



Annual Report 2022



From the Board Chair

Fellow Board Members,

I have always believed that when we face obstacles, we must roll up our sleeves and get to work. As Chair of the Southwestern Commission, I share your pride in this region and remain optimistic that, though the challenges are great, there is nothing we can't do when we work together.

Looking through these pages, it is exciting to see what the Southwestern Commission has accomplished in the past year and how its resources are used effectively to respond to the changing needs of the region. The Commission leverages the support of our local governments wisely, bringing in approximately \$100 to this region for every dollar paid in dues. I think we all would like that kind of return on investment for every project we support!

As you read through this annual report, you'll see the \$10 million to the region they've worked to secure to expand broadband infrastructure (page 9), and their efforts to help our towns and counties address the housing shortage (pages 12-13).

And while numbers tell a story, our work is really about the people in our communities. Those that are reclaiming their lives after substance abuse disorder and getting back to work with the help of peer support specialists (see page 19). Or our constituents that are over the age of 60—that's 30% of the region!—who are in need of meals and interaction, and offering support to their dedicated caregivers (pages 16-17).

All of these accomplishments are happening because we are working together. As leaders in your communities, you understand the value of regional partnerships to bring economic growth and services that benefit us all. Please continue to attend Southwestern Commission meetings so that we can form even stronger relationships that will enable us to do good work for the people of this great region.

As I close, I want to recognize Canton Mayor Zeb Smathers for his leadership as Chair over the last two years. It has been an honor to serve with someone who led during such challenging times with grace and dignity. I know he will continue to be active in this important organization.

Connie Orr
Graham County Commissioner



“The Commission leverages the support of our local governments wisely, bringing in approximately \$100 to this region for every dollar paid in dues.”



From the Director

In 1965, the towns and counties of the westernmost counties in North Carolina (known as Region A) came together to form the Southwestern Commission with the mission to **“improve the quality of life in its seven-county service area by assisting local governments in reaching their goals.”** It's a fantastic statement because the wording has allowed us to adapt over time as the needs of the region change.

In its first years, the Southwestern Commission worked on projects that included water and sewer upgrades and hospital and airport expansions in communities.

Almost 60 years later, while continuing to assist with water and sewer projects, much of our focus is on increasingly critical issues that didn't or barely existed in 1965—the expansion of broadband, availability of housing, and substance abuse disorder.

I also like how the mission from 1965 emphasizes the importance of our relationship with our local governments. One way our local governments provide support is by paying annual dues that are used to match state and federal funding. While this funding helps pay for our operating costs, more importantly, it has led to more than \$15 million that either passed through the Southwestern Commission to local communities or went directly into the region last year.

Funding is easy to track, but focusing on the funds' effects on our neighbors drives our passion. This report highlights just a few of the many ways our organization positively impacted the region in the last 12 months, and we couldn't do it without the support of our local government partners and the selfless dedication of our staff. On behalf of all of us at the Southwestern Commission, I thank you for your partnership and I look forward to another year of working together to improve the quality of life in the region.

Russ Harris
Executive Director



“This report highlights just a few of the many ways our organization positively impacted the region in the last 12 months, and we couldn't do it without the support of our local government partners and the selfless dedication of our staff.”

Southwestern Commission Staff



Administration Staff



Area Agency on Aging Staff p. 6



Community and Economic Development Staff p. 8



Workforce Development Staff p. 16

Annual Dinner



Area Agency on Aging on Aging

Spend ten minutes reflecting on 2022 with the Southwestern Commission's Area Agency on Aging team and the theme quickly turns to "back together."

"When you work closely with an aging population, 'back to normal' won't ever exist again," explains Sarajane Melton, AAA Director. "But we adapt and move on and we're so happy to regularly host or partner with others on events or services that help our neighbors throughout the region."

Below are highlights of events in 2022. They include:

Caregiver Assistance

82 caregivers supported

\$92,267 awarded to families for caregiving aid

689 caregivers received respite services



Samaritan's Feet

300 pairs of shoes distributed to two counties (Other 5 counties and EBCI events coming in 2023)

Senior Celebration

600 attendees from all seven counties and the EBCI boundary



Elder Rights

Elder Abuse Awareness Walks: 800+ participated in one of eight walks around the region

Investigated and closed 24 cases of possible elder abuse

114 people were trained to identify signs of abuse

Legal Program to assist aging citizens of their rights affected 142 people



Nutrition

11 Food distributions to more than 4,800 families

Serving 89,607 home-bound households through Meals on Wheels

Nourishing the body while encouraging connections with congregate meals, impacting 67,970



Health & Wellness

125 attended the spring conference that focuses on the relationship between physical and mental health

16 additional training opportunities with more than 400 participants

Served more than 2,050 at MedAssist event



Promoting Vaccine Awareness and Education

5 Hispanic Vaccine Clinics that promoted awareness and educated

782 Vaccines were given while distributing information to 6,300

MyReason—a campaign to promote vaccines—reached 250,468

MyReason Spanish version extended to 66,700

Community Paramedic Vaccines offered to homebound citizens touched 330 households

Additional Support Services

Area Agency on Aging Department

Approve Region A Senior Centers seeking Accreditation.

Provided technical assistance through the Senior Center of Excellence, including the Digital Senior Program



Promotion of Services Offered and Awareness/Education

Senior Resource Guide: 14,000 printed and circulated, filled with tips and information

Billboards: THREE Campaigns with more than one million views

Radio interviews with more than 11,000 listeners

Facebook posts: 8,400 interactions

Southwestern Planning Commission Monthly Newsletter: 7,200 Reached

Participated in Greening up the Mountains, SCC Job Fair and Cultural Fusion

Veterans Events

Assisted 50 veterans at the clinic in Franklin

200 attended the Veteran Stand Down

Andrews event reached more than 3,000



Community and Economic Development

2022 was a busy year for the Community and Economic Development Division of the Southwestern Commission, with eight successful grant applications that secured more than \$7.8 million into the region. Below is a graph showcasing the improvements communities will see as a result of these funds, and on the following pages are some examples of how the money was or will be spent.



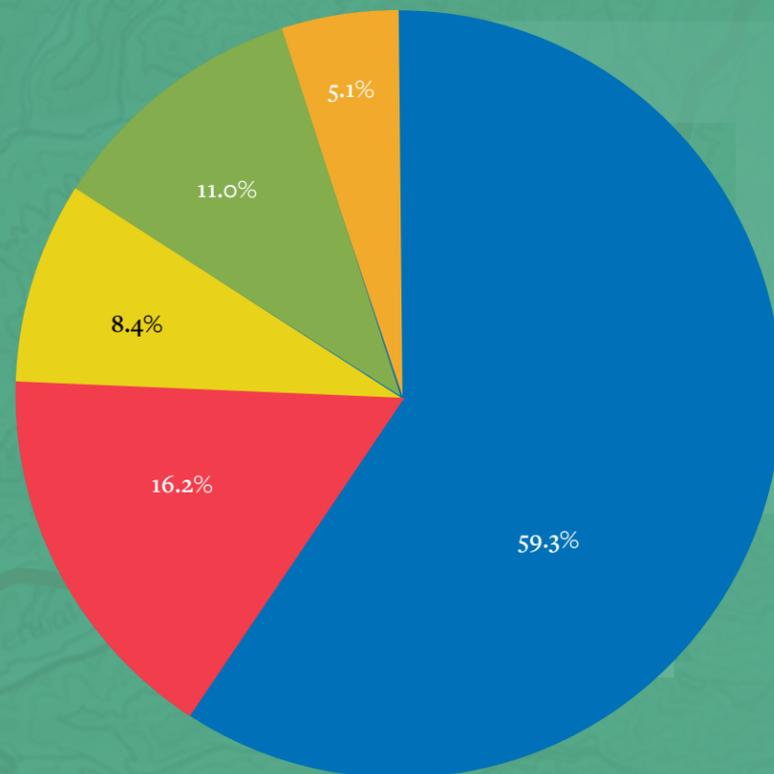
Broadband
\$4,575,000

Housing
\$1,250,000

Downtown Revitalization
\$650,000

Community Enhancements
\$850,000

Outdoor/Natural Resources
\$390,000



Broadband

Connecting to the rest of the world is imperative for a strong economy in western North Carolina. As the Southwestern Commission increasingly focuses its resources on increasing broadband access throughout Southern Appalachia, the results are slowly paying off.

“We are taking a holistic approach to broadband,” says Becca Scott, Director of Community and Economic Development at Southwestern Commission. “So we’re focused on two objectives—working with internet service providers to obtain grants to expand broadband infrastructure, and as a liaison to the North Carolina Department of Information Technology for local governments and community stakeholders to ensure people have the tools they need to use the technology once it’s available.”

The graph shown on page 8 indicates the money invested in broadband last year. This includes a multi-year, \$4.6 million project for infrastructure and smaller grants that provided hotspots and laptops that immediately benefited students and citizens. And the investment is essential.

“Students and adults who don’t have access to the internet, don’t have a computer or laptop, or don’t know how to use them—for education, work, health or connection—are at an impossible disadvantage,” says Scott. “It’s vitally important we do what we can to build more digitally equitable communities.”

In 2022, supported by a \$675,000 grant from Dogwood Health Trust, the Southwestern Commission hosted listening sessions for community leaders that would help set priorities and action plans for broadband adoption for all seven counties and the Qualla Boundary.

Led by the Institute for Emerging Issues, the three-year project expects significant and sustainable progress in implementing the strategies in the plans and leveraging state and federal dollars outside of the Dogwood grant to build capacity and demonstrate commitment to digital inclusion.

“Being left behind in a world that is moving faster and faster toward digital-only access has very real consequences in our region,” says Tiffany Henry, Director of Economic Development for Jackson County. “We’re so grateful for the forward-thinking of the Southwestern Commission, obtaining timely grants for our community that provides us with the critical capacity to evaluate our gaps and pull together the stakeholders needed to make reasonable and attainable recommendations.”

“Being left behind in a world that is moving faster and faster toward digital-only access has very real consequences in our region.”

Transportation Planning

Corridor K Breaks More Ground in 2022

In the development of the Corridor K project, the Southwestern Commission, as a Regional Planning Organization (RPO), played a critical role, representing the needs and vision of the local communities. The responsibilities of the RPO were to carry forward the local vision for the project identified in long-range plans, help identify potential issues that may impede project delivery, provide local data, including future development or land use changes, and help develop the need and purpose for the project.

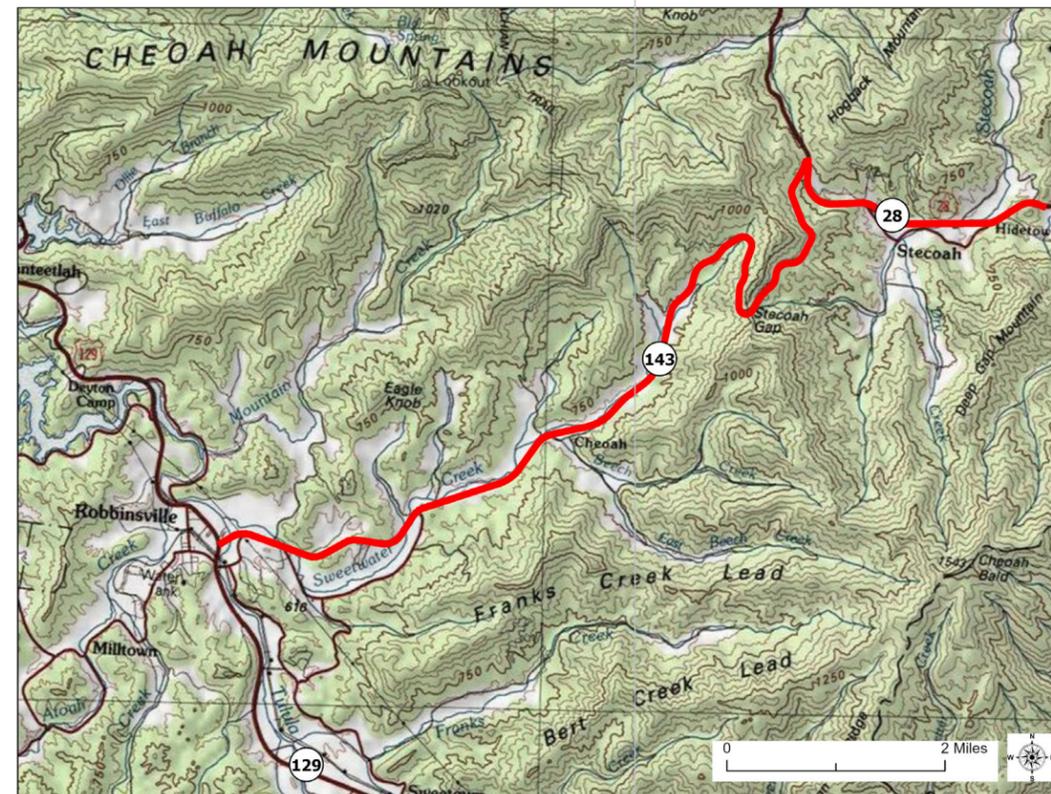
RPO staff also represented local communities on the team charged with the environmental review and permitting process, joining agencies such as the US Army Corps of Engineers, US Fish and Wildlife Service, NC State Historic Preservation Office, and US Forest Service. This team made decisions and agreed on project milestones before moving forward.

The Southwestern Commission's regional visioning study in 2014 was instrumental in resolving the decades-long controversy over the design, location, benefits, and impacts of the proposed highway through Graham and Cherokee Counties. This effort laid the groundwork for establishing a defensible purpose and need for the transportation project and helped all the lead agencies move beyond the impasse to come back to the table for a fresh start on the project in 2015.

In 2022, state leaders were present at the groundbreaking for the 12-mile phase of the project, which includes wider shoulders, passing and climbing lanes, a 10-foot multi-use path, and sidewalks in Graham County. A signature feature of the project is a vegetated land bridge at Stecoah Gap that will accommodate the crossing of the Appalachian Trail and help prevent wildlife collisions. The land bridge will be the first of its kind in the state and will be another special attraction for people visiting Graham County.

As the voice of local communities, the transportation planning staff at the Southwestern Commission ensured that the Corridor K project was developed to balance economic and transportation benefits with the need to protect natural resources and the local environment.

The land bridge will be the first of its kind in the state and will be another special attraction for people visiting Graham County.





This consortium is responsible for identifying and funding affordable housing projects in the region.

Housing

The Southwestern NC HOME Consortium, established and administered by the Southwestern Commission to address the need for affordable housing in Haywood, Jackson, Macon, Swain, Clay, and Graham counties, received \$542,373 in funding for the 2021 project year, with an additional \$207,627 in matching funds from Dogwood, totaling \$750,000. Led by Haywood County, the consortium is responsible for identifying and funding affordable housing projects in the region. Of the total funds, 10% are set aside for program administration, leaving \$675,000 available for affordable housing projects.

The Consortium's Board of Directors, composed of representatives from each county and municipality, acts as an advisory board to the Haywood County Board of Commissioners. From the applications submitted, six were selected and approved for grant awards:

- 1 | Mountain Housing Opportunities plans to develop **84 NEW RENTAL HOUSING** units in Waynesville using Low-Income Housing Tax Credits, with a proposed amount of \$300,000 in HOME funds;
- 2 | Mountain Projects plans to develop **10 HOMEOWNERSHIP SITES** in Maggie Valley, using \$110,000 in HOME funds;
- 3 | The Graham County Rural Development Authority will partner with Robbinsville High School's construction class to **BUILD AN AFFORDABLE HOME EVERY TWO YEARS** in Robbinsville, while helping students prepare to enter the workforce. Construction materials up to \$125,000 will be returned to the Graham County RDA after the house sells;
- 4 | Four Square Community Action Agency will use \$45,000 to **WORK WITH LANDLORDS TO REHABILITATE EXISTING RENTALS** to make them eligible for Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers;
- 5 | Haywood Pathways Center will receive **\$52,000 FOR OPERATING COSTS**;
- 6 | Macon Program for Progress will utilize its grant of \$43,000 to **HELP RESIDENTS OF MACON COUNTY OBTAIN OR RETAIN HOUSING**.



Mountain Projects plans to develop 10 home sites in Maggie Valley.





Grant Writing Assistance Benefits Region

“I see our department as an extension of the counties and municipalities we serve,” says Becca Scott, the Southwestern Commission director of Community and Economic Development. “Assisting the busy managers and planners so they can spend more time doing other things for their communities is what we do best.”

This was definitely true when Scott’s team authored two grants that were awarded from the Rural Economic Development Division of the NC Department of Commerce for the Rural Transformation Grant. Clay County and the Town of Bryson City were awarded a combined 1.45 million dollars for projects.

“The Southwestern Commission did a phenomenal job in ‘painting the picture’ of our need for new sidewalks on Main Street,” says Town Manager Regina Mathis, explaining the streetscape project to help revitalize Bryson City’s Main Street. “As the Town Manager, it was such a relief due to time constraints to know Southwestern Commission was completing the grant application.”

Mountain West Partnership

As the first Director of Mountain West Partnership (MWP), Josh Carpenter is ready to bring jobs and businesses to the state’s far west. Joining the Southwestern Commission in July of 2022, Carpenter has begun implementing the MWP strategic plan and has seen some successes. “There are two main objectives to move this region economically forward—supporting the businesses that are already here and recruiting new businesses,” he says. He adds that both operations face similar obstacles. “In this world of competition, communities must be ready to meet the business’s criteria, so we need to be ready with the highest and best use for education, building location, infrastructure, and availability of workforce.”

The Graham County Board of Commissioners has signed a contract with MWP that will provide both ongoing support and specific deliverables to the county. These include inventorying available sites and buildings and conducting a needs assessment for existing businesses while performing grant-writing services and updating the county’s existing economic development marketing.

Last fall, Carpenter held a first-of-its-kind event that discussed how the region could support the development of industrial sites within their communities and was part of the project to expand the Sylva-based American Sewing Corporation, an effort that includes adding an additional 10,000 square feet to their existing facility and also adding twelve administrative-level jobs. “This is especially exciting because it’s the first time Jackson County is utilizing the Building Reuse program, and it’s the first manufacturing expansion in the county in recent memory,” Carpenter says.

“I’m grateful to be in a job where I can showcase our own region’s culture and opportunities,” he says. “It’s a dream to show employers what mountain living is about while partnering with communities to develop places to do business. And, at the end of the day, we positively impact counties for the long term.”



“There are two main objectives to move this region economically forward—supporting the businesses that are already here and recruiting new businesses.”



Josh Carpenter, Director of Mountain West Partnership



Workforce Development

Bridging the Gap Between Students & Employers

It would be an understatement to say that teachers and counselors often have a major influence on the career paths of students. Many adults can vividly recall a word of encouragement, suggestion, or advice from an educator that led them to their current careers.

That knowledge was the motive for the Career Development Workshop, created for Career and Technical Education (CTE) directors, school counselors, and educators in the western prosperity zone. This collaborative effort started in 2019 with a workshop on resources available to support youth with barriers. Pausing over the pandemic, the forum returned in 2022 with a day focused on hospitality, tourism, and the outdoor economy. “As one of the most important economic drivers in western North Carolina, it’s vital to showcase different careers in this industry to students who want to continue to live and work here,” says Linda Lamp, Business Services Representative with the Southwestern Commission.

Hosted at Highland Falls Country Club, the forum included a tour of the club, visiting current employees who represented multiple career paths—from general manager, chef, maintenance, and groundskeeping.

Anna Hair, CTE Western Region Coordinator, says these events help bridge the gap between employers and those on the front line of advising students in career planning. “What better way to give educators the tools they need to help open doors for students than to allow them to experience what is essential to youth in their career development programs.”

This collaborative effort gained interest at the state level, and the Southwestern Commission was invited to join local CTE Directors to present this local best practice at the CTE Conference last fall in Cary.

“It’s vital to showcase different careers in this industry to students who want to continue to live and work here.”



Waynesville Soda Jerks’ Meheen Automated Bottle Filler Training



Reach Out & Train Up Grant impacts:

14
businesses

145
employees

6
On-the-job
training contracts

13
Train Up contracts

41
NCWorks presentations
impacting-890 people

Train Up

When the Southwestern Commission staff applied for the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act Enhancement Grant through NC Department of Commerce Division of Workforce Solutions, they couldn’t imagine the impact the grant award would have on the region.

“We used the \$200,000 grant for on-the-job training and training up—assisting workers in moving up through the ranks,” says David Garrett, Southwestern Workforce Development Director for the Southwestern Commission. “And we were able to reach employers from a multitude of sectors—manufacturing, trades, retail, agriculture, health services, and nonprofits.”

Train Up has been a valuable tool for small businesses as they develop strategies to maintain and retain staff in light of current workforce shortages. Trainings have ranged from process improvement to leadership development, while others have been industry specific to improve and expand operations, like power supply design, solar design/installation, canning line operations, sustaining a farm and nursery business, or an automated bottle filler training.



Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Program



Clay County resident Brandy Ledford was stunned by the compassion and care shown to his family when a relative died. Following that experience, he became interested in a career as an administrator at funeral homes. The problem? He had dropped out of high school before earning his diploma and had no connections in the industry.

Brandy reached out to HIGHTS for help. HIGHTS implements the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) program through their office—a program that pairs motivated job-seekers with an experienced career adviser who helps them with targeted educational and career development opportunities. The Southwestern Commission contracts with partners like HIGHTS around the region to disperse WIOA funds.

The WIOA program paired Brandy with a paid, 26-week internship at Townson-Rose Funeral Home in Andrews. The program's funds also assisted with transportation to and from work, all while Brandy worked to earn his high school equivalency diploma. After completing his internship, the funeral home hired him as an employee and Brandy hopes to begin his studies this fall to become a funeral director.

WIOA provided funding to Brandy for the things he needed to succeed, and it is extremely important to people in western North Carolina, says Sharee Blais, Youth Case Manager. "Some students would not be able to complete their GED without it," she says.

There are currently 40 youth residents in the Clay County program that are actively participating or in the one-year follow-up that tracks former participants to see if they are in college or working full-time.

Peer Support

In 2022, the Recovery to Work Initiative hired two Certified Peer Support Specialists, Lee Gibson and Candace Mink. Generously funded by the Dogwood Health Trust and led by the Southwestern Commission's Workforce Development Department, the positions were created to provide peer support services for those with a history of substance use—assisting individuals as they transition to work by helping them with anything from finding shoes or uniforms, resume-building, or as an advocate to act as a liaison between the employee and employer. And for one Cherokee County couple, the initiative has already changed lives.

Peer Support Specialist Candace Mink met Donna and Chris in June. The couple had been attending weekly appointments at Brightview Murphy Treatment Addiction Center for more than 12 months but had no jobs, identification, or housing. Living in a tent and barely scraping by, they were determined to turn their lives around. Mink assisted in retrieving their high school transcripts and finding adequate housing. Donna is now employed at Family Dollar in Andrews and is in line for a shift manager position, and Chris is a full-time cook at Maria's Diner in Andrews.

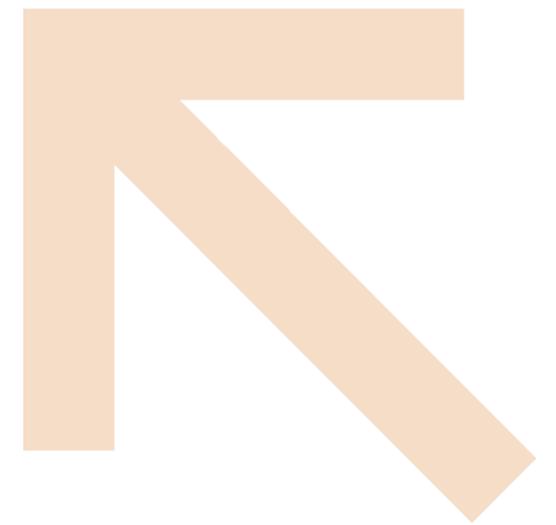
"When you are not in that situation, it's hard to understand the cycle of help that is needed for people recovering from Substance Abuse Disorder," says Mink. "They both got jobs—yay! Now, what clothes do they need to look professional? What transportation do they have to get there on time? They move into an apartment, but what mattress do they have to sleep on and be ready for work the next day?" Mink explains that employment is a top priority for people in all stages of wellness. "Individuals who work are more likely to reduce their substance use and be better able to maintain sobriety. Helping people like Donna and Chris with the details they didn't even realize they needed so that they can perform better at their jobs is what peer support is all about."

Lee Gibson, who holds the same specialist position at NCWorks in Sylva, says the job gives her exactly what she seeks—a way to give back. "This helps me maintain a lifestyle of health and wellness, where I'm able to share my lived experiences with those who need to hear them," she says. "Helping with the small, sometimes minute, baby steps that people in recovery take to build back their lives is so rewarding. They may see them as insignificant, but they really are huge, monumental leaps forward."

The Peer Support Specialist positions are paid for through a grant from Dogwood Health Trust. If you know someone in need of these services, please contact the NCWorks offices in Murphy or Sylva.



Helping people recovering from substance abuse disorders so they can work is what peer support is all about.



Rebounding Together Summit

Governor Roy Cooper was among the speakers in Cherokee when the Southwestern Commission partnered with the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond and the Land of Sky Regional Council to host the WNC Rebounding Stronger Summit in August. More than 120 regional leaders gathered to discuss the challenges and solutions facing rural western North Carolinians.

Highlighting his administration's accomplishments, Cooper stated that 83% of economic initiatives created in the past few years have been in rural communities. "When we invest in rural communities, we strengthen the entire state," said Cooper. He touched on fostering entrepreneurship in rural areas and the importance of community colleges' roles in training economic development workers so potential industries will consider Western North Carolina for expansion.

In addition to Cooper, speakers included Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians Chief Richard Sneed, Western Carolina University Chancellor Kelli Brown, and Managing Partner of Economic Leadership, LLC Ted Abernathy. Patrick Woodie, President of the NC Rural Center in Raleigh, presented three persistent challenges facing rural areas and nine drivers that rural North Carolina must adapt in order to thrive. Panels of experts led discussions regarding infrastructure solutions, workforce solutions, and strategies for innovation, which challenged and inspired representatives from Rutherford to Graham counties.

"We planned this event to bring people together to hear some of the innovative strategies that address the complicated issues we face in our region," said Russ Harris, Executive Director of the Southwestern Commission. "I hope that people were inspired by the conversations on concerns—such as lack of broadband and housing—that we are all working together to solve. While it doesn't happen as fast as we would like, strengthening and expanding the partnerships of organizations working on these issues will, ultimately, be a huge asset for western North Carolina."

"When we invest in rural communities, we strengthen the entire state."

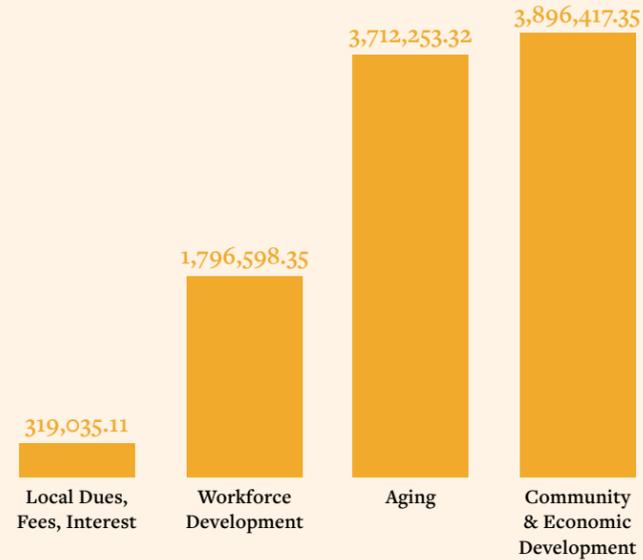


Financials

General Fund Receipts

JAN-DEC 2022

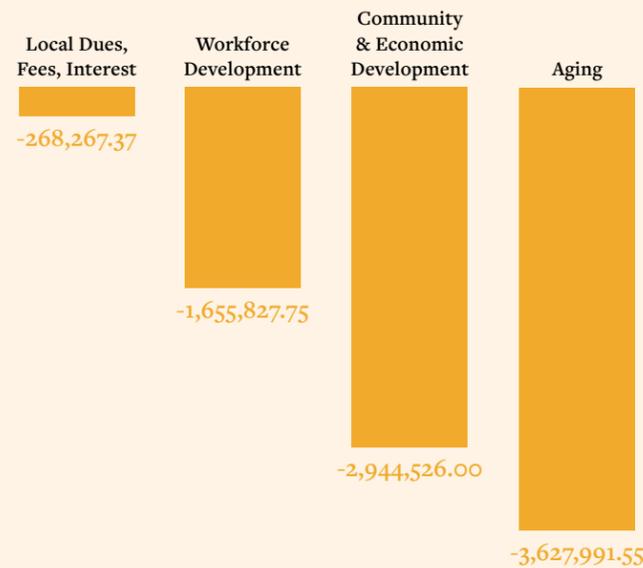
Local Dues, Fees, Interest	319,035.11
Workforce Development	1,796,598.35
Aging	3,712,253.32
Community & Economic Development	3,896,417.35
TOTAL	9,724,304.13



General Fund Disbursements

JAN-DEC 2022

Local Dues, Fees, Interest	(268,267.37)
Workforce Development	(1,655,827.75)
Community & Economic Development	(2,944,526.00)
Aging	(3,627,991.55)
TOTAL	(8,496,612.67)



Staff

AREA AGENCY ON AGING

Sarajane Melton, *Director*
 Jeanne Mathews, *Aging Program Coordinator*
 Anna Rogers, *Long Term Care Ombudsman*
 Lisa Allen, *Health and Community Educator*
 Kellie Dula, *Family Caregiver Resource Coordinator*
 Pat Baker, *Aging Program Assistant*

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

David Garrett, *Director*
 Lisa Ledford, *Program and Accountability Manager*
 Linda Lamp, *Business Services Representative*
 Laura Grindstaff, *Program Services Leader*
 Lee Gibson, *Peer Support Specialist*
 Candace Mink, *Peer Support Specialist*

COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Becca Scott, *Director*
 Rose Bauguess, *Senior Planner/Transportation*
 Anne Wade, *Project Manager*
 Millie Smith, *Project Manager*
 Caroline LaFrienier, *Senior Project Manager/Housing*

ADMINISTRATION

Russ Harris, *Executive Director*
 Ryan Scaggs, *Finance Officer/HR*
 Debra Ivey, *Office Manager/Clerk to the Board*

MOUNTAIN WEST PARTNERSHIP

Josh Carpenter, *Director*

Executive Committee

Connie Orr, *Chairman*
GRAHAM COUNTY COMMISSIONER

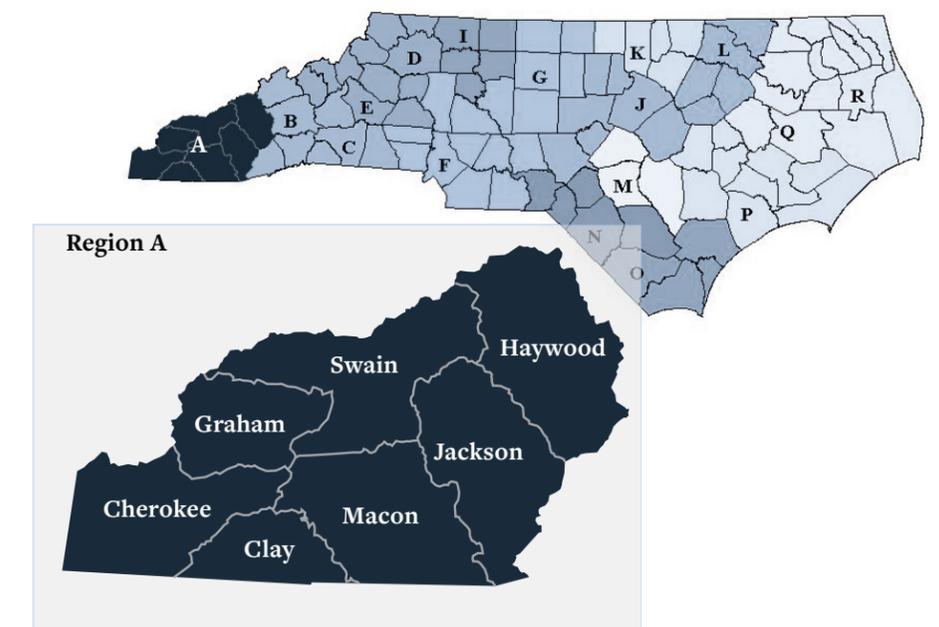
Jennifer Best, *2nd Vice-Chair*
HAYWOOD COUNTY COMMISSIONER

Tim Radford, *1st Vice-Chair*
MURPHY MAYOR

Richard Sneed, *Treasurer*
EBCI PRINCIPAL CHIEF

Counties, Towns and Municipalities in Service Area

- CHEROKEE COUNTY**
Andrews
Murphy
- CLAY COUNTY**
Hayesville
- GRAHAM COUNTY**
Fontana Dam
Lake Santeetlah
Robbinsville
- HAYWOOD COUNTY**
Canton
Clyde
Maggie Valley
Waynesville
- JACKSON COUNTY**
Dillsboro
Forest Hills
Sylva
Webster
- MACON COUNTY**
Franklin
Highlands
- SWAIN COUNTY**
Bryson City
- EBCI**



The Southwestern Commission is the council of government (COG) for North Carolina's Region A, covering the western most part of the state; Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Jackson, Macon, and Swain Counties, the Qualla Boundary, and the 17 municipalities therein.



SINCE 1965

The mission of the Southwestern Commission is to improve the quality of life in its seven-county service area by assisting local governments in reaching their goals.

125 Bonnie Lane. Sylva, NC 28779
828-586-1962 | www.regiona.org