

FOOTHILLS REGIONAL  
COMMISSION

20  
25

# CEDS PROGRESS REPORT

Prepared by Alan Toney

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# Introduction

## What is a CEDS?

The Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy's purpose is to **revitalize communities, develop and rehabilitate affordable housing, promote sustainability, attract investments, build wealth, encourage entrepreneurship, and create jobs**. It provides strategies by which local development organizations initiate and generate their own solutions to their community's economic problems. This in turn builds long term community capacity and fosters the integration of economic, social and environmental objectives.

Foothills Regional Commission's (FRC) 2023 CED Plan has six main goals; **Economic Development, Workforce, Infrastructure, Housing, Marketing, and Community Life**. It is a strategy-driven plan for regional economic development and is critical to maintain a robust economic ecosystem.

As the region's Economic Development District (EDD), FRC is tasked with overseeing the plan's process, development, and implementation. CEDS is an important prerequisite to receive recognition as an EDD and strengthens applications for funding and investments in the region. The plan is updated on a five-year cycle with progress reports published during interim years.

This document highlights key activities performed over the past five years, extending from 2023 to 2028, as they relate to FRC's EDD and regional economic development strategy. It should also be noted that this organization is still legally Isothermal Planning and Development Commission but conducts business as Foothills Regional Commission, which is how it will be referred throughout the document.

# SWOT Analysis



Foothills Regional Commission conducted an analysis of the region's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats – also known as a SWOT analysis. The analysis identifies what local government staff, elected officials, community members, and other stakeholders believe to be important in each category. This helps guide the process to identify regional priorities for economic and community development.

## STRENGTHS

- Location
- Educational opportunities
- Natural resources
- Lower cost of living
- Workforce training
- Community
- Safety

## WEAKNESSES

- Lack of housing
- Aging leadership
- Diversity of housing type and cost
- Retention of young professionals and young families
- Broadband
- Public transportation

## OPPORTUNITIES

- Regional marketing
- Outdoor amenities
- Tourism
- Community colleges
- Small towns
- Agricultural land and support
- Vacant buildings  
/commercial /industrial

## THREATS

- Increase in poverty
- Number of people leaving the region for work
- Filling jobs/lack of workforce
- Aging workforce
- Drug use/addiction epidemic
- Lack of diverse economy

# Regional Helene Recovery



The Foothills Region was heavily impacted by Hurricane Helene, especially in the communities of Saluda, Green River Cove, Chimney Rock, Lake Lure, and Old Fort. These communities lost a significant number of homes, had heavily damaged infrastructure, and severely impacted businesses. The infrastructure damage continues to work through the FEMA Public Assistance Process to focus on rebuilding the existing infrastructure needs. We have also continued to work with other funding partners such as NC Department of Commerce and US EDA for key infrastructure funding to rebuild and recover within the region.

Foothills has continued to provide key technical services through US EDA and ARC funding to assist our local governments with their recovery.

Foothills Regional Commission strives for resilient communities and regional economic prosperity. As such, committee members discussed resiliency to disasters within the region to include a list of current attributes that support economic durability.

## **RESILIENCY IN THE REGION**

- **Strong community colleges and school system**
- **Diverse and strong small business Collaboration & ability to ask others for help**
- **Diverse economy**
- **Interstate linkages**
- **Ability to adapt to job market needs**

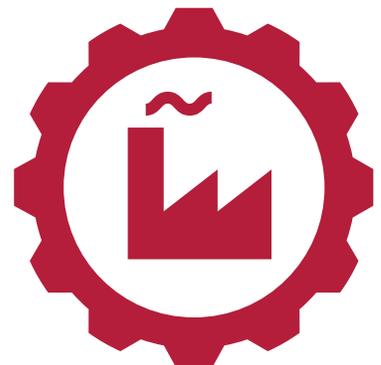
## **IMPROVEMENTS TO RESILIENCY**

- **Strengthen the education pipeline**
- **Offer more broadband options**
- **Encourage young people to stay, live, and work in the region**
- **Always strive for further improvements**
- **Agricultural pipeline**
- **Businesses providing more opportunities for young people**

# Demographic Snapshots



The following demographic snapshots depict the most recent data for each county and the overall Foothills Region. Most of the data has been collected from the US Census Bureau and the N.C. Department of Commerce. These infographics help to highlight updated information on economics, housing, population, and industries.



# Cleveland County



County Seat: Shelby

## Economics <sup>1</sup>



Median Household Income	% of Families Below Poverty Level
<b>\$43,512</b>	<b>19.1 %</b>
Per Capita Living Wage <sup>6</sup>	Food Insecurity Rate <sup>5</sup>
<b>\$31,075</b>	<b>15.7 %</b>

## Housing <sup>1</sup>



Median Home Value	Median Gross Rent
<b>\$130,000</b>	<b>\$694</b>
Homeowner Vacancy Rate <sup>3</sup>	Rental Vacancy Rate <sup>3</sup>
<b>2.0%</b>	<b>7.0%</b>
Occupied Housing Units	Homeownership rate
<b>39,887</b>	<b>68.4%</b>

## Population <sup>1</sup>



**99,519**

**2030 Estimate <sup>2</sup>**

**104,483**

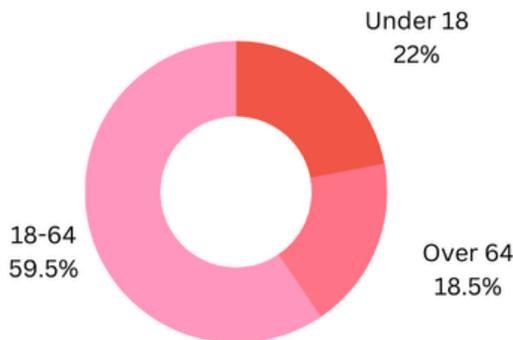
**Minority      Median Age**

**25.5%      41.9**

## Largest Private Sector Employers <sup>3</sup>

1. Walmart Associates Inc.
2. Clearwater Paper Corporation
3. Gardner-Webb University
4. Ingles Markets, Inc
5. Hanesbrands, Inc

## Total Population %



## JOB COMPARISON <sup>4</sup>

	2017 Jobs	2021 Jobs	Change in Jobs	2021 Earnings
Manufacturing	6,595	6,998	6%	\$72,119
Government	7,307	6,990	-4%	\$68,299
Retail Trade	4,271	4,316	1%	\$38,344
Healthcare and Social Assistance	3,432	3,309	-4%	\$48,407
Accommodation and Food Services	2,814	2,963	5%	\$20,222
Transportation and Warehousing	2,547	2,706	6%	\$50,631
Admin, Waste Mgmt, and Remediation Services	2,248	2,369	5%	\$38,127
Construction	2,138	2,177	2%	\$53,559
Other Services (except Public Admin)	2,375	2,111	-11%	\$24,828
Educational Services	1,567	1,506	-4%	\$35,302

Sources  
 1. US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2020 census, 2020 ACS 5-Year Estimates  
 2. North Carolina Office of Budget and Management, 2022  
 3. NC Commerce, Labor and Economic Analysis Division (May 2022)  
 4. Emsi, Economic Modeling  
 5. www.feedingamerica.org, 2020  
 6. www.livingwage.mlt.edu, 2022

# McDowell County



County Seat: Marion

## Economics <sup>1</sup>



Median Household Income	% of Families Below Poverty Level
<b>\$47,085</b>	<b>15.6%</b>
Per Capita Living Wage <sup>6</sup>	Food Insecurity Rate <sup>5</sup>
<b>\$32,531</b>	<b>15.4 %</b>

## Housing <sup>1</sup>



Median Home Value	Median Gross Rent
<b>\$129,400</b>	<b>\$647</b>
Homeowner Vacancy Rate <sup>3</sup>	Rental Vacancy Rate <sup>3</sup>
<b>1.9%</b>	<b>6.1%</b>
Occupied Housing Units	Homeownership rate
<b>18,058</b>	<b>73.7%</b>

## Population <sup>1</sup>



**44,578**

**2030 Estimate <sup>2</sup>**

**44,207**

**Minority      Median Age**

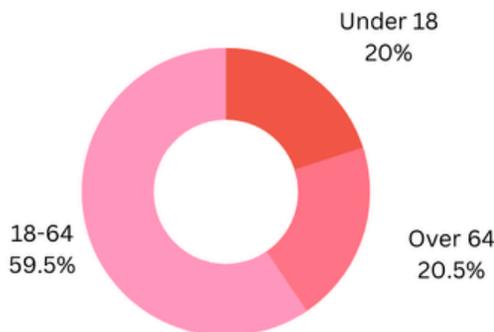
**11.8%**

**44.2**

## Largest Private Sector Employers <sup>3</sup>

1. Baxter Healthcare Corp
2. Auria Solution USA Inc
3. Coats Performance Materials
4. Love's Travel Stops and County Store
5. Walmart Associates Inc.

## Total Population %



## JOB COMPARISON <sup>4</sup>

	2017 Jobs	2021 Jobs	Change in Jobs	2021 Earnings
Manufacturing	6,210	5,567	-10%	\$61,827
Government	2,627	2,554	-3%	\$58,292
Retail Trade	1,931	2,262	17%	\$33,934
Healthcare and Social Assistance	1,536	1,525	-1%	\$44,851
Accommodation and Food Services	1,354	1,248	-8%	\$23,007
Other Services (except Public Admin)	980	1,056	8%	\$26,347
Construction	828	896	8%	\$47,587
Admin, Waste Mgmt, and Remediation Services	987	748	-24%	\$37,530
Finance and Insurance	194	248	28%	\$76,271
Wholesale Trade	303	246	-19%	\$66,708

Sources  
 1. US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2020 census, 2020 ACS 5-Year Estimates  
 2. North Carolina Office of Budget and Management, 2022  
 3. NC Commerce, Labor and Economic Analysis Division (May 2022)  
 4. Emsi, Economic Modeling  
 5. www.feedingamerica.org, 2020  
 6. www.livingwage.mit.edu, 2022

# Polk County



County Seat: Columbus

## Economics <sup>1</sup>



Median Household Income	% of Families Below Poverty Level
<b>\$52,125</b>	<b>10 %</b>
Per Capita Living Wage <sup>6</sup>	Food Insecurity Rate <sup>5</sup>
<b>\$33,197</b>	<b>12.9 %</b>

## Housing <sup>1</sup>



Median Home Value	Median Gross Rent
<b>\$222,700</b>	<b>\$855</b>
Homeowner Vacancy Rate <sup>3</sup>	Rental Vacancy Rate <sup>3</sup>
<b>3.6%</b>	<b>5.9%</b>
Occupied Housing Units	Homeownership rate
<b>8,538</b>	<b>75.6%</b>

## Population <sup>1</sup>



**19,328**

**2030 Estimate <sup>2</sup>**

**18,413**

**Minority      Median Age**

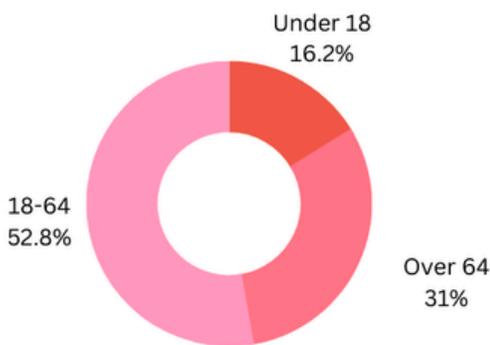
**9.7%**

**53.7**

## Largest Private Sector Employers <sup>3</sup>

1. Acts Inc
2. St Lukes Hospital Inc
3. Tryon International Equestrian Center
4. Cooperriis Inc
5. White Oak Management Inc.

## Total Population %



## JOB COMPARISON <sup>4</sup>

	2017 Jobs	2021 Jobs	Change in Jobs	2021 Earnings
Healthcare and Social Assistance	1,558	1,525	-2%	\$47,626
Government	1,006	1,018	1%	\$59,404
Accommodation and Food Services	487	521	7%	\$23,948
Other Services (except Public Admin)	538	501	-7%	\$24,543
Retail Trade	418	483	16%	\$34,828
Construction	439	477	9%	\$43,026
Manufacturing	328	369	13%	\$77,611
Admin, Waste Mgmt, and Remediation Services	258	337	31%	\$42,743
Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	418	328	-22%	\$37,332
Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	249	307	23%	\$61,591

Sources  
 1. US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2020 census, 2020 ACS 5-Year Estimates  
 2. North Carolina Office of Budget and Management, 2022  
 3. NC Commerce, Labor and Economic Analysis Division (May 2022)  
 4. Emsi, Economic Modeling  
 5. www.feedingamerica.org, 2020  
 6. www.livingwage.mt.edu, 2022

# Rutherford County



County Seat: Rutherfordton

## Economics <sup>1</sup>



Median Household Income	% of Families Below Poverty Level
<b>\$43,183</b>	<b>17.8 %</b>
Per Capita Living Wage <sup>6</sup>	Food Insecurity Rate <sup>5</sup>
<b>\$31,535</b>	<b>17.2 %</b>

## Housing <sup>1</sup>



Median Home Value	Median Gross Rent
<b>\$125,100</b>	<b>\$655</b>
Homeowner Vacancy Rate <sup>3</sup>	Rental Vacancy Rate <sup>3</sup>
<b>1.9%</b>	<b>7.9%</b>
Occupied Housing Units	Homeownership rate
<b>26,652</b>	<b>71.6%</b>

## Population <sup>1</sup>



**64,444**

### 2030 Estimate <sup>2</sup>

**65,517**

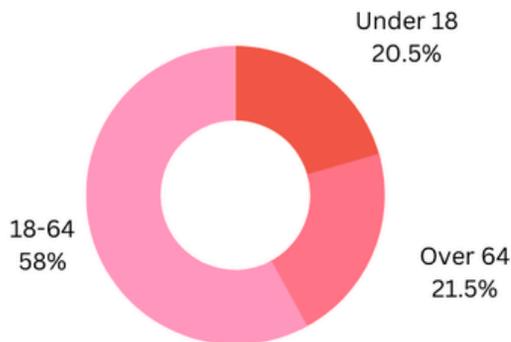
Minority Median Age

**15.2%** **45.2**

## Largest Private Sector Employers <sup>3</sup>

1. Walmart Associates Inc.
2. Rutherford Regional Health System
3. Ingles Markets, Inc
4. American Greetings Corporation
5. Sumter Buildings Inc

## Total Population %



## JOB COMPARISON <sup>4</sup>

	2017 Jobs	2021 Jobs	Change in Jobs	2021 Earnings
Government	3,536	3,513	-1%	\$53,639
Retail Trade	2,609	2,736	5%	\$34,347
Manufacturing	2,905	2,636	-9%	\$60,778
Healthcare and Social Assistance	2,775	2,300	-17%	\$50,152
Accommodation and Food Services	1,823	1,824	0%	\$24,221
Construction	1,279	1,592	24%	\$58,578
Other Services (except Public Admin)	1,480	1,563	6%	\$22,909
Admin, Waste Mgmt, and Remediation Services	996	1,224	23%	\$35,210
Information	947	676	-29%	\$72,775
Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	386	488	26%	\$58,393

Sources  
 1. US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2020 census, 2020 ACS 5-Year Estimates  
 2. North Carolina Office of Budget and Management, 2022  
 3. NC Commerce, Labor and Economic Analysis Division (May 2022)  
 4. Emsi, Economic Modeling  
 5. www.feedingamerica.org, 2020  
 6. www.livingwage.mlt.edu, 2022

# Regional



Includes Cleveland, McDowell, Rutherford, and Polk Counties

## Economics <sup>1</sup>



Median Household Income	% of Families Below Poverty Level
<b>\$46,476</b>	<b>15.6%</b>
Per Capita Living Wage <sup>6</sup>	Food Insecurity Rate <sup>5</sup>
<b>\$32,085</b>	<b>15.3 %</b>

## Housing <sup>1</sup>



Median Home Value	Median Gross Rent
<b>\$151,800</b>	<b>\$713</b>
Homeowner Vacancy Rate <sup>3</sup>	Rental Vacancy Rate <sup>3</sup>
<b>2.4%</b>	<b>6.7%</b>
Occupied Housing Units	Homeownership rate
<b>93,135</b>	<b>72.25%</b>

## Population <sup>1</sup>



**227,869**

**2030 Estimate <sup>2</sup>**

**232,620**

**Minority Median Age**

**18.6% 46.3**

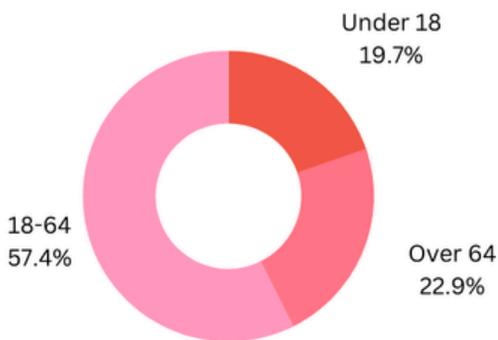
## Largest Private Sector Employers <sup>3</sup>

- Wal-Mart Associates Inc.
- Baxter Healthcare Corp
- Ingles Markets, Inc
- Clearwater Paper Corporation
- Gardner-Webb University

## Higher Education

- Gardner-Webb University
- McDowell Tech Community College
- Isothermal Community College
- Cleveland Community College

## Total Population %



## JOB COMPARISON <sup>4</sup>

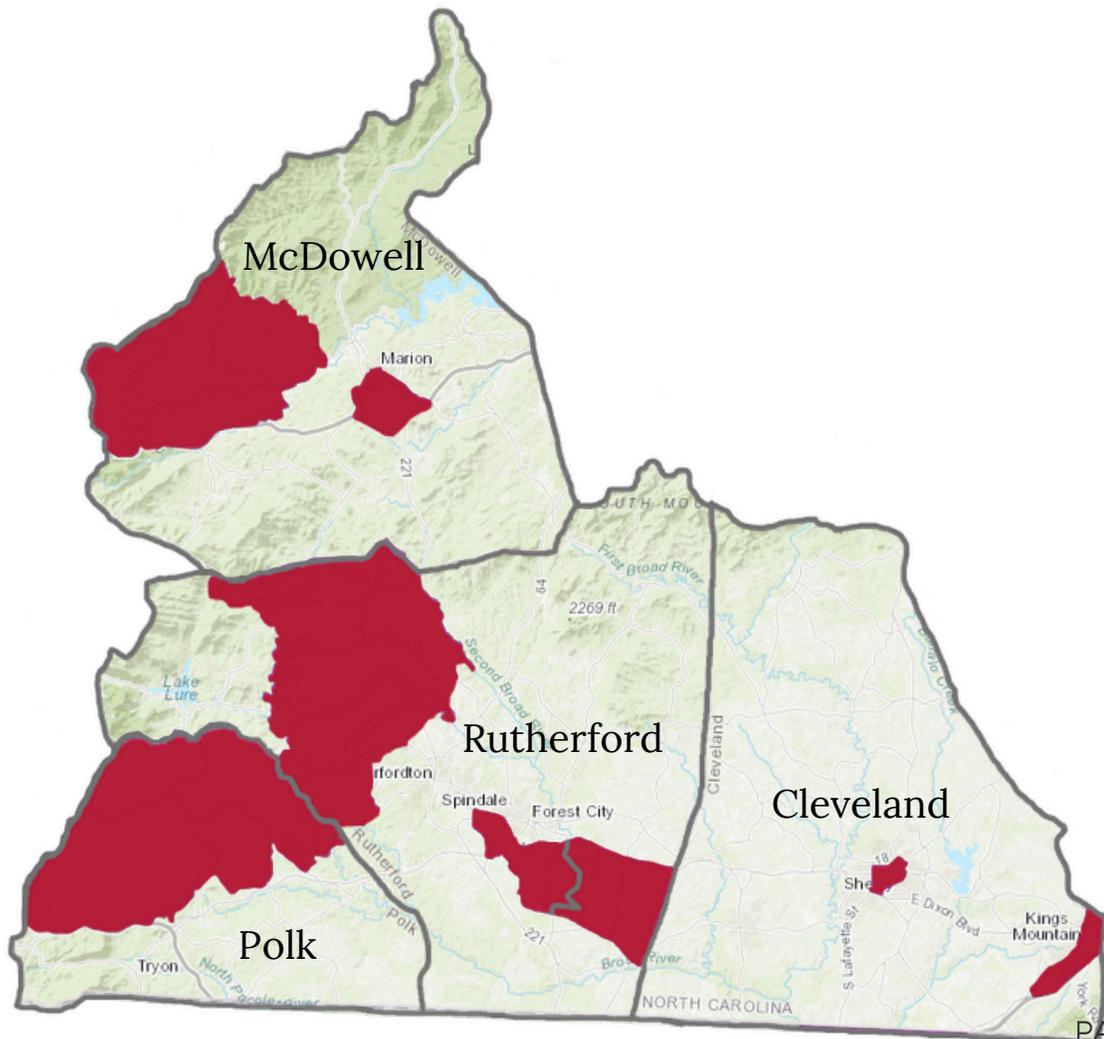
	2017 Jobs	2021 Jobs	Change in Jobs	2021 Earnings
Manufacturing	16,038	15,570	-3%	\$66,649
Government	14,475	14,074	-3%	\$62,181
Retail Trade	9,228	9,797	6%	\$36,036
Healthcare and Social Assistance	9,301	8,659	-7%	\$48,107
Accommodation and Food Services	6,478	6,555	1%	\$22,161
Other Services (except Public Admin)	5,373	5,230	-3%	\$24,534
Construction	4,684	5,141	10%	\$53,097
Admin, Waste Mgmt, and Remediation Services	4,488	4,678	4%	\$37,601
Transportation and Warehousing	3,179	3,413	7%	\$52,736
Educational Services	2,012	2,076	3%	\$37,111

Sources  
 1. US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2020 census, 2020 ACS 5-Year Estimates  
 2. North Carolina Office of Budget and Management, 2022  
 3. NC Commerce, Labor and Economic Analysis Division (May 2022)  
 4. Emsi, Economic Modeling  
 5. www.feedingamerica.org, 2020  
 6. www.livingwage.mit.edu, 2022

# Opportunity Zones



By definition, an Opportunity Zone is an economically distressed community (based on a census tract scale) where private investments, under certain conditions, may be eligible for capital gain tax incentives. Opportunity Zones were signed into law in December 2017 to stimulate economic development and job creation. Each of our Region's counties contains at least one Opportunity Zone, with Rutherford County having three. The Economic Development Administration made investment in Opportunity Zones one of its five investment priorities in 2019 to catalyze strategic investments and ultimately foster job creation and attract private investment.



# Goals

The goals of the 2023 CEDS focused on establishing a road map for the future economic development efforts in the region. It concentrated on establishing regionalism that utilized collaboration to successfully leverage the region's assets. It focused on targeted industry clusters that directly impacted the workforce and economic development. We have identified six different focus areas in our 2023 CEDS Economic Development, Workforce, Infrastructure, Housing, Marketing, and Community Life.



**Economic  
Development**

**Workforce**

**Infrastructure**

**Housing**

**Marketing**

**Community Life**



# Goal 1: Economic Development



## STRATEGY 1

### **Create a regional business/industrial park with roads, lots and shell buildings to be competitive with surrounding areas**

Foothills continues to work in Cleveland, McDowell, and Rutherford counties on developing their industrial sites and the megasite in McDowell County.

## STRATEGY 2

### **Repurpose and revitalize vacant buildings and lots for commercial, industrial, and residential opportunities**

Foothills has worked with Forest City and Rutherford County on redeveloping the former Cone Mills and Dunbar school site. FRC has also worked with McDowell County on the redevelopment of a former furniture plant and in Shelby for the redevelopment of several industrial sites and former school sites.

## STRATEGY 3

### **Continue to improve grant development capacity**

FRC has added two additional staff and continue to develop their grant administration and application capacity.

## STRATEGY 4

### **Provide support for small business development, retention, and expansion**

FRC continues to work through EDCs and with Chambers on small business development. FRC has partnered with the McDowell County Chamber on a future small business incubator.

## STRATEGY 5

### **Recruit businesses that will help diversify the economy**

The local EDC's have recruited great manufacturing businesses in 2025 such as Haartz an industrial supplier, PPG in Cleveland County, and multiple smaller organizations with hundreds of millions in investment and over 500 jobs.

# Goal 1: Economic Development



## STRATEGY 6

### **Work with businesses and local governments to provide contingency and resiliency planning support**

Foothills has assisted businesses and governments impacted by Helene with planning and response.

## STRATEGY 7

### **Continue to market & fund tourism throughout the region, specifically outdoor recreation, to help diversify tax base**

The local Tourism Development Authorities continue to invest in tourism assets and market the region and the outdoor recreation economy.

## STRATEGY 8

### **Leverage existing partnerships and develop new partnerships to strengthen funding sources**

FRC continues to partner with local governments and funding partners to invest in infrastructure for economic growth in the region.

# Goal 2: Workforce



## 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**

The FRC Workforce Development Board & The Regional Community Colleges continue to develop a wide degree of staff from electricians, heavy equipment operators, and placing individuals in key industries such as manufacturing.

## STRATEGY 2

**Support Local Businesses**

The local chambers, downtown business organizations, and FRC continue to develop their small business assets and local businesses. All towns are working on developing their downtowns and creating a business friendly environment and the Chamber work on marketing the local businesses.

## STRATEGY 3

**Identify sustainable opportunities to encourage individuals to remain and/or re-enter the workforce despite challenges (childcare, disconnected youth, lack of transportation, homelessness, drug abuse, previous incarceration, etc.)**

Local groups and partnerships such as Freedom Life Ministries and Out of the Ashes continue to assist in rehabilitation and placing previously incarcerated, homeless, and previously drug abusers to place them in housing, acquire key life skills, and have steady employment.

## STRATEGY 4

**Build and expand access to specialty healthcare providers in the region**

FRC, EDCs, and local governments continue to work to attract healthcare providers to the region.

# Goal 3: Infrastructure



## STRATEGY 1

### **Create a regional public transportation system that is accessible and affordable**

The local transit organizations continue to work to provide transit systems that serve the regions need.

## STRATEGY 2

### **Improve infrastructure resiliency by identifying and implementing hazard mitigation projects throughout the region (flood, landslide and wildfire mitigation)**

FRC has identified several rivers in the region that cause flooding and infrastructure damage and have begun working through planning with the US Army Corps of Engineers to address these issues. Cleghorn Creek has a completed study and staff is working with Soil & Water to identify the next river.

## STRATEGY 3

### **Continue to develop water and sewer infrastructure**

FRC partnered with Marion, Boiling, Springs, and Cleveland County Water and applied for and received over \$1.5 million for water and sewer projects. FRC is also in the middle of applying for water and sewer projects totaling over \$50 million throughout the region.

## STRATEGY 4

### **Develop transportation projects that will rank well in NCDOT project prioritization process**

FRC just completed Prioritization 8 and submitted the highest scoring projects for NCDOT funding. FRC has also completed two planning studies on multimodal transportation and began the regions Safe Streets for All Action Plan.

# Goal 3: Infrastructure



## STRATEGY 5

### **Evaluate potential improvements to airports (hangars, runways, taxiways) & rail service (Charlotte - Asheville passenger service)**

FRC and Rutherford County continue to work to develop the county GA Airport and have submitted the passenger service from Asheville to Charlotte for funding.

## STRATEGY 6

### **Construct sidewalks, outdoor trails, and bike/pedestrian paths to improve regional connectivity, local walkability and tourism development**

FRC has focused on pedestrian and biking by completing several studies, submitting projects through prioritization, and developing our regions linear parks network.

## STRATEGY 7

### **Expand and improve broadband and cell phone service**

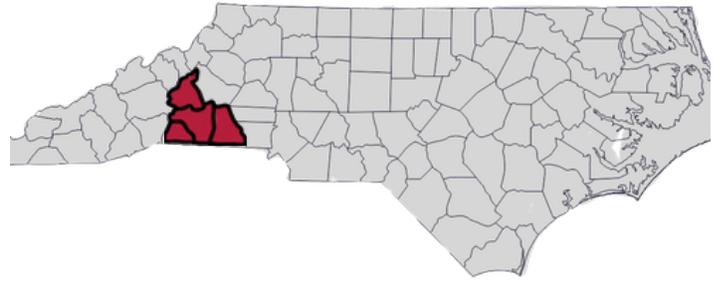
FRC completed the Connect Humanity Program and is prepared with BEAD and when other broadband funding is available.

## STRATEGY 8

### **Designate U.S. Route 74 as an Interstate Highway**

74 has been submitted through prioritization to be brought to Interstate standards and our Congressional Delegation is working through the congressional process.

# Goal 4: Housing



## STRATEGY 1

### **Explore the development of public/private partnerships to stimulate housing construction**

FRC has worked on developing partnerships with groups such as Habitat and Rutherford Housing Partnership to leverage public dollars for infrastructure development and affordable housing construction. We are also working to create partnerships with private developers.

## STRATEGY 2

### **Address vacant and dilapidated buildings/houses throughout the region**

FRC is working on creating redevelopment commissions to address blight and redevelop blighted communities.

## STRATEGY 3

### **Increase supply of all housing types**

FRC is working on completing regional housing studies with recommendations focused on regulatory reform and strategies to increase the overall housing stock in the region.

## STRATEGY 4

### **Update land use regulations to reflect housing market preferences**

FRC is working on regulatory reform in Rutherford County to allow ADU's and other housing types and to streamline the housing permitting process to ensure fast and efficient permitting.

# Goal 5: Marketing



## STRATEGY 1

### Create a regional communication program

FRC has worked with our tourism partners on a regional tourism branding.

## STRATEGY 2

### Create a regional brand identity & marketing program

FRC has not made progress on this.

## STRATEGY 3

### Continue to build partnerships and explore new ways to develop the region's quality of life

FRC and our local governments continue to find new partners to develop and improve overall quality of life for residents in the region and to attract new business.

# Goal 6: Community Life



## STRATEGY 1

### Encourage public participation in volunteer and civic group activities

Local governments have worked to find more interest in civic groups and volunteer activities at the local government level.

## STRATEGY 2

### Continue downtown revitalization efforts

FRC and the local governments in Lawndale, Old Fort, Chimney Rock, Spindale, and Rutherfordton have worked to leverage dollars to redevelop their downtowns and provide economic opportunity.

## STRATEGY 3

### Increase the overall health and well-being of the region

FRC and the local governments continue to focus on improving quality of life by improving economic outcomes, improving outdoor recreation, and rebuilding from Helene.