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News & Updates

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RHA Implements HUD-recommended Cost-saving Measures

Western Piedmont Council of Governments' Regional Housing Authority (RHA) recently began a series of cost-saving measures to ensure the long-term sustainability of the Housing Choice Voucher program.

As part of recent federal budgetary adjustments, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) advised Public Housing Agencies (PHAs) to carry out several cost-cutting measures, including, but not limited to:

- Ensuring correct voucher sizes
- Reviewing payment standards
- Reviewing utility rates
- Reviewing rent reasonableness
- Reducing or stopping voucher issuance to applicants
- Increasing minimum rent
- Stopping portability absorption
- Reducing subsidy standards

In accordance with HUD regulations (PIH Notice 2025-28), the WPCOG RHA is adjusting its subsidy standards policy to better align with current funding levels. On May 4, the RHA began conducting reexaminations, effective on July 1, to apply the new subsidy standards. Under these new guidelines, households may be eligible for a smaller voucher size than they currently hold. Subsequently, all future voucher recipients will be leased in accordance with the new standard. The goal is to continue providing stable housing for all RHA families while complying with federal requirements to keep the program running under the 2026 budget authority.

In addition to the subsidy standard policy changes, other adjustments to RHA procedures have been made. RHA staff are now also conducting in-person meetings for families who report zero income.

The RHA's goal is to continue providing safe, stable housing to as many families as possible while complying with federal requirements.

For more information, contact Jennifer Cater at 828 485 4282 or email her at jennifer.cater@wpcog.org.

Article by Jennifer Cater, RHA Program Manager

Long-Term Care Community Advisory Committee

What is the Community Advisory Committee?

Each county's Community Advisory Committee (CAC) is a group of local volunteers appointed by the county Board of Commissioners and trained and designated by the Regional Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program. Established by the North Carolina State Legislature, these committees function as vital grassroots advocates for residents in long-term care facilities. The very presence of informed, concerned citizens in and around facilities makes a critical difference to ensure quality care for people in long-term care facilities.

Community Advisory Committee: Roles and Responsibilities

- Work to maintain the intent of the Residents' Bill of Rights.
- Establish rapport with residents, families, staff, and administrators.
- Work toward keeping the public informed about aspects of long-term care and operations of homes in their counties.
- Serve as the nucleus for increased community interaction with facilities.
- Promote community education and awareness of the needs of residents in long-term care facilities.
- Make official visits to assigned facilities to assess residents' quality of life.

What are the Application Requirements?

Initial appointment to the Community Advisory Committee is for a one-year term. At the discretion of the county's Board of Commissioners, members are eligible for subsequent appointments of two- or three-year terms.

Appointees must reside in the county that they serve. They cannot have an immediate family member residing in or employed by the type of home covered by their committee, nor can they have a financial interest in a long-term care facility served by the committee.

After appointment by the Board of Commissioners, members must be able to visit long-term care facilities with fellow committee members. An interest in advocacy for disabled and senior adults is desirable.

Joining the Community Advisory Committee!

If you are interested in volunteering to serve on a Community Advisory Committee for Alexander, Burke, Caldwell, or Catawba County, contact the Ombudsman Program at 828-485-4271.

Article by Michele Francois, Regional Ombudsman

WPCOG Advancing Economic Growth and Community Revitalization Across the Region

Hildebran Celebrates Auditorium Project Completion

In July 2026, the Town of Hildebran held a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the now-complete auditorium renovation project. The project improved ADA accessibility and enhanced the usability of the existing auditorium by creating concessions and a ticket box area, expanding the backstage area to include changing rooms, restrooms, showers, storage space, and a green room. The town also replaced the seats, curtains, and other components of the auditorium, turning it into a state-of-the-art showroom.

The WPCOG is proud to have supported this project through grant writing and administration. Ultimately, WPCOG assisted in securing \$849,050 through the North Carolina Department of



Commerce's Rural Economic Development Division for the project. These funds were leveraged by the town to secure an additional ~\$900,000 to complete the project. The 1959 auditorium has now been fully renovated and placed back into use for town and community events, private rentals, and more.

Article by Kyle Case, Community & Economic Development Manager

Summer 2026 Economic Indicators Newsletter Examines Hickory MSA Population Growth and Employment Trends

The Western Piedmont Council of Governments has released the Summer 2026 edition of the *Economic Indicators Newsletter* (EIN), which highlights unemployment rates, Per Capita Personal Income (PCPI), long-range population projections, and Current Employment Survey (CES) employment trends.

Key Findings from the Summer 2026 EIN

- **Unemployment Rates:** The Hickory MSA unemployment rate remained 3.7% in both March 2025 and March 2026. The unemployment rate for our region remains the 5th lowest in the state.
- **Labor Force Changes:** Between March 2025 and March 2026, the number of employed residents declined from 163,713 to 160,080 (-3,633). The civilian labor force decreased from 170,051 to 166,487 (-3,564). The labor force decrease reflects an ongoing trend for most areas where more workers retire each year than enter the workforce.
- **Income Growth:** Hickory MSA Per Capita Personal Income rose from \$49,015 in 2021 to \$55,363 in 2024, reflecting continued economic strengthening.
- **Population Projections (2025–2045):** The Hickory MSA population is forecast to increase from 378,237 to 399,957, a 10.5% gain over 20 years. This represents the third slowest (or twelfth fastest) growth rate among North Carolina's metropolitan regions. The state is projected to increase 17.5% over the same period. In-migration provides the modest population growth for our region, as deaths are expected to continue to exceed births.
- **Aging Population:** The 65+ age group is projected to grow the fastest, increasing 13.0% (10,315 people) by 2045. This trend reflects Baby Boomers aging into retirement and continued in-migration of retirees.
- **Catawba County Growth:** All major age groups (0–4, 5–17, 18–44, 45–64, and 65+) are expected to grow between 2025 and 2045.
- **Employment Trends (CES):** Hickory MSA employment dropped sharply from 155,400 in March 2020 to 133,400 in April 2020 (-14.2%) due to pandemic-related shutdowns. Employment later rebounded to 158,800 jobs in March 2023, but the region has since experienced a net loss of 3,900 jobs (-2.5%).
- **Goods-Producing Sector:** Since March 2023, the region has lost 2,900 goods-producing jobs, primarily in furniture and non-durable goods manufacturing. The 44,100 goods-producing jobs reported in March 2026 remain below the 46,300 recorded in March 2020.
- **Service-Producing Sector:** Service-producing employment increased 2.6% from 109,100 in March 2020 to 111,900 in March 2025 as the region recovered from COVID-19. Over the past year, however, service-providing employment declined by 1,100 jobs (-1%), with losses in retail trade, transportation, warehousing, and utilities, and professional and business services.

The EIN is produced quarterly by the Western Piedmont Workforce Development Board. To subscribe, contact Taylor Dellinger at **828-485-4233** or taylor.dellinger@wpcog.org.

Article by Taylor Dellinger, Senior Data Analyst

Summer 2026 EIN

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Anthony Adrian NextGen Success Story



Anthony Adrian, a Supply Chain Management student at Appalachian State University, recently completed a WIOA NextGen Work Experience at The Corner Table in Newton. The opportunity allowed him to apply his classroom knowledge while supporting the company's supply chain operations.

A first-generation college student, Anthony used his bilingual skills to better serve a diverse customer base and quickly became a valued member of the team through his strong work ethic and willingness to learn. His supervisor was so impressed with his performance that they shared they would gladly have kept him on for an additional 400 hours if the opportunity had been available.

In addition to gaining hands-on experience, Anthony expanded his professional network and developed valuable industry connections. As he continues his education at Appalachian State University, he is building the skills and experience needed for a successful career in supply chain management.

Article by Charity Patterson Hamber, Workforce Development Board Director

Lenoir Blackberry Festival Offers Educational Opportunity on Stormwater and Local Waterways



In early July, WPCOG attended the Blackberry Festival in Lenoir to educate the public about stormwater and how to care for our local waterways. The weekend's high heat was broken by some rain, which gave us the perfect opportunity to get people thinking about where all that water would go (hint: it's not the sewer) and what it could pick up along its journey to our local rivers and lakes. Across Friday and Saturday, we spoke to 500 people and handed out over 150 pieces of material, including pamphlets, stormwater coloring sheets, and stickers.

Article by Julia Levigion, Natural Resources Technician

Greater Hickory MPO Advances Three Projects Through Spring 2026 LAPP Funding Round

The Greater Hickory MPO awarded funding for three new projects through the Spring 2026 Locally Administered Projects Program (LAPP) Call for Projects. Applications were received from the City of Hickory and the City of Lenoir for projects that improve pedestrian safety, roadway connectivity, accessibility, and streetscape enhancements throughout the region. Due to the high quality and competitiveness of the applications, MPO staff and the Transportation Advisory Committee sought to maximize the number of projects that could move forward while maintaining the long-term sustainability of the LAPP program. The approved funding recommendations include full funding for the 5th Street NE and 10th Avenue Drive NE Intersection Improvements project, as well as preconstruction funding for the Harper Avenue Streetscape Project and the 13th Avenue Drive SE Connector project.

The two projects receiving preconstruction funding may pursue construction funding through a future LAPP call once they're ready for that phase. This approach allows project development activities to begin while preserving flexibility within the MPO's discretionary funding program and supporting the continued advancement of high-priority transportation improvements throughout the region.

Article by Averi Ritchie, Transportation Planning Director

Western Piedmont Council of Governments
www.wpcog.org



Western Piedmont Council of Governments | PO Box 9026 | Hickory, NC 28603 US

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