



Aggressive redevelopment efforts feed Hickory's push for economic growth.

REGIONAL REPORT: CATAWBA COUNTY

CRAFTING A FUTURE

High-tech manufacturing and infrastructure improvement projects go hand-in-hand for Catawba County.

Catawba County's effort to reinvent itself as a high-tech manufacturing hub is coming into focus.

Driving into Hickory off U.S. 321 North, a new public art sculpture of two giant leaves marks the entrance to the city — a first hint Hickory is turning over a new leaf.

Downtown shops are bustling and the square is full of people on a bright Saturday afternoon. A family pushes a stroller and walks a little dog as they pass a light blue construction sign that reads: Future City Walk.

This 5.2-mile stretch, patterned after Little Sugar Creek in Charlotte, will eventually connect the campus of Lenoir-Rhyne University to downtown Hickory (phase

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State-of-the-art medicine is part of Catawba County's appeal.

one) and continue along Old Lenoir Road (phase two) to the Lake Hickory Riverfront (phase three) where visitors will find shopping, dining, a bridge walkway over the water and public access to the water.

Scott Millar, president of the Catawba County Economic Development Corp., says construction should start this summer. Work has begun on relocating utilities and water lines along Main Avenue.

It's one of the city's large infrastructure projects to increase the livability of Hickory and attract new businesses. And it's working.

"In the past several years, there's been an uptick in the business buzz in Hickory," says City Manager Warren Wood.

In addition to recent expansions by longtime Hickory businesses such as Corning Optical Communications, a new company is coming to town — Isotopen Technologien München AG, headquartered in Germany. The radiopharmaceutical company chose Catawba County for its first U.S. manufacturing facility.

"The [Hickory] area is planning for and embracing expansion, which will help attract talent and keep adding to the quality of life that is key to recruiting and retaining a skilled workforce," a company representative says.

The city's hope is for other companies to follow and for residents, both old and new, to enjoy lifestyle and economic improvements.

In 1961, Hickory boasted 46 furniture plants, 89 hosiery mills and 27 other factories, according to *From Tavern to Town: An Architectural History of Hickory, North Carolina*.

But in the last 20 years, Catawba County towns have struggled as two recessions hit, and many companies took their production overseas.

"Back in 1993 when I started with the city," Wood says, "about 50% of all employment in the Hickory metro area was manufacturing. Today, it's about 25%."

That's because between 2000 and 2013, 45,000 jobs were lost. "We were hit about as hard as anybody," says Wood.

Now, in the buildings that once

housed mills, townspeople shop, eat and drink, attend festivals, and buy local food at the popular Farmer's Market in Union Square, the city's central business district.

"The Hickory people are a resilient kind," says Catawba County Chamber of Commerce President Lindsay Keisler.

In 2010, with a public plan called "Inspiring Spaces," city officials began to take steps to reinvent themselves and reinvigorate the economy. The plan outlined the city's goals: Investing in improvements to the livability of the area, upgrading office and industrial space to attract businesses, and improving educational opportunities for the workforce.

Today, as these visions are coming to fruition, Hickory and neighboring towns in Catawba County are well positioned for growth, led by advanced manufacturing technologies.

INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVEMENTS

"In 2014, Hickory voters approved a \$40 million bond referendum to create a variety of amenities that would allow us to attract and retain a workforce. Since then, we secured another \$50 million toward those goals," Wood says.

The potential development around the greenway could, by 2035, result in about \$500 million in private investment, 8,000 jobs created, 1,750 new housing units and a jump in population of 3,500, says Assistant to the City Manager Yaidee Fox, citing a study the city commissioned.

The Riverwalk, another portion of the Hickory Trail initiative, will offer more shopping, dining and recreational amenities at Lake Hickory, as well as residential development and connections to other future amenities.

Charlotte firm LandDesign has been hired to plan Riverwalk.

"That river district has a tremendous amount of potential. ... The river is right there, the short line train is right there, and there is a tremendous amount of boating opportunity," says Wood, whose office is in conversation with the

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Eateries, shops and offices are moving into restored factory spaces such as Hollar Mill.

operator of the privately held 17-mile short line about a possible dinner train excursion.

That area already is a bit of a regional destination, thanks to a system of mountain-biking trails known as Lake Hickory Trails, near the future Riverwalk. The Hickory Velo Club and the Rock N Road bicycle shop support a vibrant mountain-biking community.

"Hickory tends to be the hub of the metro statistical area," says Tim Bolick of the Catawba EDC. The MSA includes Catawba, Caldwell, Alexander and Burke counties.

Another infrastructure project is covered by an N.C. Department of Transportation \$650 million plan, a portion of which will be used to convert U.S. 321 to a "superstreet" between U.S. 70 and Lenoir in Caldwell County, allowing easier traffic flow for an estimated 45,000 cars a day.

Fox adds that a \$17 million federal grant will fund creation of a pedestrian bridge over the superstreet connecting the western parts of the city — including the baseball stadium and airport — to the Riverwalk.

These projects will increase the lifestyle attractiveness of the whole region

and enhance recruiting efforts for other economic opportunities.

Big companies have already found Catawba County attractive. Apple and Bed, Bath & Beyond have data centers in Catawba County, Bolick says.

"We're a mini-Silicon Valley with all the technology-related industry we have," Wood says, explaining that data centers need two things: power and water. Catawba County has plenty of both.

Hickory provides water to Apple's data center in Maiden. "Here we say, 'Siri lives in Catawba County,'" Wood says.

Also in motion is the upgrading and modernization of local business parks and industrial areas to better support the advanced technology needs that today's industries require.

At Trivium Corp. Center, Corning Optical Communications is expanding. Additional work is being done to prepare for incoming company ITM's manufacturing facility.

Transportation Insight, the second-largest privately held company in North Carolina, considered relocating. But it decided to stay downtown because of the planned City Walk

and invested more money into its corporate campus, Wood says.

Other companies headquartered downtown are CornerStone United, Hickory Springs Manufacturing Co. and Merchants Distributors Inc. These companies have long histories in Hickory and have been supportive of the community.

URBAN REVITALIZATION

"Our downtown hasn't seen a remodel [like this] since the '80s," Wood says. "What we have planned is really going to improve the area, and we are excited."

"We are trying to reinvent our community and keep young people here," says former City Councilwoman Sally Fox, who served 20 years on the panel. During her tenure, she always worked to keep downtown relevant. "In [the] 1990s, we started a farmers market in downtown after the only grocery store there moved."

Much larger now, the farmers market is still located in Union Square and is open twice a week seasonally.

Fox lives near downtown within walking distance of her gift boutique, The Sally Co. She believes ring neighborhoods are a healthy support system for a downtown.



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Frye Regional Medical Center is opening a brain center, allowing the community to access care that was previously unavailable.

"That was one best part of being on council ... neighborhood development," Fox says.

Livability is a relevant draw for companies looking to relocate. The city wants to continue to support a vibrant downtown district for young adults and families wanting to live, work and play there.

Amenities and services abound for this community of more than 40,000 people. The region is home to two top-notch health care providers, Frye Regional Medical Center and Catawba Valley Medical Center.

Frye Regional Medical Center is opening a brain center in April led by neurosurgeon Akram Mahoud, with several locations covering various brain specialties including sports medicine, family physicians for brain care, a psychiatry group and an inpatient behavioral health hospital. The community can now access care previously unavailable nearby for strokes, brain trauma or tumors, and many other neurological conditions.

Patrick Broos, director of supply chain for Catawba Valley Medical Cen-

ter, says that the system is one of the most collaborative he's seen, having worked at four others in the U.S.

CVMC has a 258-bed acute-care facility and urgent-care facilities in addition to more than 25 primary or specialty practices.

"Within Catawba County and all the municipalities here, there seems to be so much collaboration with education, business, and government working together ... making Hickory and Catawba County sustainable for the future," Broos says. "It's a unique environment that my wife and I are excited about, particularly for our kids as they grow."

The Catawba Science Center and Hickory's aquarium are a part of the Science, Art and Literature, Together initiative that includes a community symphony, choral society, art museum and united arts council. The town operates its own 40,000-square-foot library near downtown.

Hickory's small-town community feel was highlighted last year in *National Geographic Travel* magazine's list for "Best Small Cities for 2018."

Population is growing as building permits for single-family homes increased more than 19% from 2016-18. There are 1,000 apartment units being built, and the average number of days a home is on the market is 45.

"We're in a really good place," Wood says. "And it's nice to be able to say that."

Hickory is in a good place geographically too. About 55 miles northwest of Charlotte, the city is 45 minutes from the Blue Ridge Parkway with Interstate 40 running east to west and U.S. 321 running north to south.

When ITM was researching locations for a new facility, Hickory competed with other cities. Because of the short shelf life of the company's cancer-fighting product, being within an hour of an international airport was a deciding factor.

"Hickory's location relative to Charlotte was attractive to us; it is a good balance between proximity to an urban setting [and] the benefits of a small-town setting with a strong sense of community," a company representative says.

By late 2021, the company projects to be fully operational with 137 employees.

WORKFORCE TRAINING

As Hickory's economy grows, businesses are looking for quality workers.

HKY4Vets is a collaborative program that offers introduction to Hickory and its business opportunities to groups of veterans transitioning back to civilian life every year.

Veteran Billy Rickles found the employment he was seeking through an open house and job fair sponsored by the program after moving from Florida. Rickles was hired at Western Piedmont Council of Governments to start a code enforcement division. "It felt like a perfect fit," Rickles says.

By January, he was up and running with a mobile office. After three months, the department added other services including enforcing rules for discharges to sewer systems

and American Disability Association compliance.

Rickles says the people at HKY4Vets worked hard to connect him with quality employers based on his career goals.

Hickory native Lindsay Keisler earned a business degree at UNC Charlotte and returned to her hometown to work with the Catawba Chamber of Commerce in membership. Nine years later as CEO, Keisler believes in a business-friendly climate that creates jobs for residents.

"The pursuit of value and relevance is everyday," Keisler says on the Supportedly podcast aimed at encouraging entrepreneurship.

The Edison Project is the region's only entrepreneurial competition. "We have done this for eight years, and it has helped to grow our businesses in the four-county area," Keisler says. "We award \$18,000 in seed money to the top three finalists."

"We have historically had an entrepreneurial spirit here in Hickory," Wood says. He adds that several homegrown businesses survived challenges and are hitting their strides again, such as Sherrill Furniture, Century Furniture and Hickory Springs Manufacturing.

Executive Director Dan St. Louis says the key to his work at Manufacturing Solutions Center is, well, solutions. "It doesn't matter who solves the problem, it just matters that the problem gets solved."

MSC's mission has always been to keep manufacturing in the U.S. "Collaboration is key," says St. Louis, who has been with the center since its inception in 1990. "Everyone working together."

It's a theme heard often when talking with people from Catawba County.

MSC offers testing and prototype development services for textile and furniture companies nationally. It is also involved in the development and commercialization of products by supporting four incubator companies whose innovative ideas are contributing to the entrepreneurial spirit in Hickory.

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One such company is Textile-Based Delivery Inc., led by Jordan Shindler. The proprietary biomaterial it makes can be used to embed medicinal ingredients into fabrics that are released into the body of the wearer.

Charlotte entrepreneur Michèle Dal Cin also partnered with the MSC to develop product lines for her company, Benefic LLC.

"I started with a Hosiery 101 class offered by the MSC," says Dal Cin, who works with Mark Bess at Yu Apparel, an incubator company whose products are made with U.S. yarns.

"It's all about quality for us," Bess says. "We find that if we put American-made yarns in our product, they will last twice as long."

Dal Cin says she enjoys working locally because she can personally oversee production and testing — something she couldn't do if she outsourced to China.

"That's been a huge advantage in

working with the MSC companies," says Dal Cin. "They are there to support the development of business here in North Carolina."

The MSC and Bess also connected Dal Cin to other local business partners, from a Raleigh-based designer to a Conover-based packaging company.

"Something that sets us apart as a community and a true competitive advantage is collaboration," Keisler says. Other collaborative efforts support a growing need for the highly skilled workforce that advanced technologies manufacturers are seeking.

"We just had a ribbon-cutting for a game changer for us — the Workforce Solutions Complex at the Catawba Valley Community College campus. It's an 80,000-square-foot facility that will train high-tech workers, both in the technical side and the industrial side." Wood says.

The CVCC complex will serve an ad-

ditional 1,500 students for the technical skills education called for by local employers. The center is the result of a collaboration among three public schools with support of the county commissioners.

"This is a niche in the marketplace to facilitate [our] manufacturing orientation. And it really does appeal to people that we're recruiting," Millar says.

He explains that companies looking at Catawba County often ask, "How do I get the people to make the product?"

"This [new complex] really answers that workforce question in a way that really nobody else in North Carolina is attacking as strongly," Millar says.

As "Home of the Makers and Doers," Hickory is crafting a future too. ■

— Julie Cunnane is a freelance writer based in Charlotte.



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