trust, and the Duke Endowment. What other philanthropies are interested/available?
State Funding	Additional funding from the Governor through unmet needs, or reallocation of unspent funds
Private Funding	Is there an opportunity to raise funds for this through the state/Gov’s Office?



D

Input on Core Principles from the Long-Term Economic Recovery Subcommittee of the Advisory Committee

The 12 members of the Long-Term Economic Recovery Subcommittee of the Governor’s Advisory Committee on WNC Recovery self-selected to provide input across the eight Core Principles of the Recovery Plan. For each Core Principle, they responded to the following questions to inform the Plan’s focus:



APPENDIX D

- What are the assets you know that WNC has in this core principle?
- What should be our goals in this area for the next 3, 5, and 10 years?
- What actions should we take in the next 3, 5, and 10 years to accomplish these goals?
- What should be our measurable outcomes?



Infrastructure

LINE OF EFFORT

MEMORANDUM

Overview: Planning for Long-Term Recovery (3-, 5-, and 10-Year Horizons)

To: Governor's Advisory Committee on Western North Carolina Recovery **From:** Kevin Leonard, Executive Director, North Carolina Association of County Commissioners (NCACC) **Date:** June 19, 2026 **Subject:** Recommendations for Long-Term Infrastructure Recovery Following Tropical Storm Helene

At the request of the Governor's Advisory Committee, NCACC provides the following planning assumptions and recommendations to guide long-term recovery efforts in Western North Carolina. These recommendations emphasize infrastructure priorities—while recognizing that successful recovery will require sustained coordination, flexible financing, and strong partnerships across all sectors.

Disasters do not occur in isolation. Many communities in Western North Carolina continue to recover from prior events such as Tropical Storm Fred, underscoring that disasters exacerbate preexisting challenges, including economic distress, infrastructure gaps, and limited local capacity. As such, long-term recovery planning must be grounded in realistic assumptions about pre-existing recovery challenges and emergent risks, fiscal uncertainty, and cashflow constraints faced by local governments.

By addressing these challenges directly—and by strengthening partnerships across sectors—the state can support a recovery that is not only resilient, but also equitable and sustainable over the next decade.

Planning Assumption 1: Expect Future Disasters

Western North Carolina must plan for recovery in the context of recurring disasters. Some communities are still recovering from prior events, demonstrating that recovery timelines often overlap.

- Long-term recovery strategies must incorporate planning for a multi-disaster scenario that involve both ongoing recovery and future disasters

PLANNING
ASSUMPTION

(ex. Tropical Storm Fred, federally declared disaster Oct. 1, 2021, FEMA DR 4617 – click [here](#) to view map of impacted areas).

- Data-driven tools, such as GROW NC’s infrastructure needs assessment portal, should be leveraged and enhanced with local input to identify vulnerabilities and prioritize investments.
- Coordination across state, federal, and local agencies is essential to ensure alignment and avoid duplication.
- Infrastructure planning should prioritize resilience and adaptability to future hazards.

Western North Carolina must plan for recovery in the context of recurring disasters.

Implication for 3-, 5-, and 10-year planning: Recovery efforts must consider pre-existing recovery challenges along with future risk to mitigate the impact of future disasters.

Planning Assumption 2: Funding Uncertainties Will Persist

Long-term recovery will occur in an environment of ongoing fiscal uncertainty at the federal, state, and local levels.

- Anticipated FEMA reforms are expected to shift additional administrative, financial, and programmatic responsibilities to states and counties, increasing fiscal pressure.
- Federal funding has grown more uncertain.
- Counties have limited authority to diversify revenues, constraining their ability to respond to large-scale events.
- Additionally, potential limits on property tax authority introduce further uncertainty into long-term planning, potentially affecting counties’ ability to finance infrastructure and meet matching requirements.
- Storm impacts reduce the tax base through damage to homes, businesses, and critical assets.
- Tourism, agriculture, small businesses, and other foundational sectors in Western North Carolina may take years to fully recover, delaying revenue stabilization.
- Rising costs for materials, labor, and borrowing reduce purchasing power and increase project costs.
- Disaster recovery funding is almost exclusively reimbursement-based, creating timing and cashflow challenges for local governments.

Implication for 3-, 5-, and 10-year planning: Revenue and funding volatility will continue to shape local decision-making, requiring flexible and adaptive planning frameworks. Recovery strategies must account for fluctuating and constrained funding and include mechanisms to adjust priorities and timelines as fiscal conditions evolve.

Planning Assumption 3: Local Governments Need Reliable Cashflow

Local governments are the primary implementers of disaster recovery but must operate under balanced budget requirements and limited debt capacity.

- Almost all recovery programs require upfront expenditures, yet reimbursements can take months or years.
- Rural and economically distressed counties face the greatest barriers to accessing capital and managing cashflow.
- Without reliable cashflow, local governments may be unable to initiate or sustain critical recovery projects.

***Recommended Strategies to Support Cashflow:**

- Forgive Helene-related cashflow loans to free up local resources for ongoing recovery.
- Develop advance payment mechanisms within state and federal recovery programs.
- Increase appropriations for programs that provide direct funds to local governments with streamlined administrative requirements (ex. [Helene Local Government Capital Grant](#) program).

Implication for 3-, 5-, and 10-year planning: Ensuring steady and predictable cashflow is essential to maintaining project momentum and enabling equitable recovery across communities.



Natural Resources

LINE OF EFFORT

Assets

Western North Carolina is rich in natural resources, namely:

- High-quality freshwater rivers, streams, and other bodies of water – with public access for recreational purposes or as water supply (headwaters of several river systems supply clean water to millions of people downstream);
- State and local parks
- State trails, greenways, and blueways
- North Carolina Gamelands – tens of thousands of acres of public and private lands across WNC managed by the NC Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC) for public hunting, trapping, fishing and other wildlife-associated recreation
- Blue Ridge Parkway
- US Forest Service land
- Biodiversity



- Rare and unique ecosystems – including but not limited to mountain bogs, high elevation spruce, oak, and hemlock forests

Goals and Potential Actions (these have not been prioritized)

- Goal 1: Support efforts to improve surface water quality across the region.
- Action 1.1: Increase opportunities for stream restoration, riparian health initiatives, and education (including for private landowners).
- Action 1.2: Adopt Trout Buffer rules similar to the state of Georgia.
- Action 1.3: Incorporate more rules for stormwater runoff.
- Action 1.4: Mitigate current stormwater runoff, potentially through grant funding for municipalities to implement mitigation programs, particularly in headwater stream areas.
- Action 1.5: Explore Payment for Ecosystem Services partnerships with downstream municipalities and utilities that depend on WNC's clean water.
- Goal 2: Increase the number of acres of permanently protected land in WNC, with a focus on ensuring those acres form connected corridors rather than isolated patches.
- Action 2.1: Increase state and local funding for land conservation.
- Action 2.2: Increase collaboration with local, state and federal agencies to coordinate landscape-level stewardship.
- Goal 3: Repair or remove the outdoor infrastructure impacted by Helene and by deferred maintenance.
- Action 3.1: Ensure relevant agencies and organizations have adequate funding and staff to perform repairs.
- Action 3.2: Require repairs and new construction/infrastructure can withstand future natural disasters.
- Action 3.3: Address backlog of dam safety violations.
- Action 3.4: Remove and repair high hazard dams.
- Goal 4: Eliminate new construction in 100-year floodplains and establish buyout programs for existing structures in the most vulnerable areas.
- Goal 5: Steward sensitive ecosystems damaged by Helene and/or those at great risk of impact from non-native invasive species or wildfire due to Helene.
- Action 5.1: Ensure relevant agencies, organizations, and programs are adequately staffed and funded.
- Action 5.2: Launch an aggressive, time-sensitive invasive species response program that addresses the canopy gaps and soil disturbance left by Helene before those areas are lost to invasive species.
- Action 5.3: Utilize nature-based solutions such as prescribed fire to mitigate wildfire risk and invasive species encroachment.
- Goal 6: Position WNC proactively as a climate refuge by protecting the elevation, water resources, and biodiversity that make it one.
- Action 6.1: Increase collaboration with local, state and federal agencies to coordinate landscape-level stewardship.
- Action 6.2: Incentivize sustainable forestry for forest health, erosion control, and carbon sequestration, including through voluntary carbon markets and conservation easement tax incentives.
- Goal 7: Reduce wildlife and vehicle conflict.
- Action 7.1: Explore incorporating wildlife crossings into NCDOT's mandatory minimum best practices.
- Goal 8: Expand the number of NCWRC public access points.

- Action 8.1: Add Paddle Trails, Greenways, and Blue Ways to State Trails Program.
- Action 8.2: Increase funding to relevant agencies/programs: NC Land Water Fund, NCWRC, State Trails Program.

Measurable outcomes

Assessing the vitality of WNC's natural resources would be based on multiple metrics which could include but not be limited to:

- Percentage decrease in levels or concentration of pollutants in municipal water discharge, by municipality and county
- Water quality indicators such as macroinvertebrate scores and turbidity levels,
- Number of acres protected
- Miles of streams restored
- Miles of river accessible to the public
- Miles of sustainable trails constructed
- Number of fishing licenses sold
- Miles of trails maintained
- Number of acres under fire prescription
- Number of acres treated for invasive species
- Number of private land acres enrolled in conservation easements or sustainable forestry programs
- Floodplain acres removed from development
- Species population indicators
- Number of wildlife crossings installed
- Economic impact studies

Barriers

- Resistance to regulatory reform
- Adequate funding for NC Department of Environmental Quality
- Gaps in funding and local capacity
- Lack of clarity on the timeline of municipal stormwater mandates (MS4 utilities, etc.)
- Inadequate intergovernmental cooperation, guidance, and investment (between federal, state, and local implementation partners)

This input incorporates contributions from several non-subcommittee members, including Wendy Patoprsty, Director of the Middle Fork Greenway, Blue Ridge Conservancy; Jordan Sellers, Northern Peaks State Trail Director; and Andy Hill, High Country Regional Director & Watauga Riverkeeper, MountainTrue.



Economic Development & Entrepreneurship

LINE OF EFFORT

Long-Term Recovery Subcommittee

Economic Development and Entrepreneurship

5.16.26

ASSETS:



- Western North Carolina has a strong existing and growing network to support economic development and entrepreneurship.** The West is often undersold or “flies under the radar” when compared to the rest of the state. However, we have strong existing economic development entities and programs for entrepreneurs. These entities are connected across the west and across the state. Connected providers include our chambers of commerce, Small Business Centers (SBCs), Small Business Technology Development Centers (SBTDCs), Industrial Extension, Mountain BizWorks, Economic Development Partnerships, and our experienced and creative (and some of the state’s strongest) Councils of Government (COGs). Expanding programs like NCIDEA’s RIoT program represents an opportunity for growth.
- Our Industrial Extension Centers can help incubate new processes and products for entrepreneurs.** Entrepreneurship support programs and Economic Development entities are in tune with our manufacturing base. Programs like WCU Rapid Center and access to places like the Manufacturing Solutions Center (in Catawba County) can help entrepreneurs accelerate the development of new processes and move them toward commercialization and business expansion.
- Western North Carolina has a strong Community College system that is supportive and integral to economic development, entrepreneurship, and workforce development solutions.** The Community College system provides strong support for entrepreneurs, from continuing education programs to degree programs such as the Craft Beverage Institute of the Southeast at AB-Tech and the Mechatronics Program at Western Piedmont Community College. Across the region, Community Colleges create innovative programs to support entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial development within existing industries. Community Colleges have innovative models (such as the Good Jobs Initiative) to support workforce development in existing and expanding industries.
- Economic Developers continue to recruit high-wage jobs and opportunities into the region.** Economic Developers in counties and across the region continue to recruit companies from outside the region and support the expansion of companies within the region. Economic development continues to support site prep for manufacturing expansion in the region.
- There are opportunities for economic development and entrepreneurship in expanding fields like modular construction, biotech, and forestry.** There are expanding opportunities in our economic pillars of health care, manufacturing, and tourism. There is a growing opportunity in modular construction, working with forest biomass, and biotechnology development and entrepreneurship.
- Funding entities are tuned into supporting entrepreneurship and economic development.** Funders like Dogwood Health Trust and the Appalachian Regional Commission provide unique support for investments in economic development and entrepreneurial development.

CHALLENGES/OPPORTUNITIES :

- **There are gaps in Economic Development support. We need to fill these gaps.** For example, Yancey County doesn't have an Economic Development entity focused on the county. Economic development resources tend to go to the areas where there are dedicated people.
- **There are capital gaps for projects with large site-preparation expenditures.** The reality of old sites and the WNC geography leads to higher site preparation costs.
- **There is a gap in knowledge and financial wherewithal** to develop economic projects (of all sizes) across the region in the hardest-to-reach communities.
- **Available sites for expansion are disappearing. Power, water, and sewer are needed for development.** What is the actual stock of development sites across the West?
- **We have large sites and small sites for development, but we are missing mid-sized sites** that can serve more geographically diverse communities.
- **There is still outmigration from Helene in the West.** Will we have the workforce if our growth is driven by an older population and we continue to experience outmigration?
- **Cuts in STEM education mean a less prepared workforce.** STEM has been cut from K-12 education, and this is greatly impacting the future pathway for high-wage jobs.
- **High housing and health care costs make it hard for the working class to make it in WNC.** If you can't live here, you can't work here.
- **There is still not enough grant funding and forgivable loans for small businesses.** Many businesses are rebuilding and starting over and can't manage debt as they get back on their feet.
- **There is a challenge in determining who will drive the opportunities that arise from this Subcommittee.** In looking at most distressed areas and regions, areas like NE NC- NC East Alliance, focused on STEM and marketing, training, and economic developments, that breadth of scope under a unified entity creates coordinated movement. Who is going to live, breathe, and drive this plan?

GOALS and ACTIONS:

Goal 1:

Support the growth and expansion of current anchor businesses in the region. Ensure their supply chains are sourcing locally where possible and creating entrepreneurial opportunities along that supply chain corridor and their workforce needs are met.

Action 1: Understand the needs of current anchor businesses (i.e., Baxter International) to ensure stability for future growth.

Action 2: Map current supply chains and support the growth of small suppliers into those supply chains.

Action 3: Create and expand specific workforce development programs to ensure the talent pathways are in our region.

Goal 2:

Expand, support, and incentivize the start-up of small businesses across the region, those associated with anchor industries, and those in emerging industries.

Action 1: Support, start-up and expansion resources and capital to small businesses that can grow along existing industry and anchor business corridors.

Action 2: Support start-up and expansion resources and capital to small businesses growing across new industries in life sciences, forestry and other growing industries (i.e., Circular Economy initiatives of the Textile Innovation Engine and RegenMed Engine).

Action 3: Support current organizations to expand services as needed into the hardest hit and most underserved regions of the West.

Action 4: Bring new support into the region with expansion of entities like First Flight Ventures and NCIDEA.

Action 5: Support the reemergence of crafts and making in the hardest hit areas including the Toe River region and the River District of Asheville.

Goal 3:

Grow capital, financial acumen, and transition support for expanding business and existing businesses.

Action 1: Create systems of patient capital and forgivable loans to recovering businesses, those starting in emerging markets, or those filling supply chain corridor gaps.

Action 2: Ensure there are strong structural linkages between the Long-term Recovery work and historic leadership and funders in the region including ARC, Dogwood, EDA, and the WNC Community Foundation.

Action 3: Understand and address the barriers that CDFI's have to grow and fund entrepreneurship in the region. Ensure local capital is flowing to local businesses.

Action 4: Support comprehensive programs that address succession planning to ensure businesses stay rooted in the West across ownership changes.

Goal 4:

Repair, expand, and advance infrastructure for businesses growth and resilience.

Action 1: Create a comprehensive WNC infrastructure map that looks at current and potential small, mid, and large business sites and buildings (water, sewer, power, site readiness). Include a readiness level for the region on these sites for entrepreneurs. Link the sites to comprehensive support from the region (in addition to local economic development leadership.)

Action 2: Develop most promising sites that map across current and expanding industry corridors. Create best showcase sites for the region that focus on historical and developing regional knowledge.

Goal 6:

Ensure a WNC Workforce is trained and inspired to solve current and future challenges of business opportunities in Western NC. (Where should WFD fit in the Recovery Plan?)

Action 1: Ensure the Good Jobs WNC is funded and instituting best practice in the hardest to reach regions of the West.

Action 2: Incentivize regional industry anchors to “adopt” their K-12 school systems. Develop comprehensive programming from middle to high school for these industries and small businesses including apprenticeship programs.

Action 3: Incentivize pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs across the West.

Goal 7:

Ensure the western Economic Development entities are sharing best practice and a regional vision across the region to accelerate regional growth.

Action 1: Ensure a regional shared vision and strategy for the West to ensure best practices across the region are shared and unified. (See Advanced Manufacturing Goal 1)

Action 2: The West “needs to build bridges and tell the story.” Amplify the regional stories of recovery, resilience and innovation. (Like Sharon’s instagram, but even bigger!)

Goal 8:

Ensure we are measuring sustainable regional growth and development.

Action 1: Create a metrics and data platform for the WNC Recovery strategy to ensure metrics are visible and tracking towards success.

MEASURABLE OUTCOMES: (Please note that many of these overlap the Advanced Manufacturing.)

Business Growth, Expansion, and Retention

- Increase in job growth for existing businesses.
- Increased new business filings.
- Decrease in new business closures.
- Movement of counties from tier 1- tier 2 status.
- Increased prepared sites for small, mid and large scale businesses.
- Increase capital deployed for businesses across the region.
- Ensure local businesses transition ownership to local hands to ensure continuity.

Workforce Development Goals

- Decrease in outmigration of individuals aged 10-45 in the region.
- Increase in trainings, certifications, apprenticeships, and degree attainment for the regional workforce.

Partnership and Collaboration Goals

- Increase in replication efforts for successful models across the region.

Advanced Manufacturing

ADVISORY (NOT A NINTH LOE)

Accelerating Manufacturing to Drive Long-Term Recovery in WNC

Assets

Western North Carolina is rich in assets that can be leveraged to further catalyze manufacturing across the region. The landscape of what manufacturing means in Western North Carolina has changed appreciatively over the past three decades; but these changes have created pillars for strong future growth. In looking forward, the key assets for driving manufacturing in WNC include:

- The region's existing manufacturing presence and rich manufacturing history provides a strong foundation for future value-added manufacturing growth.** The region has a workforce that has strong competencies in technical skills, problem-solving, and soft skills that make it uniquely adapted to succeed in an increasingly technology and solutions-oriented manufacturing environment. The region's history in paper, textiles and furniture isn't a relic of the past, it's the solid foundation of making things positioning the region to excel at value-added manufacturing. The region's workforce has a strong work ethic and a large percentage of the workforce approaches problems with an attitude and aptitude for solving them, important traits in technology-based and value-added manufacturing.
- Western North Carolina has a strategic location to connect to markets.** Western North Carolina's location is within a day's drive of a majority of the nation's population and is strategically connected through robust transportation arteries to regional, national and international markets through its proximity to Greenville's Foreign Trade Zone and the port of Charleston. Western North Carolina's airports and air connected industrial parks also create important nodes of opportunity for manufacturing growth. Further, the region's proximity to large aerospace and automotive clusters in Greenville and in piedmont create important opportunities for cultivating supply chain development across WNC.
- Hubs of Innovation can drive future process and product innovations and adoption of novel technologies to increase value-added manufacturing in WNC.** Western North Carolina has concentrated hubs of innovation that are currently driving creative process and product development in a host of manufacturing industries. The region has hubs like the Industrial Commons, which is building a model for advancing circularity of textile production and higher-value textile goods. Importantly, these hubs are increasingly inter-connected, creating corridors of innovation and manufacturing that can drive manufacturing density, wage growth and output. For example, the Industrial Commons is connected to other hubs of textile innovation in the region including the Manufacturing Solutions Center, Gaston College, and NCSU, which together are creating new centers of economic activity for value-added manufacturing that augment value propositions for highly specialized, higher-wage manufacturing to grow in WNC. Additionally, the WCU Center for Rapid Prototyping serves as a manufacturing innovation hub supporting manufacturing product and process innovations at diverse regional companies across the WNC region and has the potential to connect to other regional nodes, including the ICAR Clemson research hub which is driving innovation in



aerospace and automotive manufacturing in the upstate of SC and that can be further connected and leveraged for additional value added manufacturing in Western North Carolina.

- **A strong ecosystem of regional partners engage to support business development in Western North Carolina.** Western North Carolina has a robust network of partners that are working in the region to support manufacturing, including: EDPNC, NC Commerce, county economic developers, chambers, airport authorities, and NC State University’s Industry Expansion Solutions Center (IES), and Small Business and Technology Development Centers (SBTDCs). Additionally, the region has strong engagement with partners focused on driving innovation, including NC Innovation, and statewide associations focused on manufacturing, such as NC Biotechnology Center which is focused on growing life sciences in WNC.
- **Spaces for locally-relevant, environmentally-responsible manufacturing expansion are abundant.** The belief that WNC’s geography limits possibilities for manufacturing misses the truth: the region has an array of vacant, underutilized and dormant properties that have the possibility to be reactivated. In imaging a long-term recovery from Helene, the focus on value-added manufacturing gives the region a greater array of developing industries of diverse sizes, meaning that existing vacant and underutilized properties are ripe for redevelopment, offering opportunities to catalyze economic value in communities while preserving green space, farmland and tree canopy and the region’s natural assets.
- **Western North Carolina has a relevant, connected, and employer-driven workforce system.** Western North Carolina has strong workforce development assets. The region’s community college system is currently working collaboratively under the Good Jobs-WNC initiative to advance employer-focused skills training to ensure more residents are trained and ready for workforce opportunities and careers with higher wages. This system has programs across Western North Carolina that are expanding opportunities to relevant training in advanced manufacturing, skilled trades, technology, etc. This work is in addition to the strong engineering programs that WCU and UNCA/NCSU have in the region, and the related programs available at Western Carolina University, University of North Carolina at Asheville, and Appalachian State University.

Goals and Actions for this area over next 3, 5, and 10 years

Strong manufacturing assets are necessary but not sufficient to guarantee industry growth. The following reflect strategic goals and actions recommended to achieve the objective of advancing regional value-added manufacturing.

Goal 1:

Develop framework for growing high-value manufacturing based on relevant models that create corridors of value-added manufacturing activity across Western North Carolina.

Action 1: Develop regional vision for manufacturing, defining sectors of focus and areas of opportunity to guide future regional work.

Action 1.2: Develop a comprehensive regional map that identifies resources (current, latent, and potential) across for this working group (and others). The map will allow us to see the physical and training landscape of the region (campuses, facilities, firms, and training programs).

Action 1.3: Recognizing there is no single assigned organization with the task of driving manufacturing across WNC, create a regional governance model clarifying organizations engaged, focus areas, roles, and implementation framework to ensure vision is actualized. Identifying a center of gravity to connect the Western North Carolina hubs of innovation and to lead engagement and foster cross-organizational collaborations is important to realize the full potential of Western North Carolina’s value-added manufacturing cluster.

Action 1.4: Define value proposition of the innovation hubs across Western North Carolina (i.e., define their market niches and opportunities) to determine areas of missed connections between hubs, areas of duplication, or gaps that need to be cultivated to holistically drive value-added manufacturing.

Action 1.5: Define Western North Carolina’s strategic value proposition and long-term relationship to RTP. The Research Triangle Park is a hub of innovation and technology deployment, but costs, utility availability, and land access create pressures for commercialization and manufacturing. Western North Carolina’s strategic proximity both to RTP as well as other markets, its availability of skilled workforce, the accessibility of properties to develop highly specialized manufacturing, and robust ecosystem of support partners create a unique opportunity for Western North Carolina to become the nation’s leader in value-added and technology supported manufacturing. Efforts to define how product innovations made at RTP can be best connected to Western North Carolina to ensure products can be commercialized, scaled, and tested to increase innovation value to North Carolina holistically.

Efforts to define this relationship between RTP and “RTP-West” and to brand it locally, regionally, and nationally are important to realizing its potential.

Action 1.6: Create regional value-added manufacturing growth strategy, defining the region’s nodes of innovation, ensuring they are connected to relevant ecosystem partners, and working to support spillover effects of cluster agglomeration to the benefit of the region. This strategy should leverage models like the Advanced Robotics Manufacturing (ARM) Institute and must include focus on how both new and existing value-added manufacturing can be augmented in the future. Efforts should be made to ensure local, regional and state leaders are all engaged appropriately to ensure all levers of policy, governance, and funding can be connected for maximum impact.

Goal 2:

Ensure intentional efforts are focused on attraction, creation, retention, and expansion of manufacturing firms across Western North Carolina.

Action 2.1: Regional leaders should focus on **defining key manufacturing sectors most suitable for expansion and attraction**, paying particular attention to defining the diverse suppliers and customers related to strategic industries that may be cultivated at the regional level to drive economic value across broader areas.

Action 2.2: Regional and state leaders should consider **re-evaluating local and state policies to incentivize creation of value-added manufacturing growth** that align with local and regional industry growth goals. Additionally, existing successful models for helping manufacturers grow and scale in the region should be amplified (e.g., Asheville Chamber’s Scale Up programs, NC IDEA partnership with RIOT). Supported models should focus on those that infuse innovation in current company processes to create greater business value for individual companies, which will develop an epicenter of innovative companies that can be further connected and supported through strategic ecosystem events and activities.

Action 2.3: Retaining and expanding existing manufacturers is a less cost-intensive proposition than recruitment of new opportunities. Retaining companies means greater focus on ensuring businesses have **business succession planning support** to ensure they remain open as owners transition out of business, and the resources to help with **technology adoption** and **product and process innovations**. Specifically, efforts to create **stronger information sharing among business support organizations** to ensure relevant knowledge can be acted upon in a timely manner by the right organization at the right time to support business competitiveness is imperative.

Action 2.4: On expanding manufacturing holistically, further efforts should be dedicated to **leveraging the national Disaster Opportunity Zones** and **state level Tax Increment Financing (TIF)** and creating stronger partnerships to connect Federal, State, Philanthropy, and Private funding to drive impact. Helene has fostered new partnerships between diverse funding partners which can be focused on supporting value-added manufacturing in the future to drive impact.

Action 2.5: Amplify partnerships with U.S. Department of Commerce and EDPNC focused on **attracting Foreign Direct Investment and leveraging near-shoring opportunities** to drive investment in new and expanded value-added manufacturing facilities across Western North Carolina.

Goal 3:

Strengthen the business environment for value-added manufacturing expansion.

Action 3.1: Augment partnerships and investments to support more high-quality, affordable child care to support the value-added manufacturing workforce.

Action 3.2: Augment partnerships and investments to support a health care system that is high-quality, affordable and accessible to all thus providing a healthy value-added manufacturing workforce.

Action 3.3: Strengthen resilience of water/wastewater and broadband infrastructure to ensure the region's ability to serve business needs. Efforts to promote system redundancies, interconnects, and alternative intake sourcing, for example, can mitigate the likelihood of future disruptions such as those the region experienced during Helene.

Action 3.4: Continue to invest in developing sites that can drive manufacturing expansion and regional integration, as well as identify new sites, especially in the hardest hit communities.

Goal 4:

Create greater regional workforce pipelines that holistically connect K-12 and build competencies, skills, and connections to drive higher-wage, value-added manufacturing across Western North Carolina.

Action 4.1: Expand regional community college training efforts. In light of start-up and operational costs of some programs and the opportunities increasingly available with technology, regional program offerings confer important benefits that can and should be more fully developed and implemented.

Action 4.2: Expand regional apprenticeship initiatives.

Action 4.3: Having strong value-added manufacturing requires a robust pathway of creative, skilled, and technologically-savvy workforce. Such pathways require robust coordination between K-12 and community college, and requires broader access to STEAM in K-12 regionwide via NC School of Science and Math and other institutions equipped to deliver regional programming.

Action 4.4: Regional universities are in a unique position to collaborate with regional community colleges to continue developing and releasing relevant, industry-focused training that is sequenced to help workers have the opportunity to gain training for career mobility in the value-added manufacturing sector.

Action 4.5: Communicate opportunities in value-added manufacturing across the region focused on K-12, community college, and dislocated workers/transitioning workforce to amplify awareness of what value-added manufacturing is, points of entry, and opportunities for growth. In communicating these opportunities, efforts should be made to engage with partners of trust for various stakeholders, whether through school counselors, PTO groups, churches, parent/teacher events, public events, influencers from various schools or areas, community events, chambers, Rotary, etc.

Action 4.6: Ensure all levers of the workforce system are focused on educating the workforce of the future for Industry 5.0. Facilitate opportunities for greater engagement with industry, workforce, and K-12 institutions to create regional Innovation days, robotics days, STEM events and related activities to drive culture of connection and technology innovation that will define Western North Carolina as a powerhouse for value-added manufacturing in the future.

Goal 5:

Create a culture of connected organizations working together to strategically create opportunities for value-added manufacturing.

Action 5.1:

Create additional trainings for local economic developers and leaders across Western North Carolina in how to engage with private industry partners to drive value-added manufacturing expansion to help more places in WNC be postured for proactive value-added manufacturing growth. This convening/training could be led by NCEDA as a mechanism to increase capacity of Western North Carolina economic developers, with engagement with private and public sector participants.

Action 5.2:

Expand successful regional efforts like the “Work in Burke” initiative to support value added manufacturing awareness.

Measurable outcomes

Achieving growth of manufacturing first requires defining what growth is desired. In Western North Carolina, the goal is driving growth in the number of value-added manufacturing firms, increasing wages for those employed in manufacturing firms, and increasing value-added manufacturing output. Achieving these goals will require dedicated, collaborative and intentional efforts to realize clear goals. Outcomes that can help assess progress towards established goals include:

- Increased wages.

- Increases in per capita income at county level and at regional level in aggregate (% increase compared to baseline)
- Increases in per capita income at county level and at regional level for manufacturing sector (% increase compared to baseline)
- Increased worker engagement in Value-Added Manufacturing.
- Decrease in unemployment rate at county and regional level (% decrease compared to baseline).
- Increase in labor force participation rate (% increase compared to baseline)
- Increase in labor force participation rate in value-added manufacturing (% increase compared to baseline, up to desired threshold)
- Robust Ecosystem
- Number of STEAM events across the region (total number, number per county)
- Number of child care slots available (total number for region, number per county)
- Number of K-12 schools offering STEAM classes (percentage of schools for county and as region)
- Number of properties with available water/wastewater systems and broadband to support value-added manufacturing (percentage for region, percentage for county)
- Number of regional economic developers trained (% at regional level, assume 100% goal)
- Skilled and available workforce
- Percent of high school students with STEM training (by county and aggregated at region)
- Percentage increase of community college students obtaining certifications in technology or manufacturing areas (percentage increase at county and regional level)
- Percentage increase in apprenticeships (county and regional)
- Percentage increase in engineering and technology graduates from WCU, ASU, and UNCA/NCSU
- Strong Value-Added Manufacturing Cluster
- Increase in Location Quotients for industry wage and number by county and region
- Increase in Location Quotients for industry size for advanced manufacturing at regional level
- Amount of private investment in manufacturing in WNC

— Education and Workforce Development

LINE OF EFFORT

Draft Plan Framing

WNC's education ecosystem (K-12, CCs, 4-Year, Philanthropic Capital, non-profits, etc) is uncommonly strong on institutions, though could see significant boost in results in the area of coordination.

Our plan proposes to use the next 3–5 years to build that connective tissue via program and policy actions, anchored on workforce-aligned career pathways, K-20 alignment, a stabilized educator workforce, and a stronger early childhood foundation.

WNC's Education Assets

What WNC brings to this work and foundations on which a plan should be built.

- **Higher education:** One of the densest rural community college networks in the U.S. (11 CCs), 9 regional universities including Appalachian State, WCU, and UNC Asheville, and MAHEC as a nationally strong rural AHEC. Existing state policy rails (Propel NC, NC Reconnect, etc.) can be/are operationalizable rather than needing to be built from scratch.
- **K-12 foundation:** 20+ Local Education Agencies spanning large districts (Buncombe, Henderson) to small rural ones (Graham, Mitchell, Avery, Swain, Yancey), Cherokee Central Schools, and regionally embedded professional learning through WRESA and NCCAT. Strong K-12 to community college partnerships in many counties.
- **Educators and student-support staff:** Repeatedly named as WNC's most important asset: "deeply committed," "resilient," going "above and beyond despite limited resources." The pedagogical strength of the region lives in its people, not necessarily in its facilities.
- **Early childhood infrastructure:** Smart Start partnerships and CCR&R agencies in every county, Head Start grantees, and NC Pre-K slots region-wide — meaningful capacity that has been weakened by Helene and must be rebuilt.
- **College-access programs:** GEAR UP, Upward Bound, AdviseNC, NCCCS Career Coaches and growing dual enrollment partnerships are particularly visible in rural districts, where they are often the difference between students reaching postsecondary education or not.
- **Philanthropic and civic capital:** Dogwood Health Trust, Golden Leaf, ZSR, Duke Endowment, Kate B. Reynolds, JMBE, KCT, CFWNC, and regional CDFIs (Mountain BizWorks, Thread Capital) — one of the strongest rural philanthropic ecosystems in the country, with MyFutureNC infrastructure ready to leverage.
- **Place-based and cultural identity:** A strong "stay-and-build" regional identity, ties to land and traditional cultures, the craft economy (Handmade in America, Penland, Folk Art Center), and near-universal NC Cooperative Extension / 4-H / FFA presence named as pedagogical and workforce assets.



SUBCOMMITTEE FRAMING

WNC's education ecosystem (K-12, CCs, 4-Year, Philanthropic Capital, non-profits, etc) is uncommonly strong on institutions, though could see significant boost in results in the area of coordination.

- **Community trust and tight-knit communities:** Small-town environments where "parents, teachers, community members, and stakeholders are all on the same page," creating conditions for school-as-community-hub models that would be harder to build elsewhere.
- **Post-Helene mobilization:** Faith and volunteer networks activated by Helene response remain a latent civic infrastructure. The region comes out of this disaster from a position of strength, not deficit.

Potential Goals (3- to 5-Year Horizon)

G1. A seamless K-20 through line, anchored in career pathways.

- Every WNC high school graduate exits with college credits, an industry credential, enlistment, or a living-wage job placement. Connection to DPI Career Development plans structured career exposure begins in middle school region-wide.
- Postsecondary attainment tracks toward MyFutureNC's 2030 goal in every WNC county by Year (X).
- Every high school offers $\geq$ (X) CTE pathways* with dual enrollment; work-based learning placements increased by (X) by Year (X).
- Significantly increase Adult Learner enrollment, completion, and "Good Job" placements in high-wage careers (i.e., health care, advanced manufacturing, skilled trades, education, etc.)
- Exploration and/or strengthening of co-location between 4-year programs/universities on community college campuses as part of rural access strategy.

G2. A stabilized, competitively compensated educator workforce.

- By Year (X): educator compensation regionally competitive with TN, GA, and SC; rural supplement gap visibly closing; new teacher mentorship and retention stipends operating in hard-to-fill rural areas.
- By Year (X): "Grow Your Own" teacher pipelines operating in partnership with K-12 School Districts, Community Colleges, and 4-year institutions like App State, WCU, and UNCA, producing a measurable share of new WNC hires; counselor, social worker, and school psychologist ratios meet national recommended levels across all 20+ LEAs and Cherokee Central Schools; teacher apprenticeships as a model to consider and/or strengthen pending location and educational institutions.
- Early childhood educator compensation structurally stabilized through pooled philanthropic/public match — not annual grants.

G3. Modernized, resilient learning infrastructure and access.

- All K-12 and CC instructional facilities relocated out of Helene-impacted floodplains or hardened in place; lab and CTE training spaces modernized to industry standards.
- Sustained mental health workforce expansion across LEAs to address ongoing post-Helene needs; schools functioning as community hubs with embedded family supports.
- Universal device, telehealth, broadband access across the WNC footprint; weather-resilient remote-learning capability in every district.
- Transportation barriers to dual enrollment, work-based learning, and CTE participation systematically addressed — not treated as someone else's problem.

G4. Identified backbone(s) for cross-sector education coordination.

- By Year 2: a named, funded backbone organization (new or existing host) operating, with institutional permanence beyond Helene recovery.
- Public-facing WNC Education Recovery Scorecard with named owners for every commitment and annual public updates.
- Formal data-sharing agreements among DPI, NCCCS, UNC System, DHHS, and EBCI; cross-system tracking of graduation-to-placement, credential attainment, and workforce entry.

Potential Priority Actions (Next 36 Months)**Table D-1. Health care goals, bold actions (years 1–3), and leads**

Goal	Bold Action (Years 1–3)	Lead / Partners
G1. K-20 through line	Consider backbone entity(ies) (myFutureNC-style or connected?) covering all 20+ LEAs, 11 CCs, and 9 regional universities. Mandate: pathway alignment, dual enrollment scaling, transportation barrier solutions, structured career exposure starting in middle school, FAFSA completion strategy.	TBD
G1.	Consider scaling proven apprenticeship and Adult Learner models (Apprenticeship Blue Ridge, ABM Works, Surry Yadkin Works, Futures Factory, Good Jobs WNC, NC Reconnect, etc.) region-wide; triple work-based learning placements by Year (X). Focus on key industries like health care, advanced manufacturing, skilled trades, hospitality/tourism, education. Build employer-led pathway design in each sector.	TBD
G2. Educator workforce	Potential coordinated advocacy push: regional supplement parity, capital funding for facilities, mental health staff ratios. One unified WNC ask, not 20 fragmented ones.	TBD
G2.	Consider creating/scaling "Grow Your Own" teacher pipelines via community colleges and App State, WCU, and UNCA, including high-school-to-teaching pathways, paid student teaching where grant-funded, and structured new-teacher mentorship. Pair with retention stipends in hard-to-fill rural districts.	TBD
G3. Infrastructure	Pursue Helene-specific Title I, IDEA, McKinney-Vento supplementals; advocate for a state Facilities Recovery & Resilience Fund (\$X-YM); expand mental health workforce; close device/broadband gaps; address transportation as access barrier.	TBD
G3. Access	Set a regional FAFSA completion target of (X)%+ at every WNC high school by Year (Y); coordinate with key intermediaries and CCs to support completion via FAFSA nights, parent education sessions, and early-warning dashboards, etc.	TBD
G4. Backbone	Conduct landscape analysis (Year X) of existing intermediaries. Consider naming the backbone(s) by Year (X). Present WNC Scorecard or other appropriate measurement tool.	TBD

Goal	Bold Action (Years 1–3)	Lead / Partners
G4. Data	Movement towards more formal data-sharing agreements among DPI, NCCCS, UNC System, DHHS, and EBCI; integrate ECIDS data into a regional dashboard tracking K-20-to-workforce flow.	TBD

Measurable Outcomes (5-Year Targets)

Table D-2. Health care indicators and 5-year targets

Indicator	5-Year Target
Postsecondary credential attainment (MyFutureNC)	On-track in every WNC county
FAFSA completion rate	$\geq$ (X)% at every WNC high school
Work-based learning + dual enrollment	(X%) baseline by Year (Y); equitable access (not just high-achievers)
Educator retention (3-yr) & support staff ratios	Above NC avg; meet national recommendations
"Grow Your Own" teacher pipeline graduates	Measurable share of new WNC hires by Year (X)
Attendance, engagement, student well-being	Measurable improvement on early-warning indicators
Prime-age labor force participation & median income	Closes gap with NC state average
Backbone organization(s)	Operating, appropriately funded and measurement plan by Year (X)

Additional, Non-Thematic Topics (Longer-Horizon, Advocacy-related, potential triggers)

Items below were raised by one or more respondents but are not explicitly named in the above draft plan considerations.

- **R1 research institution and/or Medical School:** Mentioned as a WNC structural disadvantage.
- **Free CC tuition for high-demand programs:** Concrete and actionable w/ funding streams like NextNC, Pell, etc.; community college in WNC have already piloted w/ strong results.
- **Regional AI strategy:** Some respondents urge regional AI literacy; others raise concerns about over-reliance on technology and effects on critical thinking.
- **Teacher housing partnerships:** Promising in High Country / Boone area.
- **Regional shared-services and transportation models:** Cross-county efficiency model.
- **Public school funding equity & charter balance:** Multiple respondents named public-school defense and funding equity as values commitments.

Principles to Consider and Challenges

- **Focus across the footprint:** Plans must work for places like Avery, Graham, Mitchell, Yancey as well as they work for Buncombe and Henderson. Rural districts cannot be afterthoughts.
- **Trauma-responsive baseline:** Post-COVID, Post-Helene, recent winters mental health needs are not a side initiative, they are part of any new infrastructure.
- **EBCI partnership:** Cherokee Central Schools and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians are partners, not stakeholders.
- **Place-based by design:** WNC's land, culture, and "stay-and-build" identity are assets. Pathways should help students stay and contribute, not just leave.
- **Ownership:** Named ownership with appropriate accountability
- **Local Limitations:** Ex: CTE goals might not apply across all areas as some K-12 districts are already maxed and growth depends on community college program alignment and policy/financial constraints.
- **Alternative Models:** Distinguish registered (DOL) vs. local/structured work-based learning; consider a new phrase for the non-registered version.

What's Missing?

Our plan summarizes responses from our cross-sector working group covering K-12 administration, community college leadership, regional university student-support, operational, and leadership roles, regional council, and policy/philanthropy lenses, student-support, operation roles. There was convergence particularly on educator workforce stabilization, K-20 alignment, FAFSA completion, mental health workforce, and place-based education to workforce pathways. Voices not yet represented include early childhood practitioners (other subcommittee working group), students and families directly, employers as a coordinated voice, and EBCI leadership. Engaging these voices is itself an early-stage priority for any backbone support.



Health Care & Life Sciences

LINE OF EFFORT

SECTOR FOCUS:

1. Health Care

2. Life Sciences

Question #1: What are the assets you know that WNC has in this area of focus?

Health Care

- Strong regional health care provider network, including hospitals, outpatient systems, behavioral health, trauma care, and specialty services across WNC
- UNC Health Pardee, AdventHealth, HCA, Cherokee Indian Hospital System, and MAHEC serving as anchor institutions for care delivery and workforce development



- Regional community colleges providing robust nursing, allied health, and workforce training pipelines
- MAHEC’s residency programs and rural health workforce initiatives create strong retention and placement of health care professionals in the region
- Existing collaborations among community colleges, HCA, UNC Health & School of Medicine, UNC Health presence in the region, county health departments, MAHEC, and other partners
- Strong focus on rural health care access and residency-to-practice networks that support underserved communities
- Growing telemedicine capacity supported by broadband expansion efforts
- High quality-of-life and strong health care infrastructure help attract retirees, professionals, and employers to the region
- Strong community college and workforce development partnerships aligned with health care sector growth
- WNC Health Network leadership in continuous improvement, collaboration, and addressing social determinants of health
- Philanthropic and community support organizations such as Dogwood Health Trust, Pisgah Health Foundation, WNC Bridge Foundation and Nantahala Health Foundation
- Increasing regional demand for health care services creates opportunities for expansion and coordinated capacity planning
- Extensive network of county health departments, Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs), nonprofits, and health care organizations serving communities across WNC
- WNC can function as a “distributed health care campus” if regional collaboration, shared training capacity, and coordinated workforce strategies are strengthened

Life Sciences

- Strong and growing life sciences and biomanufacturing presence in WNC
- Existing strengths in pharmaceutical manufacturing, medical plastics, fermentation, nutraceuticals, food and beverage innovation, and natural products technologies
- Major employers and manufacturers, including Baxter and related supplier ecosystems
- NC Biotechnology Center and NC Life Sciences Organization providing statewide connectivity, technical expertise, and industry support
- Western Carolina University’s Center for Rapid Prototyping supporting manufacturing innovation, productivity, and product development
- Strong agricultural base with opportunities to connect agriculture, biotechnology, and life sciences innovation
- N.C. State University research and Extension networks connecting scientific expertise directly to local farms and communities
- Community colleges and higher education institutions providing manufacturing and technical workforce training
- Regional chambers of commerce, economic development organizations, and nonprofit partners actively supporting industry growth
- Entrepreneurship and innovation assets such as Blue Ridge Food Ventures and ScaleUp WNC that help businesses grow and scale
- Natural resources, climate, and quality of life make WNC attractive for companies and talent

- Growing number of small and emerging life sciences companies locating in the region
- Strong advanced manufacturing workforce and technical training infrastructure already in place to support future industry expansion

Question #2: What should our goals in this area be for the next 3, 5, and 10 years?

Health Care Sector Goals

3-Year Goals (Immediate Priorities)

- Stabilize and strengthen the health care workforce pipeline for nursing, allied health, and behavioral health professions
- Expand collaboration among community colleges, universities, hospitals, MAHEC, county health departments, and clinical partners
- Increase clinical placements, precepting capacity, and faculty support across the region
- Improve access to primary care, specialty care, behavioral health, and telemedicine services in rural communities
- Align regional health care education programs with the most critical workforce shortages
- Create a coordinated regional health care strategy that links workforce, economic development, health care delivery, and community health outcomes
- Build awareness of health care as a major economic development asset for WNC
- Expand residency-to-practice and rural provider retention efforts
- Strengthen partnerships with Dogwood Health Trust, Nantahala Health Foundation, Pisgah Health Foundation, WNC Bridge Foundation, WNC Health Network, and other community organizations
- Begin development of a shared regional health care data and workforce planning system

5-Year Goals (Growth and Regional Alignment)

- Create a fully integrated regional health care workforce ecosystem across WNC
- Double health care apprenticeship, internship, and work-based learning opportunities
- Expand MAHEC and UNC-affiliated residency and training programs to improve long-term provider retention
- Develop regional centers for simulation, telehealth, and advanced clinical training
- Increase health care program capacity at community colleges and universities
- Improve health care access and outcomes in rural counties through coordinated regional care models
- Establish WNC as a statewide leader in rural health care collaboration and workforce innovation
- Build stronger partnerships between health care providers and education institutions to align talent pipelines with future demand
- Increase investment in health care infrastructure, specialty services, and behavioral health capacity
- Position health care as one of the leading sectors driving regional recruitment, quality of life, and economic growth

10-Year Goals (Long-Term Transformation)

- Establish WNC as a nationally recognized rural health care innovation and workforce hub

- Build a sustainable health care talent pipeline capable of meeting the region’s aging population and long-term growth needs
- Achieve significantly improved provider retention rates across all rural counties
- Create a coordinated “distributed health care campus” model across Western North Carolina
- Position WNC as a national model for integrated rural health care delivery, workforce development, and community health collaboration
- Attract major health care research, innovation, and investment partnerships to the region
- Expand health care entrepreneurship, technology adoption, and telemedicine innovation
- Ensure all residents have equitable access to high-quality health care regardless of geography
- Leverage health care as a major driver of economic prosperity and regional resilience

Life Sciences Sector Goals

3-Year Goals (Foundation and Coordination)

- Conduct a comprehensive regional life sciences asset inventory and cluster analysis
- Create a unified WNC Life Sciences Strategy connecting education, industry, agriculture, research, and economic development
- Expand workforce training programs in:
 - Biomanufacturing
 - Biotechnology
 - Fermentation sciences
 - Pharmaceutical production
 - Advanced manufacturing
 - Food and beverage innovation
- Increase collaboration among NC Biotechnology Center, universities, community colleges, chambers, and economic development partners
- Support growth of startup and emerging companies through incubators, accelerators, and innovation hubs
- Strengthen partnerships between agriculture and life sciences sectors
- Increase awareness of WNC’s strengths in natural products, nutraceuticals, and sustainable manufacturing
- Prepare industrial sites and infrastructure for future life sciences investment

5-Year Goals (Expansion and Competitive Advantage)

- Establish WNC as a recognized North Carolina hub for life sciences and biomanufacturing
- Increase the number of life sciences firms and high-wage jobs in the region
- Build stronger commercialization pathways between research institutions and industry
- Expand entrepreneurship and innovation support systems for rural life sciences companies
- Create stronger K-12, community college, and university career pathways into life sciences fields
- Grow partnerships with NC State University, Western Carolina University, and other research institutions
- Strengthen investor and venture capital networks supporting rural innovation
- Expand technical assistance, prototyping, and manufacturing innovation resources

- Develop a regional branding and recruitment strategy for life sciences investment

10-Year Goals (National Leadership and Innovation)

- Position WNC as a nationally recognized rural life sciences and biomanufacturing cluster
- Create one of the strongest rural life sciences workforce pipelines in the Southeast
- Attract major domestic and international life sciences employers and investment
- Build a fully integrated innovation ecosystem connecting:
 - Research institutions
 - Health Care systems
 - Manufacturers
 - Agriculture
 - Entrepreneurs
 - Workforce training providers
- Increase regional GDP and high-wage employment driven by health care and life sciences sectors
- Establish WNC as a leader in sustainable manufacturing, natural products innovation, and resilient supply chains
- Retain and attract scientists, engineers, technicians, entrepreneurs, and innovators to the region
- Position WNC as a model for how rural regions can successfully integrate health care, life sciences, workforce development, and economic development into one coordinated strategy

Question #3: What actions should we take in the next 3, 5, 10 years to accomplish these goals?

Health Care Sector Actions

Next 3 Years (Build the Foundation and Accelerate Workforce Capacity)

Workforce Development

- Launch regional “grow your own” health care pipelines with local school systems, community colleges, universities, and health care employers.
- Expand dual enrollment, youth apprenticeship, and paid work-based learning opportunities in:
 - CNA
 - Medical Assisting
 - EMS
 - Behavioral Health
 - Phlebotomy
 - Surgical Technology
- Create structured internal career ladders:
 - CNA → LPN → RN
 - MA → Surgical Tech
 - EMS → Nursing
- Expand evening, weekend, and accelerated health care cohorts to increase workforce throughput.

Infrastructure & Training Capacity

- Conduct a regional assessment of:
 - Clinical placement bottlenecks
 - Simulation lab needs
 - Faculty shortages
 - Housing and transportation barriers
- Invest in community college health care training facilities and simulation technologies.
- Begin planning and fundraising for a regional health care workforce training center in Henderson County.

Regional Coordination

- Establish a formal WNC health care coalition with:
 - Health Care systems
 - Community colleges
 - Universities
 - Economic development organizations
 - Workforce boards
 - Government partners
- Publish a regional health care workforce strategy with measurable goals and annual reporting.

Workforce Retention

- Pilot workforce retention initiatives:
 - Child Care partnerships
 - Flexible scheduling
 - Housing supports
 - Leadership development
 - Tuition assistance

Health Care Operations

- Improve operational collaboration among health care providers around:
 - Transfer coordination
 - Behavioral health access
 - Home health
 - Post-acute care capacity
 - Telehealth expansion

Next 5 Years (Scale Capacity and Regional Differentiation)

Health Care Access & Infrastructure

- Expand ambulatory care access points and specialty services across rural communities.

- Secure funding for:
 - Expanded imaging
 - Laboratory infrastructure
 - Digital health connectivity
 - Telehealth systems
- Pursue development of additional clinical training sites throughout the region.

Workforce Innovation

- Establish a WNC Center of Excellence for Rural Health Care Workforce & Operations focused on:
 - Leadership development
 - Applied improvement science
 - Workforce innovation
 - Rural health care research
- Create regional health care apprenticeship models tied directly to employment guarantees.

Policy & Partnerships

- Work with state and federal agencies to pursue:
 - Workforce innovation waivers
 - Pilot programs
 - Flexible regulatory models
- Strengthen collaboration between:
 - UNC Health
 - MAHEC
 - Regional community colleges
 - Regional health systems
 - Insurers
 - Philanthropic foundations

Data & Accountability

- Build a regional health care data and analytics system to monitor:
 - Workforce supply/demand
 - Access metrics
 - Health outcomes
 - Retention rates
 - Educational attainment

Next 10 Years (Transform the Regional Health Care Ecosystem)

Health Care Capacity

- Advocate for and support development of an additional tertiary care hospital or major specialty care expansion in Western North Carolina.
- Significantly expand behavioral health, specialty care, and rural primary care access throughout the region.

National Leadership

- Position WNC as a national model for:
 - Rural health care delivery
 - Workforce innovation
 - Regional health care collaboration
 - Community-based health care research

Resilience & Sustainability

- Develop regionally coordinated emergency preparedness systems focused on:
 - Staffing surge capacity
 - Supply chain resilience
 - Climate readiness
 - Disaster recovery
- Build a sustainable, lifelong health care workforce pipeline from K–12 through advanced clinical and leadership education.

Life Sciences Sector Actions

Next 3 Years (Organize the Ecosystem and Build Talent)

Regional Leadership & Governance

- Designate a regional life sciences champion organization or coalition to:
 - Coordinate strategy
 - Align partners
 - Drive implementation
 - Recruit industry
 - Connect WNC to RTP and other innovation hubs.

Workforce Development

- Expand STEM/STEAM programming across K–12 systems with intentional alignment to:
 - Biotechnology
 - Advanced manufacturing
 - Health Care technology
 - Research careers
- Create life sciences curriculum pathways at community colleges and universities focused on:
 - GMP

- Quality systems
- Biomanufacturing
- Safety culture
- Laboratory operations

Innovation Infrastructure

- Identify and strengthen existing:
 - Innovation hubs
 - Incubators
 - Entrepreneurial support systems
 - Research partnerships
- Create stronger rural-urban innovation connections with RTP and university systems.

Industry Engagement

- Convene life sciences employers regularly to align workforce training with industry needs.
- Develop internship and apprenticeship programs tied directly to regional employers.

Next 5 Years (Grow the Cluster and Expand Regional Competitiveness)

Industry Recruitment & Expansion

- Recruit biotechnology manufacturing and health care technology firms that align with WNC workforce strengths.
- Market WNC as a destination for:
 - Innovation-based employers
 - Rural research partnerships
 - Applied manufacturing
 - Workforce innovation

Innovation & Entrepreneurship

- Expand incubator and accelerator capacity to support startup formation and commercialization.
- Develop stronger venture capital and entrepreneurial networks in the region.

Workforce Mobility

- Create seamless workforce pathways allowing movement between:
 - Health Care
 - Biotechnology
 - Advanced manufacturing
 - Research support roles
- Expand earn-and-learn apprenticeship models in:
 - Biomanufacturing

- Lab technology
- Facilities operations
- IT/cybersecurity
- Manufacturing technology

Collaboration & Policy

- Pursue pilot project status and regulatory flexibility to support public-private collaboration across health care and life sciences sectors.

Next 10 Years (Establish a Nationally Recognized Innovation Corridor)

Regional Innovation Economy

- Position WNC as a nationally recognized rural life sciences and health care innovation corridor.
- Develop a mature ecosystem that includes:
 - Research partnerships
 - Venture capital
 - Startup incubation
 - Manufacturing expansion
 - Workforce development

Applied Research & Commercialization

- Expand industry-sponsored research and community-based innovation initiatives.
- Establish WNC as a leader in rural applied research and commercialization.

Long-Term Talent Pipeline

- Create a deeply connected educational ecosystem beginning in K–12 and extending through:
 - Community colleges
 - Universities
 - Graduate education
 - Workforce retraining
 - Executive leadership development

Regional Integration

- Fully integrate health care, life sciences, advanced manufacturing, and economic development strategies into a coordinated regional innovation framework supporting long-term economic resilience and higher-wage job growth.

Question #4: What should our measurable outcomes be?

Measurable Outcomes — Health Care Sector (Western North Carolina)

Workforce Development Outcomes

- Increase the number of health care graduates annually in:
 - Nursing (ADN and PN)
 - EMS/Paramedic
 - Medical Assisting
 - Surgical Technology
 - Behavioral Health
 - Allied Health programs
- Increase health care workforce retention rates at:
 - 1 year
 - 3 years
 - 5 years
- Increase the percentage of local health care workers trained and retained in Western North Carolina.
- Increase internal advancement rates:
 - CNA → LPN
 - LPN → RN
 - MA → Surgical Tech
 - EMS → Nursing
- Increase the number of apprenticeships, internships, and paid clinical placements.
- Reduce vacancy and turnover rates for critical health care positions regionwide.

Access & Health Care Delivery Outcomes

- Reduce average patient wait times for:
 - Primary care
 - Behavioral health
 - Specialty services
- Increase telehealth utilization and broadband-enabled health care access.
- Increase regional clinical placement capacity:
 - Number of preceptors
 - Clinical training slots
 - Simulation lab capacity
- Increase health care service access points in rural counties.
- Improve health care system operational metrics:
 - ED-to-inpatient flow
 - Transfer coordination
 - Post-acute placement
 - Behavioral health access

Economic & Community Outcomes

- Increase regional health care employment growth.
- Increase health care-related wages and career mobility.
- Increase employer participation in workforce partnerships.
- Increase funding secured for health care workforce and infrastructure investments.
- Increase regional economic impact tied to health care expansion.
- Improve regional quality-of-life indicators connected to health care access and workforce stability.

Infrastructure & Innovation Outcomes

- Establish a regional health care workforce training center.
- Increase investment in:
 - Simulation labs
 - Workforce facilities
 - Telehealth infrastructure
 - Rural health care facilities
- Increase collaborative projects between health care systems, educational institutions, and government agencies.
- Publish annual “State of Health Care Workforce in WNC” metrics and dashboards.

Measurable Outcomes — Life Sciences Sector (Western North Carolina)

Workforce & Talent Outcomes

- Increase the number of students completing STEM/STEAM and life sciences pathways.
- Increase graduates in:
 - Biotechnology
 - Advanced Manufacturing
 - Quality Systems
 - Laboratory Technology
 - GMP-related programs
- Increase the percentage of graduates employed in regional life sciences industries.
- Increase industry-recognized credential attainment in life sciences and manufacturing sectors.
- Increase apprenticeship and internship participation in life sciences companies.

Industry Growth Outcomes

- Increase the number of life sciences companies locating or expanding in WNC.
- Increase life sciences-related job creation and average wages.
- Increase capital investment in:
 - Biomanufacturing
 - Research facilities
 - Innovation infrastructure

- Incubator and accelerator spaces
- Increase the number of startups and entrepreneurial ventures launched in WNC.
- Increase venture capital and private-sector investment in regional innovation initiatives.

Innovation & Research Outcomes

- Increase the number of industry-sponsored research and applied innovation projects.
- Increase partnerships between:
 - Community colleges
 - Universities
 - Health Care systems
 - Industry
 - Economic development organizations
- Increase commercialization and technology-transfer activity.
- Establish regional innovation hubs and collaborative governance structures.

Regional Competitiveness Outcomes

- Increase WNC's share of North Carolina's life sciences employment and investment.
- Increase urban-rural collaboration projects with RTP and other innovation ecosystems.
- Increase national recognition and rankings for WNC as an emerging rural innovation corridor.
- Increase broadband, infrastructure, and facility readiness for life sciences expansion.

Economic & Community Outcomes

- Increase median wages in targeted innovation sectors.
- Increase economic diversification across rural counties.
- Increase local retention of highly skilled graduates and professionals.
- Increase participation of rural and underserved communities in innovation-based careers.
- Improve overall regional economic resilience and long-term sustainability.

Shared Regional Outcomes Across Both Sectors

Regional Collaboration

- Establish formal regional governance and coordination structures.
- Increase cross-sector collaboration between:
 - Education
 - Health Care
 - Industry
 - Government
 - Philanthropy
 - Economic development

Infrastructure & Resilience

- Increase resilience planning for:
 - Health Care continuity
 - Workforce stability
 - Broadband and digital access
 - Emergency preparedness
- Increase housing and child care supports tied to workforce retention.

Quality of Life

- Improve regional population health indicators.
- Increase access to high-wage careers.
- Reduce workforce shortages in critical sectors.
- Increase overall regional prosperity and economic competitiveness



Arts & Culture, Tourism

LINE OF EFFORT

WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA

ECONOMIC RECOVERY INITIATIVE

Tourism, Arts & Culture Subcommittee

Goals, Policy Recommendations & Funding Mechanisms

Advisory Board to the Governor of North Carolina | Post-Hurricane Helene Recovery Plan

Executive Summary

Hurricane Helene's devastation of Western North Carolina in September 2024 struck at the heart of the region's economic identity. Tourism and the creative economy are not peripheral features of WNC's economic landscape—they are its foundation. The arts and entertainment sector generated 38.1% of all business revenue in Buncombe County in 2025, tourism supports more than 9,200 jobs and fuels a \$1.64 billion creative economy, and more than 80,000 people across the affected counties were employed in leisure and hospitality before the storm.

Despite some measurable recovery in retail sales and consumer spending, the tourism sector remains significantly suppressed. Lodging revenue in Buncombe County was down 21% from year-ago levels as of summer 2025, and airport traffic at Asheville Regional remained below pre-storm benchmarks. Full recovery will require sustained, coordinated action across government, the private sector, the philanthropic community, and the creative sector itself—guided by a clear set of goals, specific policy commitments, and a well-understood funding architecture.



This document sets forth the Tourism, Arts & Culture Subcommittee’s recommended goals and policy language for the Governor’s Advisory Board, organized in three recovery phases, followed by a comprehensive inventory of federal, state, and private funding mechanisms available to WNC communities.

Part I: Recovery Goals

Goals are organized across three time horizons. Each goal is paired with measurable success indicators to enable accountability and reporting.

Phase 1 Goals: Stabilize & Signal (2025–2026)

Goal 1.1 — Restore Visitor Confidence Through Clear, Honest Communication

Western North Carolina will establish a unified, authoritative, and regularly updated public information platform that provides county-by-county status of tourism assets, trail access, roads, venues, and cultural destinations—enabling visitors to make informed decisions and eliminating the ambiguity that keeps potential visitors away.

Success Indicators:

- Visitor confidence index (survey-based) returns to or exceeds pre-Helene baseline within 18 months
- Asheville Regional Airport passenger traffic restored to within 5% of 2023 levels by December 2026
- VisitNC Travel Advisory map maintained with weekly updates through full recovery period

Goal 1.2 — Provide Emergency Economic Stabilization to Artists, Artisans, and Cultural Workers

Western North Carolina will ensure that individual working artists, craft workers, musicians, and cultural practitioners—not only institutions—receive direct, accessible emergency stabilization funding during the period of depressed tourism demand, recognizing that the departure of creative workers is an irreversible cultural and economic loss.

Success Indicators:

- At least 2,000 individual artists and cultural workers across 26 Helene-affected counties receive direct stabilization support
- No more than 30-day lag between application opening and first disbursements for artist emergency grant programs
- Dedicated funding pipeline established for non-Buncombe County artists in rural communities

Goal 1.3 — Stabilize the Small Business Tourism Ecosystem

Western North Carolina will prevent the permanent closure of tourism-dependent small businesses—including galleries, music venues, studios, inns, outfitters, and restaurants—through targeted bridge financing, revenue replacement grants, and technical assistance during the extended recovery period.

Success Indicators:

- Tourism business closure rate in affected counties does not exceed 15% above pre-Helene baseline
- At least \$60 million in combined state and federal business recovery grants and bridge loans disbursed to WNC tourism businesses by end of 2026
- Technical assistance (application support, financial counseling) available in all 26 disaster-declared counties

Phase 2 Goals: Rebuild with Intention (2026–2029)

Goal 2.1 — Adopt and Fully Fund a Comprehensive Regional Arts Recovery Framework

Western North Carolina will formally adopt, fund, and implement a comprehensive arts and cultural recovery framework—building on the 2026 ArtsAVL Asheville-Buncombe Arts Recovery Framework—and extend its reach to all 26 Helene-affected counties through coordinated regional planning. Arts and culture will be treated as essential economic infrastructure, not a discretionary add-on, in all recovery planning and funding decisions.

Success Indicators:

- Governor’s Advisory Board formally endorses and transmits the ArtsAVL framework to the legislature with funding requests by September 2026
- At least \$10 million in dedicated arts and cultural infrastructure recovery funding committed through state and CDBG-DR mechanisms by end of 2026
- All 26 disaster-declared counties have active arts recovery liaisons or equivalent by mid-2027. This should either be or include the Arts Council so that this does not set up competing efforts with the Arts Council.

Goal 2.2 — Designate, Protect, and Invest in Cultural Districts and Creative Corridors

Western North Carolina will formally designate and invest in a network of cultural districts and creative corridors across the region—including the River Arts District in Asheville, the Black Mountain arts corridor, the Craft Heritage Trail, the folk music and Appalachian cultural zones of Yancey, Mitchell, and Madison Counties, and Cherokee cultural heritage sites—providing them with dedicated zoning protections, infrastructure investment, programming support, and coordinated marketing.

Success Indicators:

- Designate or organize a clearly defined champion to lead the collective region
- Minimum of 8 formal cultural district designations established across WNC by 2028
- At least \$25 million in public and private infrastructure investment directed to cultural district recovery and enhancement by 2029
- River Arts District achieves full pre-Helene studio and gallery occupancy by 2028
- Cherokee Eastern Band cultural tourism programming expanded by at least 25% over pre-Helene levels by 2029

Goal 2.3 — Build a Resilient, Regionally Coordinated Destination Management System

Western North Carolina will establish a coordinated regional Destination Management Organization (DMO) architecture that provides unified recovery marketing, product development, visitor research, and strategic planning capacity across WNC counties—transcending county-by-county fragmentation while preserving local identity and voice.

Success Indicators:

- A formal WNC Regional Tourism Recovery Consortium is chartered and staffed by 2027
- Regional visitor spending returns to or exceeds 2023 benchmark levels across all Helene-affected counties by 2028
- A unified annual visitor research program is established and publicly reported

Goal 2.4 — Grow and Retain the Creative Workforce

Western North Carolina will invest in programs that keep creative workers—artists, musicians, craftspeople, cultural educators, hospitality workers, and event producers—in the region through affordable work and live space, apprenticeship and workforce development programs, and artist-in-residency models that connect creatives to the recovery process itself.

Success Indicators:

- At least 500 affordable live/work units for artists and creative workers in pipeline or developed by 2029
- At least three regional creative workforce development programs launched and serving a combined 1,000+ participants annually by 2028
- Artist and creative worker net out-migration from WNC reverses by 2027 relative to 2024–2025 levels

Phase 3 Goals: Lead & Endure (2029–2034)

Goal 3.1 — Establish WNC as a National Model for Arts-Led Disaster Recovery

Western North Carolina will document, publish, and share its recovery model nationally—positioning the region as a case study in how arts, culture, and tourism can serve as primary drivers of disaster recovery rather than secondary beneficiaries—attracting future investment, academic attention, and philanthropic support.

Success Indicators:

- WNC regional case study published and presented at national tourism and arts policy venues by 2030
- At least two national foundations or federal programs cite WNC as a model for future disaster recovery frameworks

Goal 3.2 — Build Long-Term Disaster Resilience into the Creative Economy

Western North Carolina will require all publicly funded cultural venues, arts organizations, and tourism facilities to develop and maintain emergency preparedness plans, establish off-site backup systems for collections and records, maintain business continuity protocols, and meet resilient construction standards for any new or reconstructed facility—ensuring the region is materially prepared for future climate events.

Success Indicators:

- 100% of publicly funded cultural institutions have current emergency preparedness plans on file by 2028
- All new cultural infrastructure receiving public funding meets or exceeds current FEMA flood/hazard resilience standards
- A WNC Creative Economy Disaster Resilience Index is established and published annually beginning 2027

Goal 3.3 — Institutionalize the Creative Economy as a Permanent Economic Development Priority

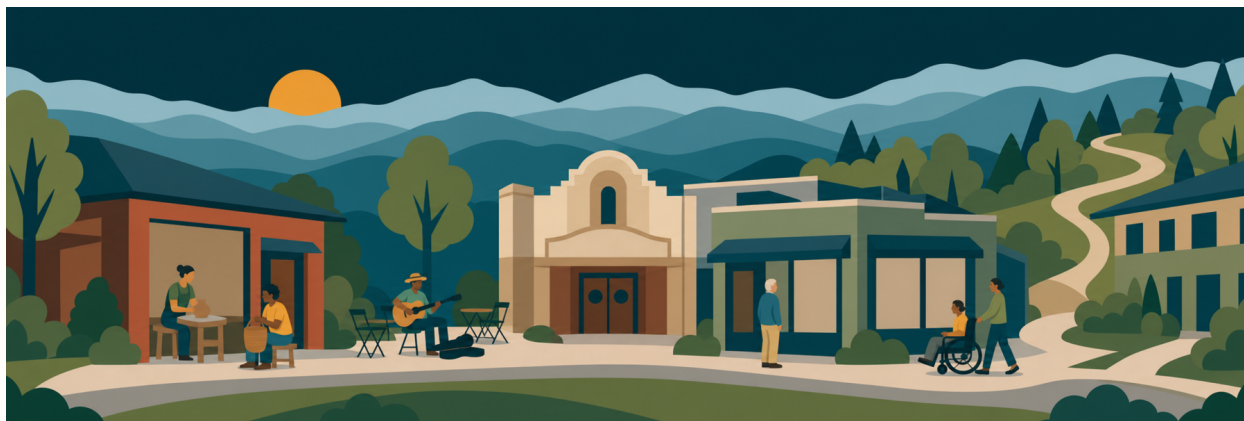
Western North Carolina will embed arts, culture, and creative industries as permanent pillars of economic development strategy at state, regional, and county levels—including dedicated line items in economic development budgets, standing representation on economic development boards, and a regular biennial creative economy measurement and reporting cycle.

Success Indicators:

- Arts and culture represented in all WNC county Comprehensive Plans

- Cultivating Arts and Creative Economy is included in all regional Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies (CEDS) by 2027
- A biennial WNC Creative Economy Report is institutionalized with state Commerce Department support
- Tourism, arts, and culture collectively account for at least 20% of all WNC economic development investment by 2030

Part II: Policy Recommendations



The following policy recommendations are organized by category. Each recommendation includes a specific policy action, the responsible entity, and the policy rationale. Language is drafted to be adapted into legislative, executive, and regulatory instruments.

A. State Government Policy Actions

Policy Recommendation A-1: Designate Tourism, Arts, and Culture as Primary Economic Recovery Sectors

Recommended Policy Language

The General Assembly of North Carolina hereby finds that tourism, arts, and cultural industries constitute primary economic infrastructure of Western North Carolina and are essential to the long-term recovery of communities affected by Hurricane Helene. State economic recovery resources shall treat the stabilization and rebuilding of tourism, arts, and cultural enterprises as a co-equal priority with physical infrastructure reconstruction. The Department of Commerce shall designate a senior position dedicated to Creative Economy and Tourism Recovery for Western North Carolina, with a minimum four-year term, funded through Helene recovery appropriations.

Responsible Entities: NC General Assembly; NC Department of Commerce

Rationale: Without explicit legislative designation, arts and tourism recovery funding competes against housing, roads, and utilities and consistently loses. Puerto Rico’s experience and the Maui recovery commission model both demonstrate that explicit statutory elevation is required to ensure sustained resource allocation.

Policy Recommendation A-2: Mandate Arts and Culture Set-Asides in All WNC CDBG-DR Expenditures

Recommended Policy Language

Of all Community Development Block Grant—Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) funds allocated to western North Carolina counties and municipalities for Hurricane Helene recovery, not less than 10 percent shall be designated for activities that directly support arts and cultural infrastructure, creative economy business recovery, artist live/work space development, public art and placemaking, or cultural district development. The NC Department of Commerce shall issue implementing guidance within 90 days of enactment establishing eligible uses, reporting requirements, and an expedited application process for arts and cultural organizations.

Responsible Entities: NC General Assembly; NC Department of Commerce; local CDBG-DR grantees

Rationale: CDBG-DR is the largest single federal recovery funding stream available to WNC communities. Without an explicit set-aside, arts and cultural uses—which are eligible but discretionary—will be crowded out by housing and infrastructure applications that are more familiar to local program administrators. Consideration should be given to connect artists and other creatives to the other 90% of funding by thinking critically around procurements, and including preference for inclusion of local creative talent and for including design elements that reflect locally-sourced artisan made upgrades, where feasible.

Policy Recommendation A-3: Establish the WNC Creative Economy Stabilization Fund

Recommended Policy Language

There is hereby established in the State Treasury a Western North Carolina Creative Economy Stabilization Fund (the “Fund”). The Fund shall receive an initial appropriation of not less than \$15 million from Hurricane Helene recovery reserves. The Fund shall be administered by the North Carolina Arts Council in partnership with regional arts organizations and shall be used exclusively to: (a) provide direct stabilization grants to individual artists, artisans, musicians, and cultural workers of up to \$10,000 per recipient; (b) provide operational grants to nonprofit arts and cultural organizations of up to \$100,000; and (c) provide matching grants of up to \$500,000 to communities establishing permanent cultural emergency preparedness programs. The Fund shall remain open for applications for a minimum of four years from the date of initial appropriation.

Responsible Entities: NC General Assembly; NC Arts Council; regional arts organizations

Rationale: Existing emergency arts funding (the NC Arts Disaster Relief Fund, CERF+, ArtsAVL grants) has been critical but is philanthropically funded and insufficient in scale. A state-capitalized, professionally administered stabilization fund modeled on Puerto Rico’s Flamboyant Foundation arts recovery fund provides durable, reliable support.

Policy Recommendation A-4: Create a WNC Tourism Recovery Tax Credit

Recommended Policy Language

For taxable years 2026 through 2030, a taxpayer that makes a qualifying investment in a tourism, arts, or cultural business located in a Hurricane Helene disaster-declared county in western North Carolina shall be allowed a credit against the taxes imposed by G.S. Chapter 105 equal to 25 percent of the qualifying investment, not to exceed \$250,000 per taxpayer per year. Qualifying investments include: capital improvements to tourism facilities, acquisition of equipment or instruments by performing artists or artisans, renovation of gallery, studio, or performance space, and creation of affordable live/work housing for creative workers. The Department of Revenue shall develop expedited certification procedures for qualifying investments within 120 days of enactment.

Responsible Entities: NC General Assembly; NC Department of Revenue

Rationale: A time-limited recovery tax credit incentivizes private capital investment in the tourism and creative economy at a critical moment when conventional lenders remain cautious. New Orleans used a combination of historic tax credits and targeted cultural investment incentives to catalyze its post-Katrina arts district recovery.

Policy Recommendation A-5: Strengthen and Expand the VisitNC WNC Recovery Campaign

Recommended Policy Language

The Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina (EDPNC), through its VisitNC division, shall maintain dedicated Western North Carolina Tourism Recovery marketing funding at a minimum of \$8 million per year for fiscal years 2026–2028. Recovery marketing shall include: (a) a sustained multi-platform visitor confidence campaign targeted at drive-market visitors within 500 miles; (b) a coordinated earned media and travel journalist program focused on authentic recovery storytelling; (c) direct sub-grants to local Tourism Development Authorities in Helene-affected counties for locally tailored recovery marketing; and (d) an annual WNC Regional Tourism Recovery Summit convening DMOs, arts organizations, businesses, and state agencies. Marketing materials shall prominently feature arts, culture, and the creative economy as signature WNC visitor assets.

Responsible Entities: NC General Assembly (appropriations); EDPNC/VisitNC; local TDAs

Rationale: New Orleans' CVB demonstrated that sustained, well-funded destination marketing was among the single most important drivers of tourism recovery post-Katrina. WNC's current VisitNC campaign has been critical but requires multi-year commitment and deeper county-level reach to fully restore visitor confidence.

B. County and Municipal Policy Actions



Policy Recommendation B-1: Adopt Cultural District Zoning Protections

Recommended Policy Language

Each county and municipality within the Hurricane Helene disaster-declared area is encouraged to adopt, within 18 months, a Cultural District Overlay Zoning designation for identified concentrations of arts, cultural, and creative businesses. Such overlay shall: (a) prohibit conversion of designated arts and cultural spaces to non-creative commercial uses without Planning Board review and community input; (b) provide a streamlined permitting process for arts and cultural uses; (c) allow live/work units for artists by right in designated districts; and (d) establish minimum affordability requirements for any publicly subsidized studio or gallery space in the district. The NC Department of Commerce shall provide model ordinance language and technical assistance upon request.

Responsible Entities: County and municipal governments; NC Department of Commerce (model ordinance support)

Policy Recommendation B-2: Require Arts and Culture Impact Analysis in Recovery Planning**Recommended Policy Language**

Any local government recovery plan, CDBG-DR action plan, or comprehensive plan update prepared in a Hurricane Helene disaster-declared county shall include a dedicated Arts, Culture, and Creative Economy chapter that: (a) inventories existing arts and cultural assets, spaces, and organizations; (b) documents Helene-related losses and ongoing impacts to the creative sector; (c) identifies specific recovery strategies and funding commitments; and (d) designates a responsible local entity for implementation and annual reporting. Local governments are encouraged to partner with ArtsAVL, the NC Arts Council, and regional arts organizations to develop this analysis.

Responsible Entities: County and municipal governments; NC Arts Council (technical assistance)

C. Regional Coordination Policy Actions

Policy Recommendation C-1: Establish the WNC Regional Tourism & Creative Economy Recovery Consortium

Recommended Policy Language

The Governor's Office, in partnership with the NC Department of Commerce, shall convene and support a Western North Carolina Regional Tourism and Creative Economy Recovery Consortium (the "Consortium"), to be operational no later than January 1, 2027. The Consortium shall include representatives of: county Tourism Development Authorities from all 26 Helene-affected counties; the NC Arts Council; ArtsAVL; the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians; regional Chambers of Commerce; the outdoor recreation and nature tourism sector; higher education institutions with arts, hospitality, and tourism programs; and at least five working artists or craftspeople resident in WNC. The Consortium shall: (a) develop and maintain a unified WNC Tourism & Creative Economy Recovery Plan updated annually; (b) coordinate federal, state, and private recovery funding applications to minimize duplication and maximize regional benefit; (c) manage the WNC Regional Tourism Recovery data and visitor research program; and (d) report annually to the Governor and General Assembly on recovery progress.

Responsible Entities: Governor's Office; NC Department of Commerce; regional TDAs and arts organizations

Policy Recommendation C-2: Launch a WNC Craft, Heritage, and Cultural Tourism Signature Product Development Initiative

Recommended Policy Language

The NC Department of Commerce and VisitNC shall, in partnership with the Consortium, develop and launch a Western North Carolina Craft, Heritage, and Cultural Tourism Signature Product Initiative within 18 months. This initiative shall create marketable, bookable visitor experiences anchored in WNC’s distinctive creative and cultural assets, including: the Southern Highland Craft Guild heritage trail; Appalachian music and storytelling experiences in the High Country and river counties; Cherokee cultural immersion experiences in partnership with the Eastern Band; literary and arts district walking and cycling routes; and farm-to-table and craft beverage experiences that integrate local artisan culture. The initiative shall prioritize experiences that draw visitors to rural and smaller communities beyond Asheville.

Responsible Entities: NC Department of Commerce; VisitNC; WNC Recovery Consortium; EBCI; Southern Highland Craft Guild

Part III: Funding Mechanisms



The following is a detailed inventory of federal, state, and private funding sources available to WNC communities for tourism, arts, and cultural recovery. Sources are organized by type and include program purpose, eligible applicants, award amounts, application status, and contacts where available. The Subcommittee recommends that the Recovery Consortium, once established, maintain a living version of this inventory updated quarterly.

A. Federal Funding Sources

Table D-3. Federal funding sources

Program	Award Range	Type	Status/Deadline	Agency/URL
EDA FY2025 Disaster Supplemental — Implementation Path	\$100K–\$20M (non-construction); \$2M–\$20M (construction)	Grant	Rolling until funds exhausted	eda.gov/supplemental/2025
EDA FY2025 Disaster Supplemental — Readiness Path	\$250K–\$500K	Grant (capacity/planning)	Rolling until funds exhausted	eda.gov/supplemental/2025
EDA	Funds vary depending on funding appropriation	Grant	Deadlines vary based on appropriation.	eda.gov/contacts contact the NC representative for details
HUD CDBG-DR (via NC OSBM/Commerce)	Varies; NC received ~\$225M (Asheville)	Grant (to local govts)	NC Action Plan underway; sub-grants expected 2026	commerce.nc.gov/cdbg-dr
NEA Grants for Arts Projects (GAP)	\$10K–\$100K	Grant	Next cycle: check arts.gov	arts.gov/grants/gap
NEA Our Town — Creative Placemaking	\$25K–\$150K	Matching grant	Annual; partnership reqd.	arts.gov/grants/our-town
SBA Economic Injury Disaster Loans (EIDL)	Up to \$2M per business	Low-interest loan	Open; check sba.gov for WNC deadlines	sba.gov/disaster
SBA Physical Damage Loans	Up to \$2M per business	Low-interest loan	Check current WNC declaration status	sba.gov/disaster
FEMA Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP)	Varies; 25% local match	Grant (infrastructure resilience)	Available post-declaration; NCEM administers	ncdps.gov/NCEM
USDA Community Facilities Program	Grants + loans for rural communities	Grant/loan	Rolling; rural areas only	rd.usda.gov
USDA Rural Business Development Grant	Up to \$500K	Grant	Rolling	rd.usda.gov/programs

Program	Award Range	Type	Status/Deadline	Agency/URL
Dept. of Labor Disaster Recovery Dislocated Worker Grant	Workforce re-employment services	Grant (to state/county)	NC already received; expand via NCWorks	dol.gov/agencies/eta

Note on EDA Funding: EDA's \$1.45 billion FY2025 Disaster Supplemental is available on a rolling, competitive basis. WNC communities should prioritize submitting applications for both the Readiness Path (planning grants) and Implementation Path (construction and non-construction projects that diversify the regional economy or accelerate growth in strategic industries, including tourism and the creative economy). EDA explicitly encourages projects involving private industry partners.

B. North Carolina State Funding Sources

Table D-4. North Carolina state funding sources

Program	Award Range	Type	Notes & Contact
NC Arts Council — Organizational Support Grants	Varies by program	Grant	Annual cycle; for 501(c)(3) arts orgs. Subcommittee recommends enhanced disaster set-aside. ncarts.org
NC Arts Disaster Relief Fund (NC Arts Foundation)	Up to \$5,000 (individual); larger for orgs	Emergency grant	Launched 2 days after Helene; ~\$1M raised; 1,500+ artists & 69 orgs served. ncartsfoundation.org
NC SmBIZ — Small Business Infrastructure Grant	~\$32M remaining	Grant (to local govts)	Restores public infrastructure serving small businesses. First-come basis. commerce.nc.gov
VisitNC Recovery Marketing Funds (EDPNC)	Legislative appropriation	Marketing grants + campaigns	Sub-grants to local TDAs; campaign extended through 2025. Subcommittee recommends expanded multi-year appropriation. visitnc.com
NC Hurricane Helene Cash-Flow Loan Program	Varies	Loan (to local govts)	Revenue replacement for local governments. Round 2 open. wncrecovery.nc.gov
PARTF — Parks & Recreation Trust Fund (Helene Recovery)	No max specified	Matching grant	Park and recreation projects serving the public. Application deadline passed but watch for future rounds. ncparks.gov/PARTF

C. Philanthropic & Private Sector Funding Sources

Table D-5. Philanthropic and private sector funding sources

Source	Focus Area	Notes
Community Foundation of WNC — WNC Long Haul Recovery Fund	Arts, businesses, individuals	\$33M+ contributed; \$21M+ awarded; grants to nonprofits. Arts & culture is an explicit priority. cfwnc.org
Dogwood Health Trust	WNC community resilience	Major WNC-focused foundation; funded PBS NC recovery storytelling. Potential major partner for cultural resilience grants. dogwoodhealthtrust.org
ArtsAVL — Arts Business Relief Grants	Arts businesses	Currently seeded by \$150K City of Asheville CDBG reallocation. For salaries, fees, production, promotion. Eligible across 26 counties. artsavl.org
CERF+ (Craft Emergency Relief Fund)	Individual craft artists	National emergency relief for professional craft artists. Equipment, tools, workspace. cerfplus.org
Mountain BizWorks — WNC Strong Fund	Small business loans	Rapid recovery loans up to \$100K; <100 employees; 6+ months operating history. mountainbizworks.org
National Coalition for Arts Preparedness & Emergency Response (NCAPER)	Arts preparedness	Resource hub, trainings, and tools for arts sector preparedness. ncaper.org
WNC Tip It Forward (GBX Group / AIR / ArtsAVL)	Culinary & creative workers	Relief grants for culinary and creative workers. Model for expanding private-sector employer-funded relief. artsavl.org

D. Funding Strategy Recommendations

The Subcommittee recommends the following strategic actions to maximize total funding capture for WNC tourism, arts, and cultural recovery:

- Assign a dedicated Federal Grants Coordinator for Tourism & Creative Economy Recovery within the Recovery Consortium, responsible for tracking all open funding opportunities, coordinating applications across counties to avoid duplication, and providing technical assistance to smaller rural counties with limited grant-writing capacity. One idea would be to leverage the work that the WNC COGS already do in this area and designate one of them to perform this or clarify as a collaborative effort.
- Stack funding sources strategically. Many programs allow or require matching funds. State and philanthropic dollars (CFWNC, Dogwood, ArtsAVL) can serve as match for federal programs (EDA, CDBG-DR, NEA Our Town), dramatically increasing total resources available.
- Prioritize EDA FY2025 Disaster Supplemental applications immediately. The program is rolling and competitive—resources will be exhausted. WNC should submit both Readiness Path applications (for planning and coordination capacity) and Implementation Path applications (for cultural district infrastructure, tourism product development, and creative workforce programs) without delay.

- Engage the Governor’s Office to advocate for a WNC-specific carve-out or priority designation in future rounds of state and federal recovery appropriations, modeled on Puerto Rico’s COR3 model and Maui’s Economic Recovery Commission.
- Develop a private sector fundraising strategy targeting national foundations with disaster arts recovery programs (Ford Foundation, Mellon Foundation, Bloomberg Philanthropies) and WNC-connected corporate donors, setting a target of \$20 million in private philanthropy for arts and cultural recovery over four years.
- Monitor the NC CDBG-DR Action Plan process closely and ensure arts and cultural uses are explicitly named as eligible and prioritized activities in final action plans for all Helene-affected jurisdictions.

Conclusion



The evidence from New Orleans, Puerto Rico, Maui, and now Western North Carolina itself is unambiguous: arts, culture, and tourism are not secondary beneficiaries of economic recovery—they are primary drivers of it. In WNC, the creative economy is the economy in ways that dwarf most other sectors. Recovery that neglects these industries will be recovery in name only.

The goals and policy recommendations in this document are grounded in what has worked elsewhere, tailored to WNC’s specific strengths and circumstances, and designed to be actionable at the state, regional, and local level. The funding mechanisms described here are real, available, and in many cases urgently time-sensitive. This committee’s work to advance these recommendations is itself a critical act of recovery.

Prepared by: Tourism, Arts & Culture Subcommittee

Governor’s Advisory Board for WNC Economic Recovery



Housing

LINE OF EFFORT

Assets

Western North Carolina assets in the housing sphere include:

- Collaborative and effective nonprofit organizations
- Pockets of local leaders who recognize that housing affordability is a real challenge for the region
- Strong Councils of Government
- Philanthropic partners deeply connected to and invested in housing issues
- Multi-generational WNC residents and families

Goals and Potential Actions (these have not been prioritized)

- Goal 1: Increase and promote opportunities for construction trades training and certifications through the state's 2- and 4-year colleges and universities.
- Goal 2: Increase the housing stock for low/moderate income families (60% to 80% AMI).
- Action 2.1: NC General Assembly could pass legislation providing funding and/or incentives for non- or for-profit developers to build housing for individuals and families in this AMI range.
- Action 2.2: Provide incentives for landlords and rental companies to reserve a % of total units for low/moderate income individuals and families
- Action 2.3: Provide stipend, loan, or reimbursement for new-home construction infrastructure such as site prep, land clearing, road installation, water/power connections when built for low/moderate income homes and neighborhoods. (These infrastructure costs, on top of new home construction, significantly impact a new-home construction budget.)
- Goal 3: Increase the development of workforce housing for home ownership or market rate rental units targeting the “missing middle” (households at >80% AMI)
- Action 3.1: NC General Assembly could pass legislation providing funding and/or incentives for non- or for-profit developers to build workforce housing projects.
- Goal 4: Facilitate the development of and coordinate local and regional housing action plans across WNC.
- Goal 5: Ensure adequate and accessible local water/sewer infrastructure for housing development.
- Action 5.1: Explore the impact of residential and commercial “impact fees” on development.
- Action 5.2: Revise the NC discharge schedule for commercial uses.
- Action 5.3: Add capacity at local Councils of Government to help municipalities find and apply for grants for infrastructure development and/or expansion.



Measurable outcomes

- Number of credentials for construction trades in the region

- Number of rental units for low/moderate AMI households
- Number of single-family housing units for low/moderate AMI households
- Number of workforce rental units for >80% AMI households
- Number of workforce for home ownership units for >80% AMI households
- Linear feet of water/sewer infrastructure for development

This input incorporates contributions from several non-subcommittee members, including Nathan Godwin, Director of Development, Watauga County Habitat for Humanity; Stacie Pineda, Realtor; James Milner, Appalachian Commercial Real Estate; and Kelli Reed Ashcraft, Director, Watauga Housing Council.



Agriculture

LINE OF EFFORT

Strengthening Agriculture Sector in WNC

Western North Carolina has abundant and economically important assets. In developing a stronger, more resilient region it is important to build and enhance the agriculture sector as a foundation for this work.

WNC Agriculture Assets

Western North Carolina has many strong assets in the agriculture sector, including:

- **Strong sense of place and local food identity.** Local communities across Western North Carolina have built economic value based on brand of connected ecosystem of farms, restaurants, and markets based on locally grown and locally made products. From an economic perspective it is important to elevate that this identity is not unique to a single brand or location: while there are products and places that may have higher name recognition there is an overarching connection to Western North Carolina agriculture that is stronger than many other states or parts of states enjoy. Organizations like ASAP (Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project) have elevated ag tourism in Western North Carolina, letting smaller farms, markets, and restaurants connect, essentially forming corridors of economic value for the region.
- **Production of specialty crops that are both economically productive and generate a sense of connection to place.** Western North Carolina boasts many specialty crops and agriculture products that generate higher returns than traditional row crops, including Christmas trees, trout, apples, berries, and mushrooms. Western North Carolina's farms and farmer markets have leveraged the agriculture product to create seasonal experiences associated with many of these crops (think choose your own Christmas tree while you meet Santa, hayrides and corn mazes while you pick apples, etc.) that generate connection for repeated visitation and greater spending from visitors.
- **Strong agriculture networks that work to strengthen the supply chain and meet needs of farmers, distributors, and associated parts of the network.** Western North Carolina has many organizations that have rich expertise and commitment to the region, including NC State Cooperative Extension, ASAP, regional



FOUNDATION

In developing a stronger, more resilient region it is important to build and enhance the agriculture sector as a foundation for this work.

Food Councils, empowering Mountain Food Systems, Tractor, WNC AgOptions, and others that are creating models and connecting urban and rural agriculture assets to increase economic value and ensure assets are available for healthy, accessible food for local residents.

- **Entrepreneurial agriculture community focused on production, agri-tourism, and value-added products that both drive economic development and cultivate community connections.** Western North Carolina has agriculture assets of various sizes and focuses that are specializing not only in production, but in creating and selling high-value events and farm experiences and value-added products that create additional revenue streams and generate greater brand loyalty to the overall region. This increases the value of the agriculture sector to the region, as in Western North Carolina agriculture is not just selling products, it is often associated with important community hubs that help connect people, foster a sense of place, and build economic and social connections for a strong quality of life.

WNC Agriculture Goals and Actions

Supporting robust agriculture sector in Western North Carolina depends on the following goals:

- **Goal 1: Protect and promote the existing agriculture sector.**
 - **Action 1.1:** Support expanded transition programming to help agriculture businesses in WNC be aware of and able to transition agriculture businesses to new ownership to remain viable (with focus on connecting businesses to both young (FFA) and those looking for career/lifestyle change)
 - **Action 1.2:** Expand support for business to business assistance to help farmers elevate business challenges and receive ideas on how to address to increase margins.
 - **Action 1.3:** Expand existing marketing efforts led by groups like ASAP with statewide tourism and marketing undertaken by EDPNC and Great Trails State to further expand opportunities for growing awareness of agriculture products and events.
 - **Action 1.4:** Partner with regional Travel and Tourism Authorities to ensure agriculture assets (products, farms, farmer's markets, etc.) are clearly featured in both print and online marketing offerings.
 - **Action 1.5:** Explore creating local and/or statewide incentives for agriculture production and conservation to counter pressure for redevelopment of farms into other economic assets.
- **Goal 2: Increase economic returns for the local agriculture sector.**
 - **Action 2.1:** Create and elevate a regional brand for WNC made products that is inclusive of agriculture products and helps customers find high-quality products and experiences
 - **Action 2.2:** Establish goals for local sourcing from anchor businesses (public and private) and provide support to help local purchase card holders to connect to opportunities to source from local agriculture businesses (using model from Kenan Center for Private Business).
 - **Action 2.2:** Increase support for local Cooperative Extension agents to ensure agriculture businesses in each county have access to relevant, actionable and accessible information on resilient high-value crops/products that can be of economic value to farmers.
- **Goal 3: Address friction points for value-added production for the regional agriculture sector and address.**
 - **Action 3.1:** Validate market analysis for overall region with lens on constraints in distribution, production, and customer purchase location for meat (chicken/beef/hog/cattle) and value-production of crops (cleaning locations, dry storage, cooler storage). Where gaps in processing centers exist, identify prime target for facility and most cost-effective and operationally efficient structure to manage.

- **Action 3.2:** Assess presence of local farmer’s markets and other agriculture hubs and engage with food councils and farmer’s markets to ensure constraints to customer engagement are addressed (i.e., validating events are in accessible, advertised locations). Where counties have gaps, explore if there is opportunity to support or expand to create new markets for farmers.

Measurable outcomes

Assessing the health of the Western North Carolina agriculture sector could be based on numerous metrics; successful measurement of the agriculture ecosystem will likely require consideration of multiple of the following metrics.

- Number of active acres of farmland, by region and county
- Percent of active acres used for farmland compared to prior year, by region and county (measure of increase or reduction in agriculture land in region)
- Dollar amount of agriculture products sold, by region and county
- Percentage increase in agriculture products sold, by region and county
- Percent of counties with Farmer’s Market or Agriculture hub
- Increase in sales of Agriculture assets in WNC, by region and county
- Increase in sales from agriculture tourism, by region and county
- Increase in regional institutions procuring from regional agriculture assets
- Percentage of farming businesses transitioning ownership rather than being closed