

WESTERN PIEDMONT COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS NEWSLETTER JUNE/JULY 2024



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Elder Abuse Awareness

Article by Christina Franklin

Since June 15, 2006, World Elder Abuse Awareness Day has continued to bring awareness to the issue of elder abuse, promote awareness of different types of abuse, and educate the community on ways it can help put an end to elder abuse. Elder Abuse Awareness Day also aims to provide individuals with the tools and courage to report an incident if they see one. Reports of elder abuse continue to increase annually. The National Centers for Elder Abuse reports that at least one in ten community-dwelling older adults experienced some form of abuse in the prior year. Most people assume this will never happen to them or someone they love. But the fact is, for every incident of abuse reported to authorities, nearly 24 additional cases remain undetected.

Elder abuse can come in many forms such as physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, financial abuse, neglect, abandonment, and verbal abuse and threats. Elder abuse can often be hard to recognize. The abuser can be a stranger, but most often is someone the victim knows such as a spouse, family member, caregiver, or friend. It is crucial that we are all aware of those who are most at risk, including individuals with dementia, women, and “older” elders. At times the individual being abused may not be able to verbalize the abuse, so it is up to others to notice the signs of abuse and to report it immediately.

If you suspect that someone you know is being abused, report it. If it is a life-threatening situation, call 911 immediately. Everyone has a responsibility to report abuse if they suspect it is happening. To report elder abuse, contact the Department of Social Services, Adult Protective Services and/or local law enforcement in the county where the adult resides. If you suspect abuse in a nursing facility, please contact your Regional Ombudsman or the Division of Health Service Regulations in North Carolina. Also, there are many resources within the Area Agency on Aging that can help reduce an older adult’s risk of being abused. To find out about these and other resources in your community visit us at www.wpcog.org.

On June 15, 2024, we asked the community to WEAR PURPLE to bring awareness to elder abuse. To find out more information about World Elder Abuse Day, please visit:

The NC Division of Aging and Adult Services

- The NC Division of Aging and Adult Services: www.ncdhhs.gov/divisions/aging-and-adult-services
- NC Adult Protective Services: www.ncdhhs.gov/assistance/adult-services/adult-protective-services
- Long Term Care Ombudsman (Advocacy for Residents in Long Term Care Facilities): www.ncdhhs.gov/divisions/aging/long-term-care-ombudsman

The National Center of Elder Abuse Resources

- Publications: <https://ncea.acl.gov/publications>
- Directory: www.ncdhhs.gov/localDSS

To report elder abuse contact your local Department of Social Services:

Alexander County
828-632-1080

Catawba County
828-695-5600

Burke County
828-764-9600

Caldwell County
828-426-8200

Sherry Long Griffin Retires After 37 Years of Service

Article by Paul Teague

WPCOG Assistant Executive Director Sherry Long Griffin has retired after more than 37 years of service with the organization.

Long Griffin was honored with a retirement ceremony at Moretz Mill in Hickory where she was presented with the Order of the Long Leaf Pine, the highest honor for state service awarded through the Office of the Governor.

A native of Catawba County, Long Griffin began her WPCOG career in 1986 as a community development administrator. In 1997, she was promoted to community and economic development director.

During Long Griffin's career, she wrote, secured, and administered more than 750 grants totaling over \$2 billion in public and private investment. She tirelessly looked for ways to assist local governments and communities in order to improve the region's economy and quality of life.

"Sherry is an amazing leader and the best in her field," WPCOG Executive Director Anthony Starr said. "We cannot overstate her contributions to the communities in our region.

"She built a great team, and they continue to make a tremendous impact throughout the region. I will surely miss her daily insight and incredible work ethic."

A graduate of Western Carolina University, Long Griffin became the first female assistant executive director at the WPCOG in 2015. She also served on the Western NC Housing Partnership board for 25 years and the board for VEDIC – a regional economic development non-profit aimed at assisting entrepreneurs. She previously has served as chair of both boards.

Regarding her career, Long Griffin said, "Working at the Western Piedmont Council of Governments has truly been an honor. I've had nothing but positive memories since starting the WPCOG over 37 years ago.

"I appreciate the professional opportunities that I have been given throughout my career. There are not many places where a person can spend their entire professional career loving their work and the challenge to make a difference in their community."

Caldwell County Manager Donald Duncan recalled Long Griffin's tireless efforts to assist communities and individuals impacted by the Great Recession in 2008.

"Sherry led the charge to allow people to stay in their homes," Duncan said. "If you lost your job in manufacturing, you could apply and stay on your feet. Over four years the program directly helped almost 1,000 homeowners."

N.C. State Rep. Jay Adams presented Long Griffin with the Order of the Long Leaf Pine. Long Griffin is also a past recipient of the Don Myers Humanitarian Award, presented by the Development District Association of Appalachia to individuals who have shown leadership and provided community service in the region.

Lenoir Mayor Joe Gibbons, who also serves as chair of the WPCOG Policy Board, said. "I commend Sherry for her visionary leadership, collaborative approach, and desire to improve the lives of our residents. Her work has had a profound, beneficial, and lasting impact on Lenoir and the region, and we wish her well in retirement."

Long Griffin and her husband Andrew live in Hickory. She has a daughter, Alexandria Mashburn who lives in Hickory; a son, John Mashburn and wife Ragan, who live in Sulphur Springs, Texas; a son, Sam Griffin, who lives in Old Fort; a son, Tyler Griffin, who lives in Connelly Springs; and two granddaughters, Rhealea Elizabeth Mashburn and Annbelle Cozette Mashburn.



NextGen Success Story

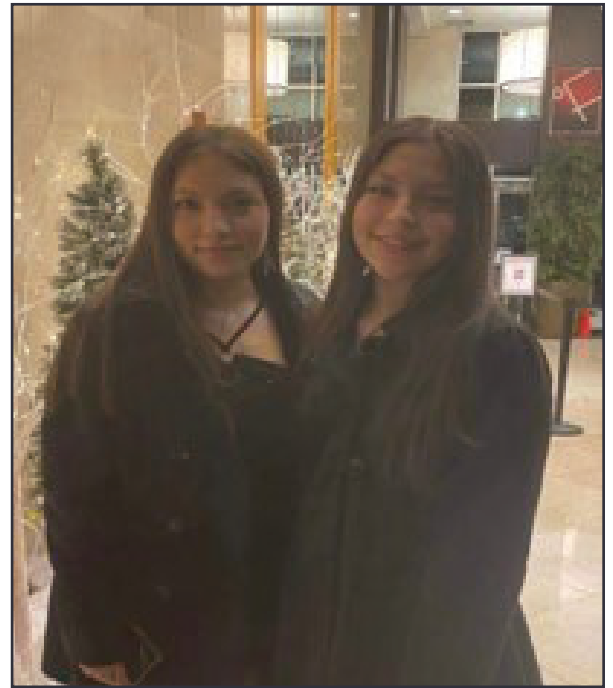
Article by Charity Patterson Hamber

Hiromy and Dalila Villa Islas

Twins Hiromy and Dalila Villa Islas enrolled in March 2023. Prior to meeting with the NextGen Business Services Representative, the twins faced some personal challenges.

NCWorks NextGen program provided In-School Youth support services to assist them with graduating high school. With partnership and collaboration with Career and Technical Education, and Career and College promise with Hickory High, NextGen was able to provide Work Experiences and support services to assist with training at CVCC.

The twins had this to say about NextGen, "We really appreciate this program, they also helped us with our college books and helped us a lot with our school stuff. Thanks to them, we got so much help and our parents and us are grateful that we had this opportunity. I think more people should know about this program. It's very helpful, important and useful, they treat us very well and it's just a great program in general."



NCWorks Career Center – Catawba Named Center of the Week

Article by Charity Patterson Hamber

The NCWorks Career Center in Catawba County was named the Division of Workforce Solutions' Center of the Week on May 27, 2024!

"What makes our Center special is the people that work in it! We are diverse. We are different in who we are and what we do. But we all have the same goals in mind: to deliver services that meet the needs of the individuals that come in to the Catawba NCWorks Career Center. Whether it is employment, training, scholarships, or answering unemployment questions/concerns, we want our customers to know, we are here to help," said Assistant Center Manager Shiela Jennings.

The center is located at 403 Conover Station, SE, Suite C, Conover, NC. For more information, email CatawbaCounty@NCWorks.gov.



NCWorks Career Center-Catawba Sheila Jennings' Promotion



Article by Charity Patterson Hamber

Western Piedmont Workforce Development Board would like to congratulate Shiela Jennings on her promotion to Assistant Manager at NCWorks Career Center – Catawba!

Shiela has been in workforce development for 5 years and with NCWorks Career Center – Catawba for two years. She says, "People are my passion. Relationship building is very important to me. Having the privilege to help someone is what gets me out of bed in the morning. That's why I love what I do here at NCWorks – Catawba. We are in the business of helping people get back into the workforce or change careers and in the process, we also build relationships with our customers. As Assistant Manager, I am here to serve, facilitate, and strengthen partnerships and collaborations within the Western Piedmont Workforce Development Board services area."

Scam Jam 2024

Article by Michael Layza

We've all been targets of scam calls, texts, and emails, but these crimes are a growing concern for adults over the age of 60. The FBI reports over 101,000 adults over the age of 60 reported being a victim of a scam or fraud. With a reported loss of \$3.4 billion in 2023 alone. These numbers may only be a fraction of the actual cost and number of victims as many of these crimes go unreported.

Scams can come in many forms such as investment scams, government impersonation scams, lottery/sweepstakes scams, phone scams, and Medicare scams. These scams target seniors from all income levels and backgrounds. It is important for everyone, especially older adults, to be educated on how to prevent themselves from becoming a victim.

The Western Piedmont Area Agency on Aging will be hosting Scam Jam 2024, on August 29, 2024, from 10:00 am to 2:00 pm. at the Hickory Metro Convention Center. Scam Jam is a collection of educational presentations designed to familiarize consumers with the kind of scams and frauds in today's society such as consumer frauds, identity theft, and telemarketing fraud. Guest speakers include representatives from the NC Attorney General's Office, NC Secretary of State, Catawba County Sheriff's Department, and NC Senior Medicare Patrol. A free lunch will be provided. You can register online for the event at www.wpcog.org or by contacting Michael Layza by phone at 828-485-4271.

If you feel you have been a victim of a scam or fraud, contact your local law enforcement or the NC Department of Justice Consumer Protection Division at 1-877-5-NO-SCAM.

Sources: "Elder Fraud in Focus". FBI.gov. April 30, 2024.

<https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/elder-fraud-in-focus#:~:text=If%20you%20or%20someone%20you,Complaint%20Center>



New Income limits Posted for First-time Homebuyers

Article by Paul Teague

Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has posted new income limits for individuals and families seeking to participate in the Unifour Consortium Down-Payment Assistance Program for first-time homebuyers.

The program provides assistance of 20 percent of the purchase price and is capped at \$30,000 for eligible first-time buyers. The down-payment assistance operates as a zero-percent interest loan with \$0 monthly payments. Upon the 10-year anniversary, half the down-payment assistance loan is forgiven. Repayment of the balance is triggered when the home is sold, refinanced or otherwise transferred.



The new annual income limits for family size are:

- 1 person - \$43,750
- 2 persons - \$50,000
- 3 persons - \$56,250
- 4 persons - \$62,500
- 5 persons - \$67,500
- 6 persons - \$72,500
- 7 persons - \$77,500
- 8 persons - \$82,500

The totals are based on gross household income. Current household income is verified, then projected forward 12 months to arrive at the total.

Potential clients cannot have owned a home within the last three years, and mobile homes are not eligible. The down-payment assistance can be used to purchase a home in Alexander, Burke, Caldwell or Catawba counties.

Clients must have a minimum of \$500 to place toward the purchase of a home and must be able to obtain a loan from a local participating lender.

The maximum purchase price for an existing home currently is \$217,000 in Alexander, Burke and Caldwell counties. In Catawba County, the maximum purchase price of an existing home is \$219,000

For new construction, the maximum purchase price is \$251,000 in all counties.

The purchase prices for existing and new homes are expected to be adjusted later this year.

For additional information about the down-payment assistance program, please contact Rick Oxford at 828-485-4245 or Jennifer Cannon at 828-485-4250.

NCWorks Center-Catawba Volunteers at the Hickory Soup Kitchen

Article by Charity Patterson Hamber

On Friday July 19, 2024, staff from NCWorks Career Center-Catawba volunteered at the Hickory Soup Kitchen. NCWorks staff assisted in unloading and storing food in freezers, making mashed potatoes, cutting tomatoes, assembling salads, cutting bread, assisting with green bean preparation, and cleaning up. NCWorks staff looks forward to volunteering in the future!



Summer 2024 EIN to Highlight 2023-2043 Hickory MSA Population Projections and Hickory MSA Current Employment Survey Trends

Article by Taylor Dellinger

The latest issue of the Economic Indicators Newsletter (EIN) will release on August 5, 2024. The current issue addresses Hickory Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) unemployment rates, Hickory Metro Per Capita Personal Income (PCPI), 2023-2043 Hickory MSA population projections and Hickory MSA Current Employment Survey (CES) trends.

Here are a few key highlights of the EIN:

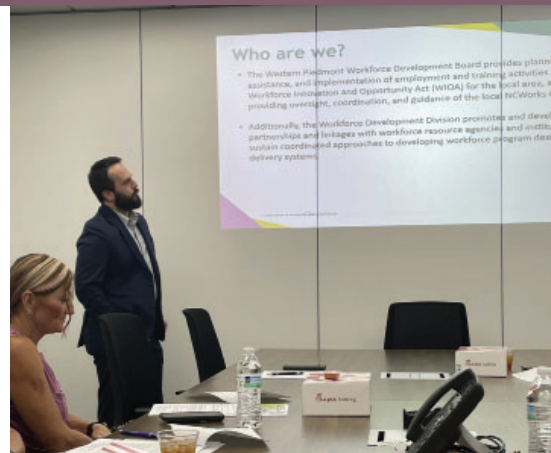
- The Hickory MSA's unemployment rate has increased from 3.2% in March 2023 to 3.6% in March 2024.
- Between March 2023 and March 2024, the estimated number of employed persons fell from 170,109 to 168,533 (-1,576), while the civilian labor force decreased from 175,707 to 174,836 (-871).
- Hickory MSA Per Capita Personal Income (PCPI) increased from \$41,239 in 2019 to \$49,697 in 2022.
- Between 2023 and 2043, the number of Hickory MSA residents is forecast to increase from 373,734 to 398,388. The predicted 10.5% increase is the fifth slowest (or tenth fastest) population growth rate of the North Carolina Metros.
- The age 65 and older cohort is expected to be the fastest growing age group (29.4% or 22,821 persons) in the region over the next 20 years. This prediction is due to Baby Boomers reaching retirement age during the next two decades, as well as thousands of retirees moving into the Hickory MSA.
- All major Catawba County age groups (0-4, 5-17, 18-44, 45-64, 65 and over) are expected to experience population growth between 2023 and 2043.
- Between April 2020 and February 2024, the region experienced rapid employment growth as the effects of the pandemic waned. In fact, as of February 2024 the total number of jobs in the Hickory MSA (157,200) exceeded the number of employed workers in February 2020 (155,500).
- Hickory MSA goods-producing employment, which includes mining, construction and manufacturing, grew from 38,200 in April 2020 to 46,900 in February 2023. There has been a net loss of 1,200 goods-producing jobs in the region since February 2023, mostly due to temporary closure of the Mitchell Gold plant in Alexander County.
- Hickory MSA service-providing employment has grown by more than 16,000 jobs since the COVID-19 pandemic ended. Nearly all service-providing sectors in the region have more employment in February 2024 and in February 2020.

If you are not currently receiving the EIN and would like to, click [here](#) to subscribe, or please contact Taylor Dellinger, Data Analyst at 828-485-4233 or by email taylor.dellinger@wpcog.org.

Hickory Business Development Committee Presentation

Article by Charity Patterson Hamber

Trey Hedrick met with business leaders and partners at City of Hickory's Business Development Committee on June 26th, 2024. Trey Hedrick presented attendees with information about services that are provided by the Western Piedmont Workforce Development Board. During the presentation, Trey answered questions about the Upskill Grant, which provides funding to employers for existing employee's training on a variety of skills. He also spoke about the variety of services provided at the NCWorks Career Centers.



Terminating a Housing Choice Voucher

Article by Jennifer Cannon

WPCOG's Regional Housing Authority issues Housing Choice Vouchers (HCV) to qualified recipients. The HCV program gives voucher holders a lot of flexibility and freedom to choose housing that fulfills their families' needs while also meeting the requirements of the program. The housing authority, landlords, and tenants must always follow HUD voucher regulations. When tenants do not uphold their obligations, their assistance can end.

Tenants need to understand their responsibilities when they receive a voucher, as well as the reasons they can lose their housing assistance.

Reasons housing assistance may be terminated include:

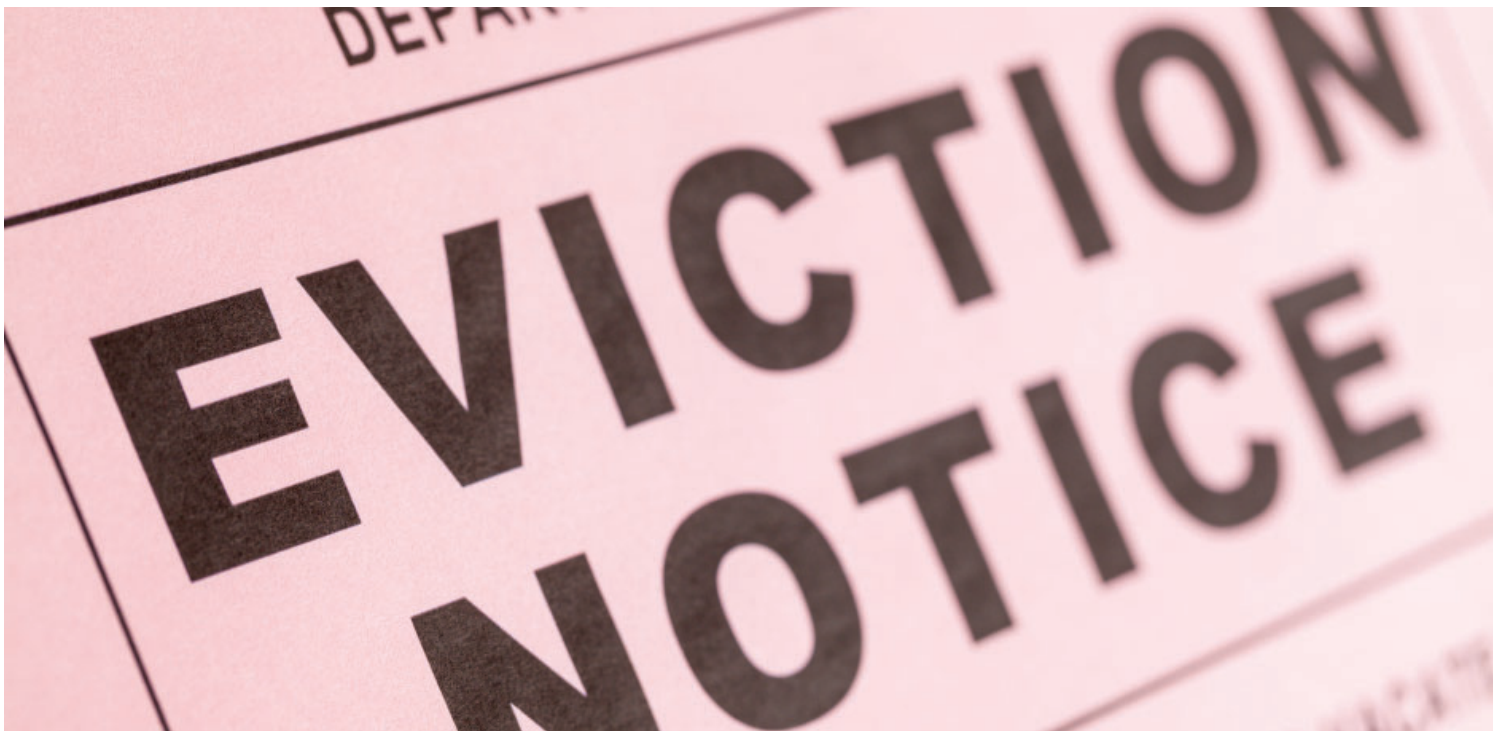
- 1. Eviction through the court system**
- 2. Serious and repeated lease violations**
- 3. Family engages in illegal drug use or has a pattern of illegal drug use**
- 4. Failure to document citizenship or provide social security numbers**
- 5. Producing or manufacturing of methamphetamine**
- 6. Failure to provide documentation for annual recertification**

When a tenant's housing assistance is being terminated, the head of household will receive a letter in the mail with an appeal date. The appeal date is extremely important. A tenant must notify their housing specialist, in writing, by that date, if they do not agree with the decision and want to appeal the termination. Once an appeal is requested, the tenant will be scheduled to have an in-person meeting at WPCOG with their housing specialist and a hearing officer. During that termination meeting, the hearing officer may ask questions and review the tenant's documentation to decide whether or not their housing assistance will be terminated. A decision will not be made at the hearing. RHA policy requires that the tenant receive notification of the hearing officer's decision within 10 business days.

A tenant who is terminated from the housing program is barred from applying for HCV assistance for five years.

For more information about termination procedures, contact Jennifer Cater at 828 485 4282 or

Jennifer.cater@wpcog.org.



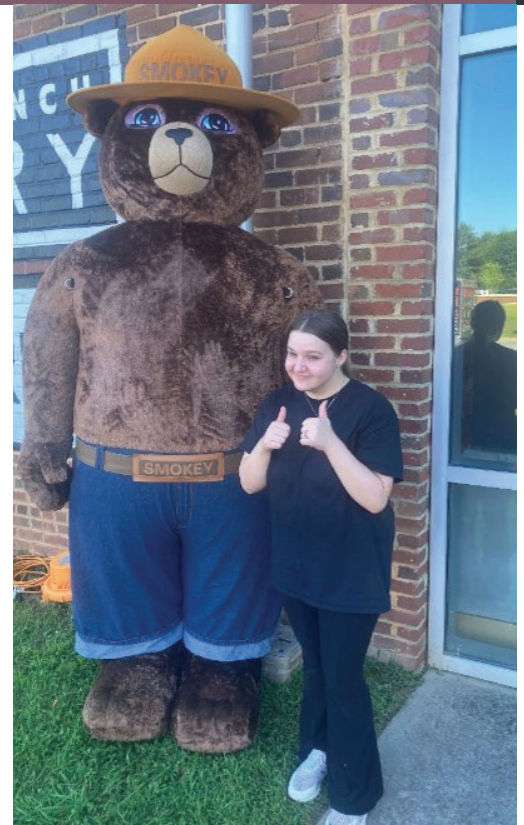
WEX Success Story - Meghan

Article by Charity Patterson Hamber

Meghan's story is truly inspiring and highlights the transformative power of support and opportunity in education and career development. Despite facing personal challenges at a young age, Meghan remained determined to earn her high school diploma and pursue higher education. Her involvement in the Pathways program and eligibility for WIOA services not only provided her with essential support, but also reinforced her positive attitude and commitment to her goals.

Finding a WEX opportunity at the Catawba County Library through Business Services Representative Thomas Adams efforts not only fulfilled Meghan's immediate need for income, but also equipped her with valuable workplace skills and boosted her confidence. This experience will undoubtedly contribute to her growth and preparedness as she embarks on her journey towards becoming a paralegal, as she begins her classes this summer at CVCC. Meghan's dedication and participation in the NextGen program are a testament to her resilience and willingness to seize opportunities for personal and professional advancement.

Meghan's journey exemplifies how effective career advising and our NextGen can empower young individuals to overcome challenges, pursue their ambitions, and achieve success. Her story is a reminder of the importance of mentorship, community support, and access to resources in shaping promising futures.



Greater Hickory MPO Awarded \$4.1 Million in Federal Transportation Funding to Local Projects

Article by Daniel Odom

The Western Piedmont Council of Governments (WPCOG) and the Greater Hickory Metropolitan Planning Organization (GHMPO) have awarded \$4.1 million in federal transportation funding for local multimodal projects. These funds, awarded through the MPO's Locally Administered Project Program, require a 20% local match and support bicycle/pedestrian, transit, and small intersection improvements.

In June, the Greater Hickory MPO approved funding for four significant projects. Following a competitive application process, projects submitted by Burke County, the City of Hickory, and the Town of Valdese were selected:

- **Burke County** will receive \$1.24 million in federal funds for the Canal Bridge Sidewalk project, enhancing connectivity to existing trails in the Lake James area.
- **Hickory** will receive \$1.69 million in federal funds for sections of the Historic Ridgeview Walk project. This includes improvements at the intersection of 4th Street Drive SW and US-70, and additional connectivity to the Hickory Trail System.
- **Valdese** will receive \$1.145 million in federal funds for Phase 1 of the Lovelady Road Sidewalk project, which aims to complete the first segment of a future connection to Lake Rhodhiss Drive and Hoyle Creek.

These projects aim to enhance transportation infrastructure, promote connectivity, and improve the overall quality of life for the region's residents. Looking ahead, the funding approval signifies GHMPO's commitment to advancing transportation solutions and fostering safer, more accessible pathways for residents and visitors.



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