

Minutes
Western Piedmont Council of Governments
Bimonthly Policy Board Meeting
Wednesday, February 4, 2026
Rutherford College Town Hall

Members Present

Randy Burns, Chair
George Holleman, Treasurer
Joseph Gibbons, Past Chair
Mike LaBrose, At-Large
Jill Patton, At-Large
Ronnie Setzer
Bob Floyd
Johnny Berry
Joie Fulbright
Brenda Powell, Alternate
Dennis Anthony
Tracy Townsend
Ritch Bolick, Alternate
Charlotte Williams, Alternate
Ralph Prestwood, Alternate
Ronnie Thompson, Alternate
Beverly Danner
Scott Gilleland, Alternate
Allen Spencer
Carroll Hoyle
Yates Jensen, Alternate
Kimberly S. Brown, Alternate
Keith Huffman
Helen Chestnut
Mark Transou
Tommy Luckadoo
Tonia Stephenson
Wes Christopher

Members Absent

Larry Yoder, Vice Chair
Larry Chapman, Secretary
Cole Setzer, At-Large
Chris Jernigan, At-Large
Josh Lail, Alternate
Kelvin Gregory
Jeff Brittain, Alternate
Lloyd Robbins, Alternate
Robbie Wilkie, Alternate

Local Government/Agency

Burke County
Taylorsville
Lenoir
Caldwell County
Hickory
Cajah's Mountain
Cedar Rock
Connelly Springs
Conover
Conover
Drexel
Granite Falls
Granite Falls
Hickory
Lenoir
Morganton
Newton
Newton
Rhodhiss
Rutherford College
Rutherford College
Taylorsville
Valdese
Appointed
Appointed
Appointed
Appointed
Appointed

Alexander County
Hudson
Catawba County
Morganton
Alexander County
Brookford
Burke County
Cajah's Mountain
Caldwell County

Donald Robinson	Catawba
Carroll Yount, Alternate	Catawba
Barbara Beatty, Alternate	Catawba County
Dale Sherrill	Claremont
Ramona Duncan, Alternate	Connelly Springs
Barbara Pennell	Gamewell
Ron Lackey, Alternate	Gamewell
Sheila Perkins	Glen Alpine
Ben Honeycutt	Hildebran
Mike Smith, Alternate	Hildebran
Jim Engelman, Alternate	Hudson
Allen Bumgarner	Long View
Phyllis Pennington, Alternate	Long View
Holly Crafton-Lay	Maiden
Fore Rembert, Alternate	Maiden
Kendra Edwards, Alternate	Rhodhiss
Bobby Mosteller	Sawmills
Joe Wesson, Alternate	Sawmills
Rexanna Lowman, Alternate	Valdese
Amparo R. Alfaro	Appointed
Erisha Lipford	Appointed

Guests/Others Present

Randy Feierabend	Cajah's Mountain
Tamara Stamey	Connelly Springs
Bill Carroll	Drexel
Daniel Cobb	Granite Falls
Arnita Dula	Hickory
Scott Hildebran	Lenoir
Jerry Hodge	Newton

WPCOG Staff Present

Anthony Starr, Executive Director
Alison Alexander, Assistant Executive Director
Andrea Roper, Director of Finance
Ben Willis, Director of Community and Economic Development
Alison Adams, Director of Community and Regional Planning
Averi Ritchie, Director of Transportation
Charity Patterson Hamber, Director of Workforce Development
Lucas Bentley, IT Manager
Tasmin Mack, HR Manager
Shelby Zeilender, WPCOG Lead for NC Fellow

Call to Order/Welcome

A regular meeting of the WPCOG Policy Board was called to order at 6:45 pm by Chair Burns. Chair Burns thanked the Town of Rutherford College for hosting. Town of Rutherford College Mayor Yates Jensen welcomed the Policy Board.

Administration of Oaths of Office

Ms. Crystal Carpenter, Burke County Clerk of Superior Court, administered Oaths of Office to the Executive Committee Members and the new Policy Board delegates that attended.

Recognition of New Board Delegates

Chair Burns recognized the following new Policy Board delegates:

- Tracy Townsend – Granite Falls
- Allen Bumgarner – Long View
- Beverly Danner – Newton
- Keith Huffman – Valdese
- Wes Christopher – Appointed

Recognition of Outgoing Board Member

Chair Burns thanked Mayor Jerry Hodge for his years of service as a Policy Board delegate.

Introductions

Introductions were made by everyone in attendance.

Minutes of Previous Meeting

Minutes of the previous meeting were considered. Ms. Jill Patton made a motion to approve the minutes from the November 25, 2025 meeting and Mr. Joie Fulbright offered a second. The motion passed unanimously.

Unfinished Business/Reports

There was no unfinished business.

New Business

Regional Student Enrollment Changes

Mr. Anthony Starr, Executive Director, presented a series of student enrollment maps showing elementary, middle and high school district Average Daily Membership changes from the 2019-2020 to the 2025-2026 (pre-COVID/post COVID) school years and the 2024-2025 to the 2025-2026 school years. The maps showed both numeric and percentage changes in student enrollments. These maps were included in the agenda packet.

Key points from the maps and associated data:

- The 2019-2020 to 2024-25 ADM change maps show higher elementary enrollments in eastern and other sections of Catawba County, as well as at few schools in Burke County since the 2019-

2020 school year.

- Enrollments are lower for the majority of the high and middle schools in 2025-2026 compared to 2019-2020, meaning that enrollments at these schools have not returned to preCOVID levels.
- There are a number of factors behind these results including lower birth rates, growth in charter and private school enrollments, and lack of new housing in parts of the region.
- Notable exceptions to this trend are at Bandy's and St. Stephens High Schools in Catawba County, and at Draughn High School in Burke County, (these areas have experienced more housing growth than other areas in region).
- One year trend maps show declines at nearly all of the region's high schools between the 2024-2025 and 2025-2026 school years. These schools have been impacted by declines in some of the region's elementary and middle schools over the past several years.
- One-year map results indicate renewed student enrollment growth at some elementary and middle schools as a result of housing growth that has occurred in the region over the past couple of years.
- This student growth should eventually impact student enrollment numbers at area high schools.

The data and maps underscore the need to continue facilitating more housing growth and in-migration of working age people. The enrollment of our schools has direct bearing on the available workforce for our region and a general labor shortage continues in our area and the country.

No board action was requested. This item was for informational purposes only.

Workforce Development Board Update

Ms. Charity Patterson Hamber, Director of Workforce Development, presented an overview of recent efforts and upcoming initiatives of the Workforce Development Board and Workforce staff, including the Disaster Recovery National Dislocated Worker Grant related to Hurricane Helene, the recent Rapid Response for the Kroehler Furniture closure, and the Pathway Home 6 grant.

No board action was requested. This item was for informational purposes only.

Western Piedmont NCWorks Infrastructure Funding Agreement

Ms. Charity Patterson Hamber, stated the Partner Infrastructure Funding Agreement is entered into by and between the Western Piedmont Workforce Development Board and the Western Piedmont Workforce Development Board NCWorks Partners.

The Infrastructure Funding Agreement details the operational and service costs, how the system will be funded and the roles and responsibilities of each One-Stop for the operation of the One-Stop Delivery System. All partners to this Agreement recognize that infrastructure and other additional costs are applicable to all required partners, as outlined in Section 121(b)(1)(B) of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), whether they are physically located in the NCWorks Career Center or not. Each partner's contributions to these costs, however, may vary, as these contributions are based on the proportionate use and relative benefit received.

Staff requested that the Policy Board approve the Western Piedmont NCWorks Infrastructure Funding Agreement

Mr. George Holleman made a motion that the Policy Board approve the Western Piedmont NCWorks Infrastructure Funding Agreement and Ms. Jill Patton offered a second. Motion passed unanimously.

Catawba Career Center Lease Renewal

Ms. Alison Alexander, Assistant Executive Director, stated in 2015, the Policy Board approved leasing a portion of Conover Station as the location of the NCWorks Career Center for Catawba County. The lease included 6,888 square feet of space for exclusive use for our Workforce Development program for the operation of an NCWorks Career Center. The lease also included non-exclusive space such as the hallways, restrooms, large meeting spaces, parking, etc. and includes utilities.

The initial lease term was for a period of five years with an option to renew the lease for an additional five years, which occurred in 2021. The current lease cost is \$8,311 per month or \$14.48 per square foot annually. The term ends on March 31, 2026. The lease rate is consistent with current market rates. The new lease maintains the same rental rate for the first five-year period, starting on April 1, 2026 and increases by 5% for the renewal period, beginning April 1, 2031, to \$8,727.00 per month. The terms of the lease provide for a one-year notice of cancellation due to funding issues and allows the Western Piedmont Council of Governments to utilize the space for non-workforce uses if necessary.

As of the creation of this agenda, the Conover City Council had not reviewed/approved the new lease agreement, and staff asked that the Executive Director be authorized to negotiate any final edits that may arise.

Staff requested that the Policy Board approve the renewal of the lease with the City of Conover, and authorize the Executive Director and Board Chair to execute the lease.

Ms. Jill Patton made a motion to approve the renewal of the lease with the City of Conover for a five-year term per the terms of the agreement and authorize the Executive Director to negotiate any final modifications to the lease before execution by the Board Chair and Executive Director and Mr. Joie Fulbright offered a second. Motion passed unanimously.

Department of Environmental Quality Decentralized Wastewater Grant

Ms. Alison Adams, Director of Community and Regional Planning, stated The Western Piedmont Council of Governments was awarded \$7,556,854 in grant funding by North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality to support the repair and replacement of approximately 300 failed septic systems across an eleven-county region in western North Carolina. The program will prioritize systems damaged by Hurricane Helene, with up to 150 storm-related repairs, while the remaining repairs will address non-storm-related failures in accordance with state grant guidelines. Health departments estimate more than 240 septic systems were directly damaged by the storm, with hundreds of additional failures due to aging infrastructure and prolonged saturation. All counties in the project area were designated federal disaster areas.

Western Piedmont Council of Governments serves as the lead applicant and program administrator, partnering with the High Country Council of Governments to implement the project. Western Piedmont Council of Governments will coordinate repairs in Alexander, Burke, Caldwell, and Catawba counties, while High Country Council of Governments will oversee implementation in Alleghany, Ashe, Avery, Mitchell, Watauga, Wilkes, and Yancey counties. Local health departments and districts in each county will serve as the permitting authorities and assist with identifying eligible properties.

In addition to repairing or replacing failed systems, the program will incorporate resiliency measures where feasible to reduce vulnerability to future flooding and extreme weather events. These measures may include system relocation out of flood zones, installation of watertight tanks, expanded drain fields, elevation of system components, and elimination of straight pipes discharging into local waterways. Projected timeline to finalize the grant award with North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality is March 2026.

No board action requested. This item was for informational purposes only.

5th Amendment of the FY2025-26 Budget

Ms. Andrea Roper, Director of Finance, stated the 5th Amendment of the FY2025-26 budget reflects a total budget of \$50,814,231 and an operating budget of \$12,321,571 which represents an increase of the total budget from the November 25, 2025 budget adoption of \$547,478.

The 5th Amendment of the 2025-2026 Budget includes:

- General Government increased due to additional contracts for website maintenance.
- Environmental Protection increased to incorporate additional funding for forestry grants and anticipated.
- Interbasin Transfer expenditures.
- Community Development increased to reflect additional admin funds earned for urgent repair programs
- Urgent repair program and expected contractor payments.
- Area Agency on Aging decreased due to Medicare Improvements for Patients & Providers funding being less than expected.
- Regional Public Housing increased due to anticipated legal fees.
- Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act increased following additional grant funding for dislocated workers.
- Fund Balance Appropriated increased to recognize unutilized Interbasin Transfer dues collected in FY25. These funds will be utilized this fiscal year to cover legal and contractual costs associated with the project.
- Salaries, retirement and group insurance decreased due to personnel changes across multiple departments.
- Contractual expenditures increased to cover contractor payments related to the dislocated worker grant, as well as Interbasin Transfer and URP contractor costs.
- Legal fees decreased to correct Interbasin Transfer costs, reallocating them to contractual.

- Contingency increased to anticipate expenditures for new projects and projected funding needs during the current fiscal year.
- Transfer to Capital Reserve Fund decreased following a reduction in indirect funds generated due to a decrease in chargeable salaries.
- Workforce Development Special Revenue Fund increased due to additional funding for dislocated workers.
- Valdese Public Housing Special Revenue Fund increased to cover projected maintenance and contractual costs for housing unit renovations.

Staff requested that the Policy Board to review and approve the Fifth Amendment of the 2025-2026 Budget.

Mr. Mike LaBrose made a motion that the Policy Board approve the Fifth Amendment of the 2025-2026 Budget as proposed and Mr. Joe Gibbons offered a second. Motion passed unanimously.

FY27 Assessments for Local Governments

Mr. Anthony Starr, Executive Director, stated each year the Western Piedmont Council of Governments assesses dues to its local governments per its charter and bylaws. Based on the state population estimate for July 2024, the proposed assessments for FY27 reflect a 0.48% increase in population or 1,785 more persons in the region than in July 2023. The proposed assessments represent a total increase of required assessments of 0.29%, a \$1,751.08 increase.

The general assessments rate reflect no increase and remain at 98.1 cents per capita. Inflation increased 2.7% from December 2024 to December 2025. The proposed per capita rate represents a no increase. The proposed rate remains lower than the rate going back to the 1970s, when adjusted for inflation.

The Western Piedmont Council of Governments uses the general assessments to provide the required matching funds for the Area Agency on Aging, Economic Development Administration, and Appalachian Regional Commission. The funds also support research and data analytics services provided to local governments.

The assessments also include the required match for the Metropolitan Planning Organizations per federal and state requirements. The federal funding for the Metropolitan Planning Organizations is not increasing for FY26. Assessments for water resources remain the same as the current fiscal year. A narrative was included in the agenda packet.

A temporary assessment is included for the interbasin transfer coalition costs (\$520,200).

The table shows all the assessments including the optional dues for Sister Cities. The table was included in the agenda packet.

Staff requested that the Policy Board review and approve the FY2026-27 assessments.

Mr. George Holleman made a motion that the Board approve the assessments as presented and Ms. Jill Patton offered a second. Motion passed unanimously.

Other Business

Executive Director's and Staff Reports

Mr. Anthony Starr, Executive Director, highlighted the following items in his Executive Director's Report which was included in the agenda packet.

- Ms. Tina Miller, Director of Area Agency on Aging, will be retiring May 1, 2026 after 28 years of service. A transition plan is in place.
- Surplus furniture will be available soon for local governments as new furniture will be purchased.
- The building expansion is 69% complete. We are waiting on windows and Piedmont Natural Gas. There is a possibility the May Policy Board Meeting may be held at Western Piedmont Council of Governments with a ribbon cutting preceding the meeting.
- Mr. Anthony Starr continues to make IBT presentations to city and county governing boards.
- Western Piedmont Council of Governments Annual Meeting is Thursday, April 16, 2026, at the Hickory Metro Convention Center.
- Community and Economic Development has a number of new grants.
- We hope to have the financial audit for the Hickory Public Housing Authority to present at the March 24, 2026 Policy Board Meeting if the auditors are ready.

Ms. Alison Adams, Director of Community and Regional Planning, reported there is a sister Cities strategic plan meeting in March.

Chair Burns asked the timeline for the next CEDS, and Ms. Alison Adams, Director of Community and Regional Planning, said the committee appointments would take place in September.

Annual Meeting

Annual Meeting is April 16, 2026 at the Hickory Metro Center.

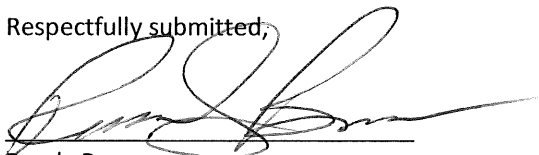
Next Meeting

The next Policy Board meeting will be Tuesday, March 24, 2026 and will be hosted by the Town of Cahah's Mountain and Caldwell County.

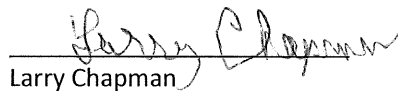
Adjournment

Chair Burns thanked the Town and County for their hospitality. Meeting was adjourned at 7:42 pm.

Respectfully submitted,



Randy Burns
Chair



Larry Chapman
Secretary