

**Minutes**  
**Western Piedmont Council of Governments**  
**Bimonthly Policy Board Meeting**  
**Tuesday, January 25, 2022**  
**J.E. Broyhill Civic Center, Lenoir, NC**

**Members Present:**

Jill Patton, Chair  
Joseph L. Gibbons, Vice-Chair  
George Holleman, Treasurer  
Bob Floyd, Past Chair  
Larry Yoder, At-Large  
Wayne Abele, At-Large  
Kitty Barnes, At-Large  
Marla Thompson, At-Large  
Johnnie Carswell, Alternate  
Robbie Wilkie, Alternate  
Ronnie Setzer  
Dale Sherrill  
Ramona Duncan  
Jim Green, Alternate  
Dennis Anthony  
Dr. Caryl Burns  
Tracy Townsend, Alternate  
David Williams, Alternate  
Mike Smith, Alternate  
Danny Hipps  
Holly Crafton-Lay, Alternate  
Jerry Hodge  
Beverly Danner, Alternate  
Charlie Watts  
Amparo R. Alfaro  
Erisha Lipford  
Helen Chestnut  
Jeanna Price  
Malla Vue  
Randy Burns

**Members Absent:**

Kelvin Gregory  
Mike Labrose  
Donald Robinson  
Joie Fulbright  
Barbara Pennell  
Larry Chapman, Secretary  
Sheila Perkins

**Local Government/Agency:**

Hickory  
Lenoir  
Taylorsville  
Town of Cedar Rock  
Alexander County  
Burke County  
Catawba County  
Long View  
Burke County  
Caldwell County  
Cajah's Mountain  
Claremont  
Connelly Springs  
Conover  
Drexel  
Granite Falls  
Granite Falls  
Hickory  
Hildebran  
Maiden  
Maiden  
Newton  
Newton  
Valdese  
Appointed  
Appointed  
Appointed  
Appointed  
Appointed  
Appointed

Brookford  
Caldwell County  
Catawba  
Conover  
Gamewell  
Hudson  
Glen Alpine

Ben Honeycutt  
Chris Jernigan  
Allen Spencer  
Wayne Annas  
Keith Warren  
Tommy Luckadoo

Hildebran  
Morganton  
Rhodhiss  
Rutherford College  
Sawmills  
Appointed

**Guests/Others Present:**

Randy Feirerabend  
Donald Duncan  
Tamara Brooks  
Jimmy Clark  
Kyle Hayman  
Sherry Bradshaw  
Jerry Church  
Scott Hildebran  
Ben Willis  
Kenneth Geathers, Jr.  
Seth Eckard

Cajah's Mountain  
Caldwell County  
Connelly Springs  
Conover  
Conover  
Drexel  
Granite Falls  
Lenoir  
Lenoir  
Rutherford College  
Valdese

**WPCOG Staff Present:**

Anthony Starr, Executive Director  
Sherry Long, Assistant Executive Director/Director of Community and Economic Development  
Ashley Bolick, Director of Administrative Services and Human Resources  
Alison Adams, Director of Community and Regional Planning  
Tina Miller, Director of Area Agency on Aging  
Wendy Johnson, Director of Workforce Development  
Jason Toney, Communications Specialist  
Sarah Stamey, Aging Specialist  
Elizabeth Hilliard, Executive Administrative Assistant

**Call to Order/Welcome**

A regular meeting of the WPCOG Policy Board was called to order at 6:45 pm by Chair Patton. Chair Patton thanked the City of Lenoir for hosting. City of Lenoir Mayor, Joe Gibbons, welcomed the Policy Board to Lenoir.

**Minutes of Previous Meeting**

Minutes of the previous meeting were considered. Mr. Wayne Abele made a motion to approve the minutes from the November 23, 2021 meeting and Ms. Kitty Barnes offered a second. The motion passed unanimously.

**Unfinished Business/Reports**

There was no unfinished business.

## **New Business**

### Recognition of New Board Members

Chair Patton welcomed the new board members listed below:

- Ramona Duncan, Connelly Springs Delegate
- Wayne Annas, Rutherford College Delegate
- Charlie Watts, Valdese Delegate
- Danny Hipps, Maiden Delegate
- Kelvin Gregory, Brookford Delegate was not in attendance

### NC Task Force for Racial Equity in Criminal Justice

Ms. Holly Jones, North Carolina Department of Justice (NCDOJ) Community Partnerships/Outreach Coordinator, and Mr. Mike Hawkins, TREC member and former Transylvania County commissioner, provided a virtual presentation on the NC Task Force for Racial Equity in Criminal Justice (TREC). In June 2020, Governor Roy Cooper appointed the NC TREC. The TREC was created in response to the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and others. The governor charged the task force to examine issues of racism in the criminal justice system and to develop recommendations. Governor Cooper asked the task force to identify intentional and unintentional racial biases in the criminal justice and law enforcement systems and to highlight the unequal outcomes that result from these biases. In addition to identifying these issues, the task force was charged with recommending evidence-based solutions to help eliminate racial bias and create fairer outcomes for black people and communities of color, while maintaining public safety. The task force executive summary report has 125 recommendations listed along with solutions and necessary actions.

The NCDOJ requested to present a summary of the report to the WPCOG Policy Board.

### NADO Award Recognition

Mr. Anthony Starr, WPCOG Executive Director, present the NADO awards. Each year the Council of Governments applies for National Association of Development Organizations' (NADO) awards. The association's Aliceann Wohbruck Impact Awards program recognizes regional development organizations and partnering organizations for improving the economic and community competitiveness of our nation's regions and local communities. Award winning projects were honored during NADO's 2021 Annual Training Conference, held in Portland, Oregon October 17-19, 2021. Western Piedmont Council of Governments was honored during the 2021 NADO Conference for the following three awards:

- COVID Relief – Assistance to Seniors, Caregivers, and Aging Service Providers. Ms. Tina Miller, Director of the Area Agency on Aging, and Ms. Sarah Stamey, Aging Specialist accepted this award and were recognized for their diligent and hard work with the Cares Act. This was an enormous amount of work which helped over 1,500 seniors and caregivers living in isolation without resources. They were able to provide meals through an online document management system, groceries, pharmacy items, technology, face coverings, etc.
- Unifour HOME Consortium – 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. Ms. Sherry Long, Assistant Executive Director/Director of Community and Economic Development, accepted this award and was recognized in addition to Mr. Rick Oxford, Housing Program Manager, and Ms. Jennifer Cannon,

Community and Economic Development Administrator for their work. The Consortium continues on and has provided financial assistance to 3,005 first-time homebuyers, funded 14 non-profit organizations, and made loans to 20 low-income multi-family housing tax-credit projects. The region has received \$24.6 million under the HOME Investment Partnership Act for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and an additional \$5.2 million in program income has been generated and expended on program activities. The City of Lenoir serves as the lead entity and fiscal agent for the region. This program's success is a result of a great partnership between Lenoir and the WPCOG.

- A Study of Equity, Economic, and Demographic Data for the City of Hickory. Ms. Alison Adams, Director of Community and Regional Planning accepted this award on behalf of Mr. Taylor Dellinger, Senior Data Analyst/GIS Manager. The City of Hickory requested the WPCOG complete a study of equity, economic, and demographic data to better understand racial inequalities in the city. WPCOG staff chose to examine demographics, income/poverty data, educational attainment, health care, employment data, housing, education achievement, and minority-owned businesses. WPCOG created the maps, charts, report, and a presentation which was given at City Council, in addition to newspaper interviews. Based on the results of the report, the City of Hickory will determine what work is currently being done to connect disadvantaged communities to employment opportunities, help them overcome obstacles, and identify gaps.

#### 2022 WPCOG Strategic Plan

Mr. Anthony Starr, WPCOG Executive Director, presented the Draft Strategic Plan. The Policy Board is the governing board for the WPCOG and it initiated a strategic planning process in 2020 to ensure the best performance of the organization. The process managed by the consultants with the SouthEast Regional Directors' Institute (SERDI) is complete. They conducted surveys, stakeholder meetings, focus groups, and presented to the Policy Board. The SERDI consultants presented their report at the September Policy Board meeting. The Executive Committee discussed the potential goals of the strategic plan at its October and December meetings.

The Executive Committee and staff considered the SERDI assessment and the feedback throughout the process to develop draft recommendations for the strategic plan. The draft plan includes strategies for the following areas:

- Community and Regional Marketing;
- Heathy Housing;
- Utilities Infrastructure;
- WPCOG Staff Succession Planning;
- Workforce Development;
- Weather Radar Service;
- Expansion to WPCOG Office; and
- New and Expanded Services to Local Governments.

Mr. Bob Floyd made a motion that the Policy Board adopt the 2022 WPCOG Strategic Plan. Mr. Wayne Annas offered a second. The motion passed unanimously.

Workforce Development Board Appointment

Ms. Wendy Johnson, WPCOG Director of Workforce Development, requested the Policy Board to appoint Ms. Shannon Warlick, Human Resource Manager, at ServPro, in order to meet one of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) board private sector openings, representing Caldwell County.

Mr. Larry Yoder made a motion to appoint Ms. Shannon Warlick to the Workforce Development Board for a staggered two-year term beginning February 24, 2022 – June 30, 2024. Ms. Kitty Barnes offered a second. The motion passed unanimously.

Workforce Development Board Realignment Study

Ms. Wendy Johnson, WPCOG Director of Workforce Development, presented a request of NC Governor Roy Cooper, the NCWorks Commission (the state workforce development board) and its Governance and System Alignment Committee initiated a realignment and re-designation study of the local workforce development boards. The NCWorks Commission Committee, Governance and System Alignment, is conducting the study to make a recommendation. There are indications the state is considering the alignment of workforce boards with the eight prosperity zones. For our region, that would result in a workforce board that includes our four counties and the mountain counties of the High Country Council of Governments and McDowell County. From an economic and labor perspective, our region has many differences from the mountain counties which have far less manufacturing employment and greater emphasis on agriculture and tourism.

The NC Association of Regional Council of Governments requested that the Department of Commerce and the NCWorks Commission reconsider their approach and seek to begin collaboration with workforce development boards, councils of governments (COGs), and our local elected officials in a meaningful way. It would be wiser to align workforce boards that do not cross COG boundaries where COGs enjoy long-standing support, awareness, and collaboration among local businesses and elected leaders. This approach would not affect our region.

Mr. Danny Hipps made a motion that the Policy Board support the alignment of workforce development boards with councils of governments if the state moves ahead with consolidation. A second was offered by Ms. Kitty Barnes. The motion passed unanimously.

FY 22-23 WPCOG Assessments for Local Governments

Mr. Anthony Starr, WPCOG Executive Director, presented the FY2022-23 WPCOG Assessments for Local Governments. Each year the WPCOG assess dues to its local governments per its charter and bylaws. The proposed assessments for FY23 reflect a 3% decrease in population due to the 2020 Census and state population estimate for July 2020 reflecting a lower total than the 2019 state population estimate used for the current FY assessments. The current population estimate reflects 11,204 fewer persons for the region than 2019. The proposed assessments represent a total increase of required assessments of 1.2% (\$6,065.45 increase).

The general assessments rate is increased from 81 to 83.4 cents per capital to adjust for a portion of annual inflation. Inflation increased 7.04% from December 2020 to December 2021. The proposed per

capita rate represents a 3% increase. With the population decrease, the new rate results in decreased revenues of \$381.12.

Ms. Kitty Barnes made a motion that the Board approve the assessments as presented. A second was offered by Mr. Danny Higgs. The motion passed unanimously.

#### 6<sup>th</sup> Amendment of FY 2021 – 2022 Budget

Mr. Anthony Starr, WPCOG Executive Director, presented the Budget Summary Sheets for Ms. Andrea Roper, WPCOG Director of Finance. The 6<sup>th</sup> Amendment of this FY budget reflects a total budget of \$20,640,505 and an operating budget of \$7,472,259 which represents an increase of the total budget from the December 17, 2021 budget amendment of \$17,619.

The 6<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the 2021-2022 Budget includes:

- Increase of \$20,712 in Community Development due to funding received for the Housing Stability Counseling Program.
- Community and Regional Planning decreased \$50,824 due to the delay of several projects. Projects are scheduled to begin next fiscal year.
- Increase of \$47,731 in Fund Balance Appropriated-Previous Year Fringe Funds. These are restricted, unused fringe funds from prior fiscal year.
- Chargeable salaries decreased due to the increase in compensated absences (sick leave and vacation leave).
- Workers compensation and unemployment costs decreased to reflect actual FY22 expenditures.
- Increase in supplies due to needed supplies for the new Housing Stability Counseling Program.
- Advertising/Subscription increased to cover the subscription costs of GIS software.
- Increase in capital outlay-equipment due to the anticipated purchase of a code enforcement vehicle.
- OPEB Trust Allocation decreased due to the increase in compensated absences.
- Transfer to Capital Reserve increased due to personnel changes directly related to the indirect budget.

Ms. Kitty Barnes made a motion that the Policy Board approve the 6<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the 2021-2022 Budget as proposed. A second was offered by Wayne Annas. The motion passed unanimously.

#### Potential WPCOG Building Expansion

Mr. Anthony Starr, WPCOG Executive Director, presented a conceptual plan and cost estimate for the potential WPCOG building expansion. The current WPCOG office was constructed in 2011. At that time, the offices provided significant extra space for the staff. However, the staff has grown in recent years from 45 employees to currently 64 full-time and part-time employees. Three years ago, staff converted the library to a suite for seven cubicle offices to provide additional capacity for staff. We are in the process of converting a workroom into a two-person office. Once that is completed, we will have three smaller offices near the reception desk and four planning cubicles (in the former library) available for new staff positions. We have typically used the cubicles for staff who are in the office on a limited basis.

NCWorks Career Centers - The NCWorks Career Center foot traffic began decreasing in 2015, well before the Pandemic, and is expected for that to continue beyond COVID-19. This reduces the justification for operating career centers in every county. With the construction of a regional career center, we could provide a much nicer and more functional career center and lower the costs for the Workforce Development Program. The WPCOG would work with local governments and partners to provide small meeting spaces for those who have travel limitations.

WPCOG pays \$99,732 annually to lease the space at Conover Station (the state reimburses us \$9,255). In addition, the NC Division of Workforce Solutions leases space for the Caldwell and Burke career centers for a total cost of \$116,740 each year. Federal rules require that the state, local workforce boards, and other partners share the cost of the career centers based on a pre-determined formula.

Planning for Expansion - Staff began planning for expansion of the office to accommodate future growth of WPCOG staff and to consolidate the regional NCWorks Career Centers to one location. Staff contracted with CBSA Architects to develop a conceptual plan and cost estimate to determine the feasibility of the project and to provide the necessary details for the Executive Committee and Policy Board to make informed decisions. The plans provide for about 7,400 square feet of space for WPCOG offices and 9,600 square feet for the regional career center. It also adds 77 additional parking spaces using the land purchased by the WPCOG a few years ago for a total of 185 spaces.

Construction Costs - CBSA estimates the cost of construction for the entire project at \$4.98 million including a contingency of 20%. The regional career center portion represents about 56% of that cost and the WPCOG office the remaining portion totaling 44%.

Financing and Leasing - Staff contacted the U.S. department of Agriculture (USDA) to inquire about financing options. USDA indicates they can loan the WPCOG funds at 2.125% for a 30-year term. The cost of the annual debt service is about \$45,000 per \$1 million borrowed. The estimated annual debt service cost of the career center portion is about \$126,000 and the WPCOG office portion is about \$99,000. Debt service for both portions, through USDA would be about \$225,000 annually. Conventional financing through private banks is also an option. The WPCOG could charge the NC Division of Workforce Solutions an annual lease cost to cover all of the debt and operational costs of the career center portion of the expansion.

Funding from General Assembly - Though grants are not available for this project, a special appropriation from the General Assembly is possible. If the Policy Board is supportive of the project, the WPCOG and its local governments could seek funding from the General Assembly through our state delegation for the region. The short session is scheduled to begin in April or May of 2022.

Next Steps and Schedule - The immediate step is discussion and consideration by the Policy Board. Advocacy with our state representatives would begin once approval by the Policy Board occurs. Construction could begin once funding is secured from the General Assembly or when the Policy Board agrees to use traditional financing. Negotiating and executing a lease agreement with the State would also occur in 2022. Selection of an architect, design of the building, and construction bidding could begin in the summer or fall of 2022.

Mr. Bob Floyd made a motion that the Policy Board authorize staff to move ahead with the project including seeking funding from the General Assembly. A second was offered by Mr. Wayne Annas. The motion passed unanimously.

#### CEDS Committee Appointment

Ms. Alison Adams, Director of Community and Regional Planning, presented a list of Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) members in addition to a Summary Page about the CEDS Committee.

The WPCOG was designated as the economic development district for our region in 2004 by the U.S. Economic Development Administration. The WPCOG is required to develop and maintain a regional CEDS every five years. The last CEDS was adopted in 2017 and work must soon begin for the 2022 CEDS. Part of that process involves the appointment and engagement of a CEDS Committee that broadly represents the region.

At its November meeting, the Policy Board appointed 13 members to the CEDS Committee. Since that meeting, two members have resigned from serving on the committee. Honey Estrada recently accepted employment outside the area and Ben Willis begins work at the WPCOG as the new community and economic development director. In his new role, Mr. Willis will continue to be very involved in the CEDS process.

Staff recommends replacing the vacancy, created by Honey Estrada, by appointing Yaidee Fox. Ms. Fox works for the City of Hickory as an executive assistant manager.

The CEDS Committee is expected to meet about six times and complete its work by September of 2022.

Mr. George Holleman made a motion that the Board appoint Yaidee Fox to the CEDS Committee. A second was offered by Mr. Larry Yoder. The motion passed unanimously.

#### Executive Director's and Staff Report

Mr. Anthony Starr, WPCOG Executive Director, reviewed the Executive Director's Report outlining both current and upcoming projects by department.

- WPCOG is in the final stages of assisting the **City of Conover** with their search for a new city manager. Second interviews scheduled for later in January.
- The **Town of Long View** search for their new town clerk & public information officer is complete and their new employee, Heather Minor started on January 12, 2022.
- WPCOG is assisting the **City of Newton** with their search for a new City Manager. Applications were accepted until January 17<sup>th</sup>.
- Mr. Ben Willis has been hired as the new Community and Economic Development Director and he will start on January 31, 2022. Ben has recently serving as the Director of The Education Foundation of Caldwell County and previously served as the Small Business Center Director at CCC&TI.



- Mr. Lucas Bentley has been hired as the new IT Manager and will start on January 31, 2022. Lucas has been serving as the IT Director for Caldwell County since 2012.
- Save-the-Date: WPCOG Annual Meeting will be held at the Hickory Metro Convention Center on Thursday, March 31 at 6 pm. Staff is hard at work planning for a special event as well as the 2021 Annual Report.
- Staff plan to meet with the NC Division of Emergency Management to work on the plan to improve weather radar service for our region. The state budget included a provision to require the completion of the plan by May 2022.
- The NC Association of Regional Council of Governments (NCARCOG) was appropriated, by the General Assembly, \$16 million to assist local governments with the American Rescue Plan Act and disaster recovery. The NCARCOG will allocate the funds equally to each council of governments (approximately \$950,000). Funds must be utilized by December 31, 2026.
- Former Lenoir City Manager Mr. Lane Bailey recently retired as the Salisbury City Manager. Mr. Bailey began work as the executive director for the NCARCOG on January 1, 2022.
- The Policy Board appointed the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) Committee in November and the committee will begin meeting in February. The CEDS will be presented to the Policy Board in September 2022.
- The Area Agency on Aging has a vacancy for a Regional Aging Advisory Committee representative for Alexander County.
- Community and Economic Development staff are currently administering seventy-seven (77) grants for local governments.
- Forty-one (41) housing rehabilitations projects were underway in December.
- Three Building Reuse grants were funded by the NC Commerce in October totaling \$920,000. **Conover** received \$440,000 for Sherrill Furniture. The company will invest \$2,961,000 and create 80 new, full-time jobs. **Morganton** received \$240,000 to assist E J Victor who will invest \$2,200,000 and create 30 new, full-time jobs. **Burke County** received a \$240,000 grant to assist Toner Machining. The business is investing \$912,000 and creating 30 new, full-time jobs.
- Land use collection for **Catawba County, Town of Gamewell, Town of Cahah's Mountain,** and the **Town of Longview** are in process.
- The first Draft of the **Town of Drexel** Comprehensive Plan is finished.
- WPCOG staff are beginning temporary staff assistance for the **Catawba County Planning Department** (January to June).
- Finance continues to provide financial administration services for **Town of Catawba** and **Caldwell Chamber**.
- Financial administration services began for the **Hickory-Conover Tourism Development Authority** January 1<sup>st</sup>.
- The Executive Committee awarded the FY 22 audit service contract to Thompson, Price, Scott, Adams & Co. PA.
- Beginning every Wednesday, January 5, 2022, a rotation of Catawba County NCWorks Career Center advisors will provide career service hours at the Ridgeview Library in **Hickory**. A celebratory kick-off event job fair event is planned for February 8, at 2pm-5pm.

Ms. Sherry Long, Assistant Executive Director/Director of Community Development, announced the following:

- She will be the American Rescue Plan (ARPA) contact. According to the final rule there is a great opportunity for replacement reserve funds that can be used for general government and for matching as much as 90% on grants. She will be assisting with grants in hopes of doubling funds.

Ms. Ashley Bolick, WPCOG Director of Administration Services and Human Resources, announced the following:

- Board member profile sheets can be picked up following the meeting if one was not received prior to the meeting. We have five new Policy Board members this year and new members elected during COVID last year have not had the opportunity to get to know other members. Board members were asked to complete and to include fun facts along with a picture of themselves doing something fun. The profile sheet will also be sent out electronically. A PowerPoint will be made with this information and will run during future Policy Board meetings.
- New Policy Board members and managers can request a jacket. See Ms. Ashley Bolick or Ms. Elizabeth Hilliard following the meeting to order.
- High quality pictures or aerials of landmarks of the region's cities and towns are needed. Plans are to have them put on canvas and displayed in the WPCOG office. Please send pictures to Ms. Ashley Bolick.
- 2022 WPCOG Meetings and Events Calendar is available to be pick-up at the registration table. This will be sent out electronically.
- Save the date for Annual Meeting on March 31, 2022. This will be held at the Hickory Metro Center.

Ms. Alison Adams, WPCOG Director of Regional and Community Planning, announced the following:

- Mr. Chad Powell is the new Code Enforcement Officer. Mr. Matt Taylor decided to go back to the Sheriff's Department in Watauga County.
- Mr. Taylor Dellinger, WPCOG Senior Data Analyst/GIS Manager, received a good report following surgery. He is now receiving more intensive chemo by infusions. He is doing well.

#### Adjournment

Chair Patton reminded the board of the next meeting scheduled for March 22, 2022 at the Town of Hudson and adjourned the meeting at 8:00 pm.