

Southwestern Commission 2013 Year in Review



2013

**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**

The Southwestern North Carolina Planning and Economic Development Commission (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 and the 16 municipalities therein.

Letter from the Chairman

Fellow Board Members

I consider it an honor to have served as Chairman of the Southwestern Commission for the preceding year. I am a person who believes in hiring good staff, giving them the mission, and then sitting back to let them do their job.

Looking back at the Commission's activities over the past year, I commend the Board for having accomplished many great transitions and tasks. The transition of Ryan into our Executive Director's position has been transparent and seamless. We have worked together to modernize the organization and implement sound operational principals. We have shifted gears to create a more entrepreneurial Commission, with the goal of becoming financially sustainable. We currently pass through \$38 for every \$1 in local revenues. And finally, we are gaining a better understanding of the true value of the organization to our local governments. In today's world it is next to impossible to go it alone. The Commission allows us to think globally and act locally.

We enter 2014 with the objective to support and advocate for the Southwestern Commission and its regional, cooperative approach, and to seek continued membership contributions to support our activities.



Virtual Dementia Tour

The Area Agency on Aging and our partner organizations continue to facilitate the Virtual Dementia Tour® (VDT), which is an experiential opportunity for individuals to “walk in the shoes” of someone living with Alzheimer’s disease or related memory illnesses. The Virtual Dementia Tour® is a scientifically proven method designed to build sensitivity and awareness in individuals caring for those with

dementia. A simulation of dementia, this toolkit was created by P.K. Beville, a specialist in Geriatrics and founder of Second Wind Dreams, for anyone seeking to understand the physical and mental challenges of those with Dementia. Its purpose is to help professional and family caregivers better identify with the day-to-day struggles associated with memory illness, thereby improving their ability to provide compassionate and positive care.

There are approximately 35 million Americans age 65 and older and more than 5.4 million suffer from Alzheimer’s disease. Dementia is the overriding diagnosis for cognitive impairments - the largest category under Dementia is Alzheimer’s disease. The VDT is a core element of the ongoing in-service training that is provided by our Long-Term Care Ombudsman in each of our region’s facilities. To find out more about the Virtual Dementia Tour®, contact the Area Agency on Aging.

“To be honest, this experience scared me because I didn’t know exactly what was going on. I couldn’t hear the instructions, and I felt pressured because I thought I had a time limit to get everything done, so I felt down about myself because I didn’t complete the tasks. What will stay with me is that I now understand more about this disease, and I will be more understanding about the residents.” -LTC Facility Staff



Regional Trails Plan

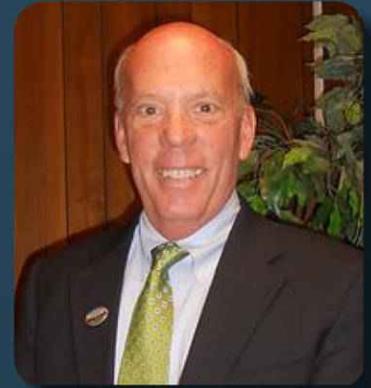
Earlier this year, the Southwestern Rural Planning Organization and planning department completed the Regional Trails Plan. The plan is the first ever comprehensive inventory of trail assets in the region. The plan includes both existing trails—greenway, hiking, paddling, biking, equestrian, and more—and suggestions for potential future trail development. Individual maps are available for each of the seven western counties along with a region-wide trails map. Given the contribution of outdoor recreation to the economy of Region A, this plan is an outstanding tourism-based economic development tool.

Most of all, I would thank you, the leaders of the communities in the Southwestern Commission who have helped make this organization a success by volunteering your time and attending meetings. These meetings foster strong collaboration by providing a place to share concerns and strategies. We have been especially attentive to our state and national representatives by asking them to be a part of our process.

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. I believe this year's activities have served that mission well. I look forward to a successful 2014.

*Gavin A. Brown - Mayor of Waynesville
Chairman of the Southwestern Commission*

In today's world it is next to impossible to go it alone. Our commission allows us to think globally and act locally.



"We're tapping into the collective wisdom of residents, business people and specialists on different topics related to the health and prosperity of our communities to build a foundation for anticipating and responding to whatever comes our way." Bill Tunnel - Lead Project Consultant

Opt-In

A Regional Vision Study (funded by NCDOT and Federal Highways) is currently underway, entitled "OPT-IN". OPT-IN is short for "Opportunity Initiative," to stress both its opportunity-focused goals and its invitation to collaborate. The firm hired to complete the study, Tunnel, Spangler and Walsh (TSW), has recently completed the initial public input sessions.

This study is an ambitious regional visioning effort to try to resolve broader transportation and economic development challenges and barriers in the region. The project seeks to answer some of the most complex questions: What is/are the relevant region(s) for economic development purposes? How do they intersect? In that ways do they pull against one another? What are the larger global, national, state and mega-regional forces that are likely to influence opportunities and challenges in the region? Who are the target "customers" for our future economies, and what do they value? The official website for OPT-IN is www.OptInswnc.org.



WORKING TOGETHER TO BETTER UNDERSTAND AND INFORM CHOICES FACING LOCAL GOVERNMENTS, BUSINESSES AND FAMILIES IN NORTH CAROLINA'S SEVEN WESTERNMOST COUNTIES, AND IN THE EASTERN BAND OF CHEROKEE INDIANS

North Carolina is one of the most diversified agriculture states in the nation. The state's 52,400 farmers grow over 80 different commodities, utilizing 8.6 million of the state's 31 million acres to furnish consumers a dependable and affordable supply of food and fiber.



Homegrown Economic Development

In recent years, the Community Development Department has observed rapid growth and interest in the local food movement, specifically growing the local foods economy both in WNC and nationally. As a result, an agricultural economic development effort is underway, with the goal of connecting county economic development and planning staff with agriculture opportunities and resources for their communities. Staff is currently working with Jackson County, NCDA, Cooperative Extension and the Southwestern Resource Conservation & Development Council to study the viability of converting the old Drexel plant in Whittier to an Ag Development Center. In addition, staff has secured funding for a regional study on the financial feasibility of locating a USDA-certified large animal processing plant in WNC. Staff continues to assist NCDA with the Master Planning process for the state-owned WNC Farmers Market, which serves farmers in our region.

ToolBox Implementation Fund - ARC Minigrant Program

2013 ended the third full year of the Toolbox Implementation Fund (TIF) grant program. These federal grant funds were made available by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) in 2010, with the aim of effecting meaningful land use planning and growth management in the counties and towns of Region A. The Southwestern Commission administers these funds for ARC, and delivers mini-grants to local governments and 501(c)(3) non-profit organizations to support community-based efforts to implement tools from the 2009 Southwestern NC report: "Region A Toolbox: A Pilot of the Mountain Landscapes Initiative". The first round of grants were made in 2011, and since then the Commission, via ARC, has made 20 grants totalling \$194,000 to the counties, towns, and non-profits in Region A.

Government entities and nonprofits that have received funding to date include: Cashiers Village Council, Graham Revitalization Economic Action Team (GREAT), Handmade in America, Haywood Waterways, Little Tennessee Land Trust (LTLT), Jackson County, Town of Sylva, SWRC&D, Cherokee County, Macon County, WNC Communities, Fines Creek Community Association, Hiwassee River Watershed Association, Macon County, Clay County Community Revitalization Association and Southern Appalachian Family Farms.

Projects that have been funded have dealt with a wide spectrum of issues. A Streetscape Plan for the Town of Sylva's main commercial corridor was created, to assist the town in cooperating with NCDOT on future improvements; training for local farmers and tailgate market vendors was funded through a cooperative effort between the Clay County Communities Revitalization Association and Southern Appalachian Family Farmers; pedestrian and greenway plans were created in Graham and Jackson Counties; a Master Plan for a Mountain Folk Center in Cherokee County was created; and a number of agricultural projects aimed at economic development were funded.



Workforce Development Board

The federal Workforce Investment Act (WIA) is the nation's principal workforce development legislation, providing funds to address the employment and training needs of adults, dislocated workers and youth.

The Workforce Development Department of Southwestern Commission serves as staff to the Southwestern Workforce Development Board. The Workforce Development Board is a group of community and business leaders charged with planning and oversight responsibilities for workforce programs and services in our area, such as:

- developing local plans for the use of WIA funds to assist Job Seekers and Employers
- oversight of the local service delivery system through the Workforce Career Centers (formerly JobLink Career Centers)
- coordinating activities with economic development entities and employers in their local areas

Workforce Investment Act (WIA) funds provide services and programs that assist participants by upgrading the skills of existing workers, preparing youth and other emerging workers to enter the labor force, and reconnecting dislocated workers and economically disadvantaged persons to the workforce.



"Without the WIA program, I would not have been able to even consider going back to school. With WIA's help and assistance I was able to complete the BLET program, was successful in my job search and I am now a School Resource Officer with the Macon County School System. It is not just a job but a career."
 -WIA Participant Troy Burt



"OJT is definitely a great use of Workforce Investment Act (WIA) training funds. It allowed us to select, hire and train a veteran as a new employee and get him trained. Even though he was finishing up at Southwestern Community College in the HVAC program, he still needed more training. We would not have been able to hire him without the OJT program. It is a great program. We offer a great package of benefits to our employees so we were excited to hire someone who is a good fit into our company."
 -Laurie Auld from Andrews Auld Heating and Cooling



The Graham County Workforce Center, located at 347 Rodney Orr Bypass in Robbinsville, is completely funded by WIA to provide Graham County residents access to employment and training programs and services. Prior to the opening of the Graham center in 2004, residents had to travel to either Murphy or Franklin to access these services. Since the beginning of the "Great Recession" in 2008, Graham County has and continues to have the highest unemployment rate of any of the seven counties in our region. The Graham County Workforce Center provides valuable services to the citizens of Graham County. The center is staffed three days per week by WIA and Division of Workforce Solutions staff from Murphy.



It is becoming increasingly critical that a region promote its competitive advantages to its state and federal government to ensure the development of sound state and national strategies. This in turn ensures that a region with unique assets can compete in the global economy.



Mountain West Alliance

The Mountain West Alliance (MWA) is a Regional Technology Marketing Initiative for the six far western counties. It is guided by local assets and strengthens, and it strives to overcome the negative perceptions of the counties it serves. Its mission statement is three-fold: 1) Identify the assets and strengths of the region, 2) Create a marketing platform to communicate and convey the economic story of our region to relocating business and industry, and 3) Utilize the marketing platform to encourage diversified growth within the region.

The group is made up of EDC Directors and/or planners from each of the six counties and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, as well as the Executive Director of the Southwestern Commission. The MWA will soon be able to work as a group to recruit additional businesses and strengthen the regional economy. This effort is being coordinated with private sector interests in the region including the software, technology, and utility industries.

Freight Study

The Southwestern Rural Planning Organization began a freight assessment last year, including a survey that is currently being distributed to wholesalers, industries, and other freight movers in Region A. The survey takes a comprehensive look at the volume of freight being shipped into and out of the seven counties, which routes and modes are carrying freight, and how current conditions may change in the future. The study also aims to identify the most pressing needs of local freight movers: what priority level are improvements such as highway upgrades, better rail options, more accessible fueling stations, more or better-trained drivers, or others?

The results of the study, once analyzed, will strengthen economic development and industry recruitment by providing hard data on the volume and type of freight already originating from or destined for the region. At the same time, local freight network needs will be highlighted, as will potential opportunities to close gaps and meet needs. While current NC Department of Transportation traffic counts include truck volumes, the NCDOT data does not include specifics such as origination or destination points, non-highway modes, or smaller shippers and less-than-truckload (LTL) cargo. A major goal of the assessment is for the survey results to complement and inform the existing NCDOT data.

In addition to this region-specific study, the RPO is exchanging ideas with neighbouring transportation planning organizations. Land of Sky Regional Council in Asheville has graciously assisted the RPO with obtaining data resources, and Southwestern RPO has given feedback on Land of Sky's Freight Across Appalachia initiative. On February 28th, RPO staff will join staff of Land of Sky, NCDOT, and councils of government from east Tennessee and north Georgia in visiting the new road-to-rail intermodal freight facility in Greer, South Carolina. The intermodal facility not only has the potential to boost southwestern North Carolina's role in international trade, but also to expand industrial development in the immediate vicinity of Greer, which in turn could enhance demand for raw materials and component technologies produced in our region.

The ultimate goal is to cultivate the Southwestern region's connections to the larger economy, in order to grow our mountain economy and create jobs.



Elder Abuse Walk

In collaboration with the 30th Judicial Alliance, the Area Agency on Aging sponsored the first Elder Abuse Awareness and Prevention Walk in the Region, which occurred simultaneously in Jackson, Haywood and Macon Counties. The activity not only helped build community awareness and the need for prevention, but it also opened doors to other collaborative relationships, which will help us expand our

Elder Abuse Walk activities in 2014 to include every county in the Region. The Elder Abuse Awareness and Prevention Walk will take place on June 14, 2014.

As the regional hub for 211, the Area Agency on Agency continues its community outreach activities and work with regional service providers to ensure that the database contains accurate and updated information. As part of our outreach strategy, we distributed nearly 7,000 magnets across the Region.



RLF & PPIF

One of the primary goals of the Southwestern Commission has been to develop, attract, expand, and maintain better economic and employment opportunities within its seven county service area. The Commission seeks to develop and maintain occupational skill levels in the human resource base so that new job opportunities can be fully capitalized upon. A primary barrier in reaching these goals is access to capital. The Commission's Revolving Loan Fund is an economic tool to assist in reaching these goals. The purpose is to assist in the creation and/or retention of private sector jobs within the region by providing loan funds (gap financing) in conjunction with funds from conventional lending institutions, from other non-traditional, gap financing sources, and from the borrowers' own equity financing. Loan funds will revolve perpetually, providing supplemental, short-term financing of business and industry proposals.

The Public-Private Investment Fund provides a vehicle for local businesses, citizens, and seasonal residents to make private contributions to a fund that will foster the success and growth of new and expanding businesses. This fund is designed to foster development by making investments in local businesses whose goals align with the SWC's member government's economic development initiatives.

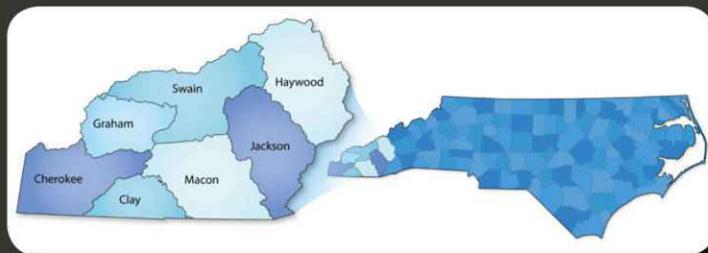
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Core Services

Workforce Development
 Business Services
 Aging Initiatives
 Transportation Planning
 Community Planning
 Strategic Plans
 Project Development
 Project Funding
 Project Management
 Grant Writing
 Grant Administration
 Facilitation Services
 Board Retreats
 Leadership Assistance
 Regional Convening
 Technical Assistance
 GIS Mapping
 Economic Development
 Hiring/Selection



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