



FOOTHILLS
REGIONAL COMMISSION

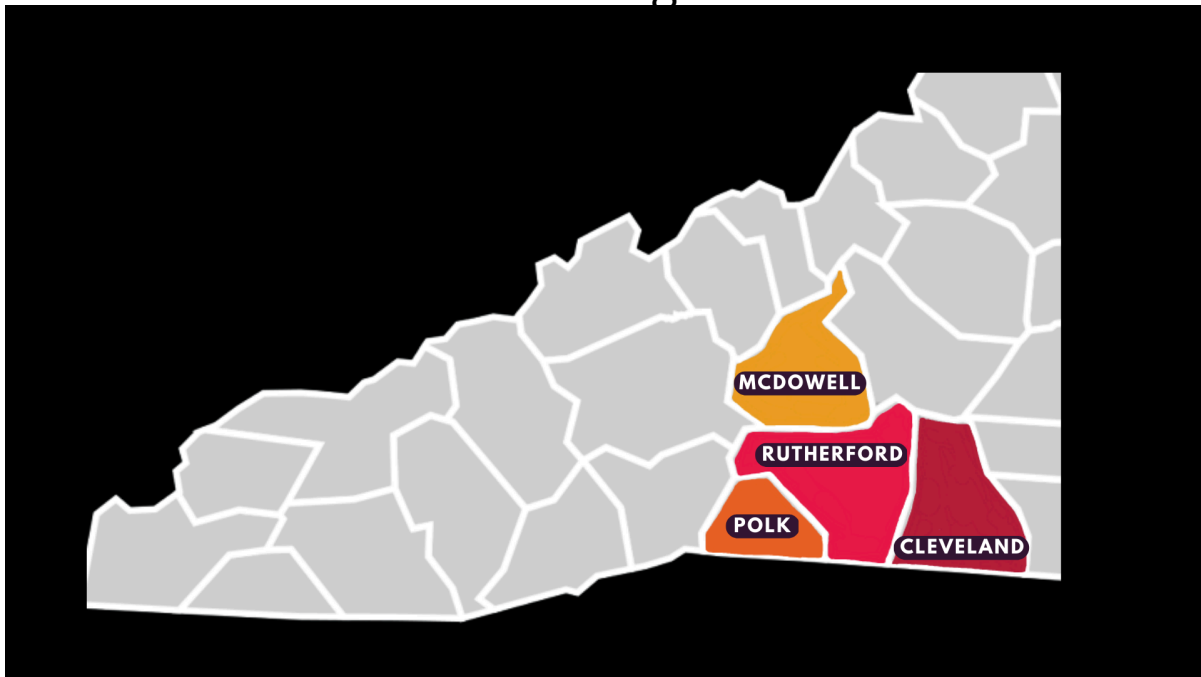


2024 Annual CEDS Update



Introduction

Foothills Regional Commission (FRC) released its 5-year Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies or CEDS on December 1, 2023. In 2023 Foothills Regional Commission in partnership with Western Piedmont Council of Governments conducted a robust data collection through surveys, interviews, and a steering committee made up of representatives from all four counties with a variety of expertise and backgrounds. The CEDS will foster the Commission's goals of valuing economic diversity and partnering collaboration, sharing risks and rewards to build opportunities, and enhance economic growth.



Throughout 2024 the Foothills Team has been working on CEDS action items along with our local government partners.

Hurricane Helene Impacts

The 2024 CEDS update would not be complete without documenting both real and potential Helene impacts. Helene has devastated all four counties and all four have different impacts.

Rutherford and McDowell were hit the hardest, mostly concentrated in Chimney Rock, Lake Lure, Old Fort, and Little Switzerland. Polk County was also significantly impacted by Helene, especially near the Green River and Tryon area. Cleveland County was the least impacted county but still had significant impacts in the Boiling Springs area and Northern Cleveland County. This is going to change the primary focus of the department to recovery and resiliency projects for the foreseeable future. Rebuilding can take years from this historic event.



Anticipated 2025 Activities

The primary focus of 2024 EDA activities will continue to be Hurricane Helene recovery projects and priorities. This will mainly be focused on infrastructure projects in areas with significant need such as Chimney Rock, Lake Lure, Old Fort, and more.

Staff will also be working with Marion and Boiling Springs on entrepreneurship projects to improve economic outcomes in those communities.

FRC also anticipates adding an additional staff member with the EDA funds in order to better serve the region and administer current EDA projects and future EDA projects.

CEDS Focus Areas

**1.Economic
Development**

2.Workforce

3.Infrastructure

4.Housing

5.Marketing

6.Community Life

The economic development portion of the plan is focused on strategies that lead to job creation within the Foothills Region.

Strategy 1: Create a regional business/industrial park with roads, lots, and shell buildings to be competitive with surrounding areas

1. FRC has begun the planning process with Rutherford County on their Economic Development Action Plan.

Strategy 2: Repurpose and revitalize vacant buildings and lots for commercial, industrial, and residential opportunities

2. FRC staff have worked with Rutherford County and Forest City on the old Forest City Dunbar site redevelopment.

Strategy 3: Continue to improve grant development capacity

3. FRC has hired additional staff to assist with CDBG, BRIC, and Broadband grant funding sources.

Strategy 4: Provide support for small business development, retention, and expansion

4. FRC staff has worked with the Center on Rural Innovation on the recruitment and development of the tech industry in Rutherford County.

Strategy 5: Recruit businesses that will help diversify the economy

5. FRC staff has worked with the Center on Rural Innovation on the recruitment and development of the tech industry in Rutherford County.

Strategy 6: Work with businesses and local governments to provide contingency and resiliency planning support

6. FRC staff are working with Rutherfordton, Spindale, Rutherford County Soil & Water, and The Army Corps of Engineers on a study on Cleghorn Creek and flooding issues present along the corridor.
7. FRC staff are working with Old Fort, Spindale, Polk County, McDowell County, and Rutherford County on BRIC applications.
8. FRC staff have held multiple disaster recovery and resiliency training programs for the region.
9. FRC staff have assisted Rutherford County with a COOP plan update.
10. FRC staff assisted McDowell County with an update to their emergency management plan.

Strategy 7: Continue to market & fund tourism throughout the region, specifically outdoor recreation, to help diversify tax base

11. The RPO has worked with McDowell County, Marion, Ellenboro, Forest City, and Rutherford County on multi-modal trail networks and complete street projects downtown to improve access to outdoor recreation opportunities.

Strategy 8: Leverage existing partnerships and develop new partnerships to strengthen funding sources

12. FRC staff have continued to partner with a variety of state and federal agencies including NC Commerce and NC Department of Agriculture, local sources, and have developed new partnerships such as with the McDowell County Chamber to strengthen funding sources.

The workforce strategies build upon the region's efforts to improve career pathways with education and training to meet industry needs, marketing of workforce development activities across and with the region, ensure availability of competitive wage information, and ensure a positive impact on job recruitment and retention.

Strategy 1: Meet the demands of businesses and industries in the region by aligning career development needs and training opportunities with the educational system and examining future workforce needs

1.The workforce development board has continued to partner with local companies to provide key training opportunities and workforce development opportunities.

Strategy 2: Support local businesses

2.Partnership with CORI, FRC, Rutherford County, ICC, Rutherford County Schools to develop tech entrepreneurship opportunities.

Strategy 3: Identify sustainable opportunities to encourage individuals to remain and/or re-enter the workforce despite challenges

3.Partnership with Freedom Life Ministries on building their transitional housing project.

Strategy 4: Build and expand access to specialty healthcare providers in the region

4.N/A

The infrastructure strategies are focused on developing transportation infrastructure, water, sewer, electric, gas, and broadband.

Strategy 1: Create a regional public transportation system that is accessible and affordable

1.RPO partnership with the region's transit systems.

Strategy 2: Improve infrastructure resiliency by identifying and implementing hazard mitigation projects throughout the region

2.N/A

Strategy 3: Continue to develop water and sewer infrastructure

3.Water and sewer infrastructure projects in Spindale, Kings Mountain, and McDowell County.

Strategy 4: Develop transportation projects that will rank well in NCDOT project prioritization process

4.RPO staff created a methodology focused on developing and submitting high scoring projects through the prioritization process.

Strategy 5: Evaluate potential improvements to airports & rail service

5.RPO staff have been working with NCDOT on passenger rail service through Marion and Old Fort to Asheville and airport improvements at Rutherford County airport.

Strategy 6: Construct sidewalks, outdoor trails, and bike/pedestrian paths to improve regional connectivity, local walkability, and tourism development

6.FRC staff have worked with Chimney Rock on downtown streetscape improvements and trail connections from Marion to Gilkey and Forest City to Ellenboro.

Strategy 7: Expand and improve broadband and cell phone service
7.FRC staff has partnered with NC Rural Center and Connect Humanity in preparation for BEAD funding and has been working with Cleveland, McDowell, and Rutherford on future CAB projects.

Strategy 8: Designate U.S. Route 74 as an Interstate Highway
8.FRC staff have been working with regional partners and legislative delegations to have US 74 designated a future Interstate Highway or to be brought up to Interstate standards via the prioritization process.

Strategy 9: Increase access to electric vehicle (EV) charging stations
1.N/A

Housing plays a key role in a region's overall economic development. The strategies described herein build upon the region's efforts to improve housing conditions.

Strategy 1: Explore the development of public/private partnerships to stimulate housing construction

1.FRC has been partnering with RC Habitat, Gateway Foundation, Cleveland Development Corporation, and Cleveland Habitat to stimulate affordable housing development.

Strategy 2: Address vacant and dilapidated buildings/houses throughout the region.

2.FRC has worked with Rutherford County on the rehabilitation of the Old Forest City Dunbar School.

Strategy 3: Increase supply of all housing types

3.FRC has awarded upwards of \$1 million to housing organizations within the region for housing development.

Strategy 4: Update land use regulations to reflect housing market preferences

4.FRC has started the regional housing study and Forest City land use plan to updating land use regulations to reflect market preferences and allow for a diversity of housing types.

Marketing strategies in this portion of the CEDS intend to build upon the region's efforts to develop a regional approach to marketing, and identify and promote regional attractions, events, and natural resources

Strategy 1: Create a regional communication program

1.N/A

Strategy 2: Create a regional brand and marketing program

2.N/A

Strategy 3: Continue to build partnerships and explore new ways to develop the region's quality of life.

3.FRC continues to work towards partnerships throughout the region with local governments, non-profit organizations, educational entities, Chambers of Commerce, and more.

Community life is focused on cultivating community involvement, creating robust downtowns, promoting healthy living, and developing methods to encourage active senior citizen and minority participation.

Strategy 1: Increase opportunities for civic engagement across a wide range of populations

1.FRC has worked to provide surveys in Spanish to provide input opportunities to the Hispanic population and has been intentional with engagement to ensure all cross sections are engaged.

Strategy 2: Encourage public participation in volunteer and civic group activities

2.N/A

Strategy 3: Continue downtown revitalization efforts

3.FRC will continue to work with Tourism and downtown development organizations to revitalize downtowns. Staff have worked with Marion, Boiling Springs, Chimney Rock, and Old Fort. Staff hope this work will be able to continue after Helene.

Strategy 4: Increase the overall health and well-being of the region

4.Staff hope to continue working with all regional partners to continue improving the overall health and well-being of the Foothills Region and working towards making it the best place for people to live, work, and play.