



MOUNTAIN WEST NC CREATE BRIDGES

2021 PROJECT YEAR-END REPORT

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September 22, 2021

2020-2022

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PROJECT LEADERSHIP



BECKY BOWEN

Project Manager

North Carolina State University



CHANEL NESTOR

Project Coordinator

North Carolina State University



RUSS HARRIS

Project Co-Chair

Interim Director, Southwestern Commission



RICH PRICE

Project Co-Chair

Executive Director of Economic Development
and Regional Partnerships, Western Carolina
University

2020-2021

CREATE BRIDGES COACHES

Susan Jakes

Associate State Program Leader (CRD) Extension Assistant Professor,
North Carolina State University

Darren E. Rhodes

Rural Planning Program Manager
NC Main Street and Rural Planning Center Dept of Commerce

Duarte B. Morais

Associate Professor
Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management
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John Parker

Faith Team Fellow, Institute for Emerging Issues,
North Carolina State University

Dr. Michelle Eley

Community and Economic Development Specialist, North Carolina A&T
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Tim Ware

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ABOUT CREATE BRIDGES

CELEBRATING RETAIL, ACCOMMODATIONS, TOURISM, AND ENTERTAINMENT BY BUILDING RURAL INNOVATIONS AND DEVELOPING GROWTH ECONOMIES



The Southern Rural Development Center (SRDC) secured \$2,041,330 in grant funding from the Walmart Foundation to expand CREATE BRIDGES, a pilot program centered on strengthening retail, accommodations, tourism, and entertainment industries which have been notably impacted by COVID-19 and often make up a large portion of the jobs and businesses that drive rural economies. The SRDC has collaborated on Phase II of this initiative with three Land-Grant University (LGU) partners: New Mexico State University, North Carolina State University, and University of Illinois.

This initiative, CREATE BRIDGES: Celebrating Retail, Accommodations, Tourism, and Entertainment by Building Rural Innovations and Developing Growth Economies, is built upon the SRDC-led Stronger Economies Together (SET) initiative, a collaborative effort across 32 states which helps rural counties work together to develop and implement an economic development plan for their multi-county region. Built in partnership with USDA Rural Development, the nation's four Regional Rural Development Centers, and LGU partners, SET serves as a building block for this new initiative.

While manufacturing and professional services are often the focus of economic development, businesses focused on retail, accommodations, tourism and entertainment (the CREATE businesses) are important to the viability of rural communities and regions. These industries provide needed goods, services and amenities to local residents and visitors and enhance quality of life. They are also a major source of jobs and tax revenue in rural communities and often provide the first work experience for residents who move up the career path within these businesses or go on to work in other sectors. Currently, planning and training focused on these sectors is often neglected or underemphasized despite a need to strengthen it. As a result, small and large businesses alike face high worker turnover rates and a dwindling pool of mid/upper management workers.



35%

*of Regional Jobs are in CREATE
Industries*

22,797

*Total number of CREATE
INDUSTRY Jobs
in the Mountain-West Region*

JACKSON COUNTY SNAPSHOT

Population Gain: 9.1%
Racial Breakdown: 81% White
9% American Indian 6% Latino
65 +: 20%
Median Home Value: \$196,100
Median Gross Monthly Rent: \$739

Homes With Computers: 87%
Homes with Broadband: 71%
Living in Poverty: 19%
Accommodation and Food Services
Revenue: \$548,517,000
Retail Sales Revenue:
\$403,657,000
Building Permits: 832
Occupancy Tax Rate: 4-6%

43,938

Total Population

MACON COUNTY SNAPSHOT

Population Gain: 5.7%
Racial Breakdown: 87% White 8% Latino
65 +: 29%
Median Home Value: \$165,600
Median Gross Monthly Rent: \$756

Homes With Computers: 85%
Homes with Broadband: 75%
Living in Poverty: 14%
Accommodation and Food Services Revenue: \$63,264,000
Retail Sales Revenue: \$432,474,000
Building Permits: 109
Occupancy Tax Rate: 3% (Franklin); 3% (Macon County)

35,858

Total Population

GRAHAM COUNTY SNAPSHOT

Population Loss: -4.7%
Racial Breakdown: 89% White 8%
American Indian
65 +: 24%
Median Home Value: \$122,300
Median Gross Monthly Rent: \$499

Homes With Computers: 66%
Homes with Broadband: 57%
Living in Poverty: 17%
Accommodation and Food Services
Revenue: \$14,266,000
Retail Sales Revenue: \$44,505,000
Building Permits: 14
Occupancy Tax Rate: 3% (Municipal
– Fontana Dam, Lake Santeetlah,
Robbinsville)

8,441

Total Population

SWAIN COUNTY SNAPSHOT

Population Gain: 2.1%
Racial Breakdown: 63% White 30%
American Indian
65 +: 20%
Median Home Value: \$139,100
Median Gross Monthly Rent: \$642

Homes With Computers: 76%
Homes with Broadband: 60%
Living in Poverty: 16%
Accommodation and Food Services
Revenue: \$49,985,000
Retail Sales Revenue: \$107,087,000
Building Permits: 83
Occupancy Tax Rate: 4%

14,271

Total Population

CREATE BRIDGES YEAR ONE OVERVIEW

The CREATE BRIDGES initiative was launched to develop and test a process to fill a void in planning for the CREATE sectors, particularly in rural areas. The process is designed to raise awareness of the role these important businesses play in the local economy, determine challenges and barriers negatively impacting those businesses, and develop and implement strategies to strengthen the retail, accommodations, tourism, and entertainment sectors within a region. In the Mountain West region, the process is managed by NC State Extension and includes coaches from Community Development, Tourism, and Outreach and Extension from both NC State University and NC A&T State University, as well as representatives from the NC Department of Commerce and the NC Association of Regional Councils of Government.

In September of 2020, North Carolina State University announced the selection of the Mountain West region of North Carolina for participation in CREATE BRIDGES. The selected Mountain West NC region includes Jackson, Swain, Macon, and Graham Counties as well as the Qualla Boundary. Regions located in North Carolina that applied to participate in the CREATE BRIDGES Initiative had to meet a number of qualifications including being classified as rural and economically distressed.

SRDC defined a rural region as encompassing two to five contiguous counties (with some exceptions for Tribal areas) and the total population and/or geographic area of the region had to be at least 51% rural in nature. Regions were able to cross state boundaries as long as the counties that make up that multi-state region meet the rural requirement. The selected two-to-five county pilot region had to also be considered economically distressed, meaning that the poverty rate for the region is at or above the state average or the region has high unemployment or low labor force participation rates relative to the state average.

In addition to the Mountain West region, six other regions in North Carolina applied to participate in the CREATE BRIDGES project. Regions were analyzed on a (100) point basis with scoring categories including, Description of the region, Evidence of rural and economic distress, Evidence of working together, Stakeholder buy-in, and also evidence that CREATE businesses are a priority for the region.

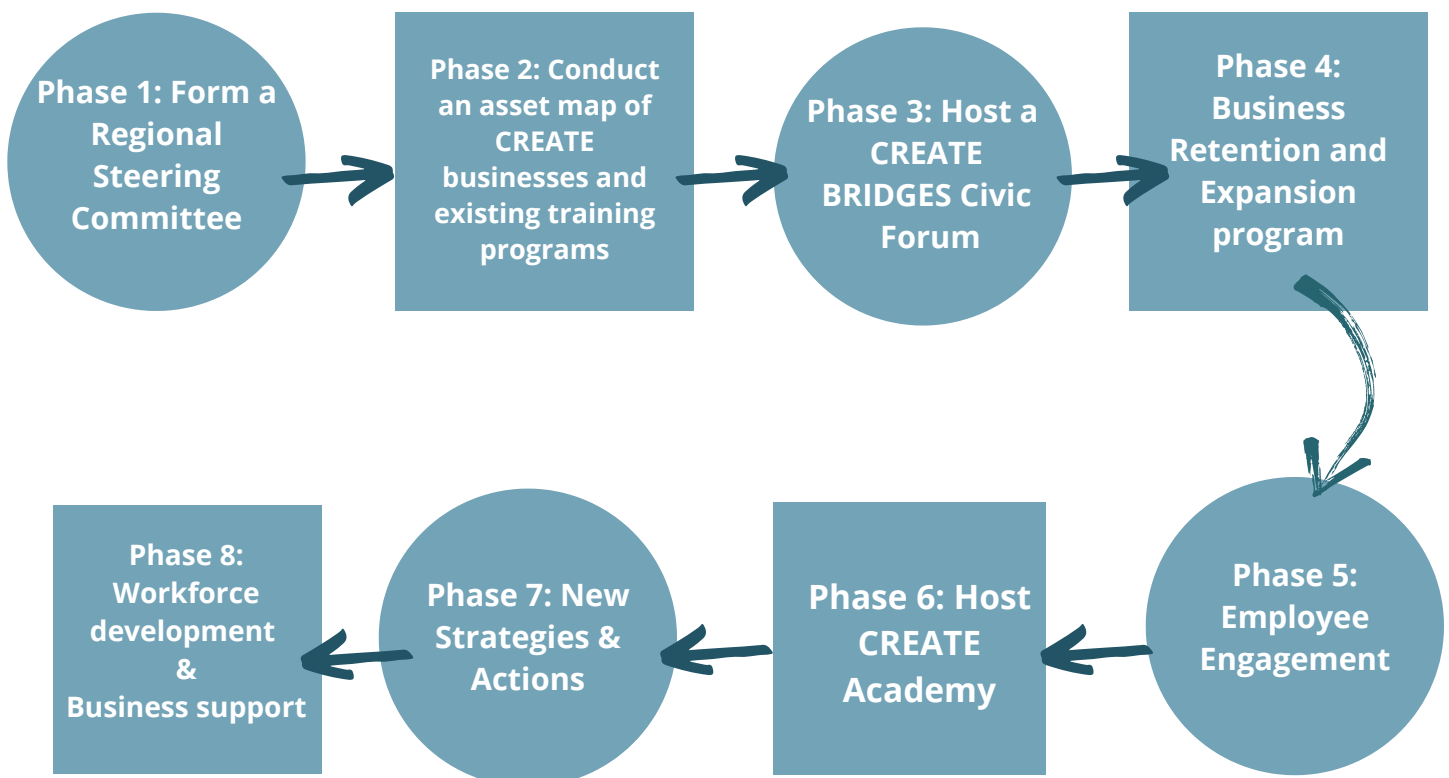


PROJECT PHASES

2020-2022

Over a two-year timeline, major steps in this process include the formation of the Regional Steering Committee, conducting an inventory of CREATE businesses, existing training programs, and service providers, hosting a CREATE civic forum, implementation of a Business Retention and Expansion program, implementation of an Employee Perspectives survey, hosting a CREATE Academy, and the development and implementation of new strategies and actions to strengthen the CREATE business sector and workforce in the region.

Between October of 2020 and September 2021, the Mountain West region has completed all steps of the project except the development and implementation of new strategies and actions, which will be completed during late 2021 and all of 2022.



2020-2021

FORMING THE REGIONAL STEERING COMMITTEE

While working within the retail, entertainment, accommodations, and tourism sectors, this project has engaged a regionally representative Steering Committee with Mountain West stakeholders for the past 12 months. The CREATE BRIDGES Regional Steering Committee includes business operators, state/local workforce agencies, chambers of commerce, economic development specialists, education professionals, and local government leaders. This experience-diverse group has diligently committed themselves to developing new ways of outreach and engagement with business owners and regional workforce; as well as connecting support agencies that function to maintain a robust small business ecosystem and skilled workforce in the Mountain West. The Regional Steering Committee is co-chaired by representatives from Western Carolina University and the Southwestern Commission, both based in Jackson County.

Kent Cranford

Owner, Motion Makers Bicycle Shops

Tommy Jenkins

Director, Macon County Economic Development

Linda Harbuck

Director, Franklin Chamber of Commerce & Franklin TDC

Kaye McHan

Director, Highlands Chamber of Commerce

Scotty Corbin

General Manager, Smoky Mountain Center for Performing Arts

Thomas Craig

Owner, The Ugly Dog Public House & The Highlands Dive

Ann Bass

Planner, NC Commerce - Appalachian Region Commission

Rob Hawk

County Extension Director, Jackson and Swain Counties

Laura Lauffer

Project Director, Empowering Mountain Food Systems -
North Carolina State University

Lance Collins

Small Business Center Director, Tri-County Community College

2020-2021

Rich Price (Co- Chair)

Executive Director, Economic Development & Regional Partnerships- Western Carolina University

Russ Harris

Interim Director, Southwestern Commission

Nick Breedlove

Director, Jackson Tourism Development Authority

Julie Spiro Donaldson

Executive Director, Jackson County Chamber of Commerce

Stephanie Edwards

Executive Director, Cashiers Area Chamber of Commerce

Dale Collins

Owner, Tuckasegee Fly Shop & Fishing

Mary Lanning

General Manager, Hampton Inn & Suites - Cashiers

Tiffany Henry

Director, Jackson County Economic Development

Sophia Paulos

Director, Graham County Economic Development

Daniel Allison

Director, Graham Tourism Development Authority

Angie Knight

Superintendent, Graham County Schools

Eric Reece

Pastor, Robbinsville United Methodist Church & Imagine Hub

Linda Lamp

Business Services Representative, Southwestern Commission

Sandra S. Dennison

SBTDC Regional Director, Western Carolina University

David Garrett

Workforce Development Director, Southwestern Commission

Josh Carpenter

Existing Industries Manager, Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina

2020-2021

Jim Hager

Business and Economic Development Committee chair GREAT (Graham Revitalization Economic Action Team)

Karen Taylor

Director, Robbinsville TDA

Mary Anne Baker

Director, Swain Tourism Development Authority

Jeremiah Wiggins

Owner, Deep Creek Lodge & Tubing

Erin Smith

Owner, Humanite Boutique & Aloft in The Smokies

Kim Albritton

Vice President, Great Smoky Mountains Railroad

Tim Black

Director of Retail, Nantahala Outdoor Center

Brooks Robinson

Senior Vice President- Harrah's Cherokee Casinos

Mike Parker

Director of Destination Marketing, Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians

Hope Huskey

Associate Director, Sequoyah Fund

Sabrina Arch

Director, EBCI Enterprise Development

Christopher McCoy

Director, EBCI Communications

Bernadette Peters

Main Street Economic Development Director, Town of Sylva

Marne Harris

SBC Director, Southwestern Community College

CIVIC FORUMS AND RESOURCE LISTING

Through the collaborative work of the Regional Steering Committee Members, CREATE BRIDGES Coaches, and Participants in the Regional Civic Forums, a list of regional assets and resources was created in December of 2020. Community participants were invited to three county-based civic forums through the outreach efforts of the regional steering committee. These three place-based virtual meetings asked participants to list regional assets and resources, identify regional strengths and challenges, and envision possible regional accomplishments that could be completed through the CREATE BRIDGES project.

The Google software Jamboard functioned as an interactive way to collaboratively engage the Civic forum participants during asset identification and visioning. During this phase of the project we found that taking time to identify assets or resources before setting goals in the regions is important because having a good understanding of the breadth of resources available in the region can be a valuable way to determine which opportunities should be pursued as regional goals and which ones should be put on the back burner as priorities given that the required assets are simply not in place.

Opportunities where the resources needed are already available may be easier to launch. On the other hand, goals that require absent or underdeveloped assets will require more preparation, time, and effort for the goals to be successful. Because of the safety and health mandates brought on by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the CREATE BRIDGES process, normally conducted face-to-face, has had to pivot to a digital format in 2020 and 2021.

This transition to digital has been tough for the CREATE BRIDGES process and for the Mountain West Region, which has historically also suffered from limited ability to address economic challenges. Lack of broadband access hinders the region's potential and has served as an obstacle to engagement for this project. Self-identifying as an environmentally-rich area that finds strength in its people, culture, and natural resources, the Mountain West region found that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the prior immense need for expansion of broadband, as well as a qualified labor pool and workforce housing.

The Civic Forum attendees expressed that the work of the CREATE BRIDGES project should prioritize the identified challenges of lack of workforce housing, expansion of broadband access, and workforce development, as well as invest time into developing community collaboration initiatives. But because of other economic development initiatives in the region focused on broadband expansion and housing needs, later conversations with the Regional Steering Committee, however, refined the focus of the CREATE BRIDGES process to strategies that did not focus on housing or broadband needs. A record of these current regional initiatives is attached as Appendix B.


BUSINESS RETENTION AND EXPANSION

During the BRE phase, local CREATE businesses were surveyed in order to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the business environment, and set priorities for action to help these businesses thrive and grow. Retaining and expanding local businesses is a central component of CREATE BRIDGES. The Business Retention and Expansion (BRE) process engages local businesses to assess the strengths and challenges of running a business and inform strategies to address issues that may affect critical business activities. Between March 15, 2021 and June 23, 2021, 33 businesses participated in the Business Retention and Expansion survey. The regional steering committee found innovative approaches to increasing connectivity between the CREATE businesses of this region and engaging with the BRE phase but we believe that broadband access and regional worker shortages served as an accessory to the low participation rate by businesses in this survey process.

BRE Surveys were completed by either business owners, human resource managers, or staff managers representing all four of the target CREATE sectors. The CREATE BRIDGES team developed many ways to outreach business representation in the survey including creating a flyer with a QR code for easier access, maintaining a mailing list of businesses which we contacted regularly, developing sector-specific virtual engagement events which included sector specific discussion and live survey participation and completion, while also having one-on-one discussions with business representatives. 13 surveys were completed during virtual BRE roundtables, 12 surveys were completed during on-site regional visits, and 8 BRE surveys were completed through direct engagement with the survey.

The businesses surveyed possessed a range of 0 to 500+ paid full time employees. 24% of the regional businesses stated that family members contribute to the business operations and do not receive a W-2. 91% of the surveyed businesses in the region offered hourly non-tipped pay above the state minimum wage with a starting range from \$7.25 to \$18.75 per hour. 64% of the businesses surveyed stated that they changed their hours seasonally; all of those who elaborated stated that the winter season change was the reason for the seasonal hour change.

Most regional businesses have not experienced a change in their employee hiring in the past 3 years and also did not view their rate of employee turnover as a barrier to their business operations. Of those that did see a change in employee hiring, most saw a need to hire more employees. 57% of businesses offer some sort of benefit to their employees which range from merchandise discounts, vacation time, and health benefits. Of those that elaborated on their employee benefits, 95% of them offer flexible scheduling and 60% offer health benefits.



Through conversations with businesses, BRE surveys, and regional stakeholders, outdoor recreation was identified to be the main economic driver of the Mountain West. Throughout the pandemic of 2020, this region found itself unprepared for the droves of tourists, most of whom came from large East coast cities hoping to escape the high density urban areas by coming into the open and secluded environments that this region has to offer. Most businesses had to alter their operations because of COVID restrictions and public health guidelines; the majority of businesses closed temporarily to prepare for reopening after lockdown or because of a COVID contraction in their facility. The entertainment sector experienced the most negative impacts of COVID because of the Governor's mandates on gatherings. This public health policy totally halted any business that depended upon live events, performances, or ticketed events as their main revenue source.

Decreased indoor patron capacity had a major impact on the accommodations and retail industries. Even though most businesses saw an increase in patrons, 57% did not see an increase in employees and only 15% saw a decrease.

Regional Business CONVERSATION

We Want to Hear From Retail, Entertainment,
Accommodations, and Tourism Businesses

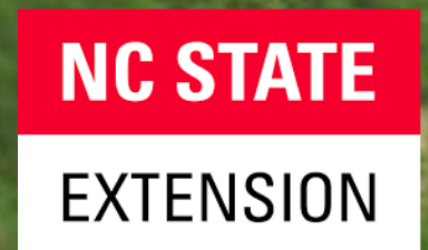
Business Retention and Expansion Roundtable

Join the CREATE BRIDGES research
team for a conversation with local
businesses in the Mountain-West
Region

TUESDAY MAY 11 • 2:00-3 :30 PM • FRANKLIN TOWN HALL
TUESDAY MAY 11 • 6:00-7 :30 PM • JACKSON COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY
WEDNESDAY MAY 12 • 2:00-3:30 PM • GRAHAM COUNTY COMMUNITY SERVICES BUILDING
THURSDAY MAY 13 • 2:00-3:30 PM • EBCI COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

REGISTER AT
[HTTPS://GO.NCSU.EDU/CREATEBRIDGESEVENTS](https://go.ncsu.edu/createbridgesevents) OR SCAN QR CODE

VISIT [HTTPS://GO.NCSU.EDU/FPEC8MN](https://go.ncsu.edu/fpec8mn) FOR MORE
INFORMATION



EMPLOYEE AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT ENGAGEMENT

Between July 29th, 2021 and September 15th, 2021, the CREATE BRIDGES initiative received 74 responses to the Employee Perspectives survey. The purpose of this survey was to engage employees about their work experience and to determine challenges and barriers to employees in these sectors. This information will inform strategies for workforce/employee development programs that currently exist in, or may need to be developed for, the region.

Much like with the BRE survey, the Regional Steering Committee spearheaded the outreach to employees for this phase. Prior to releasing the Employee Engagement survey, a subcommittee was formed to evaluate the survey questions, as well as develop best practices for engagement with the employees of the region. A flyer with a QR code was developed and was sent out first to our full regional steering committee to send to their networks, and then to the businesses that completed the BRE survey for them to distribute to their employees.

Most of the employees that completed the survey are full-time workers and overall most participants work in the Food and Accommodations sector. 82 % of the survey participants have completed at least some college coursework with 50% of the participants having obtained an associates or bachelor's degree. 83% of participants work in Jackson County and represent the majority of survey participants; 33%, have been with their employer for over 10 years. One third of survey participants make \$11.00- \$15.00 per hour, while 25% make more than \$25 per hour. 58% of employees have been promoted at their current employer and 64% of those that have been promoted were required to complete training in order to receive their promotion, and subsequently those individuals received training to fulfill their new role.

Fifty-four percent of employees feel very valued by their employer; most participants stated that they chose their current job because they genuinely enjoy their work environment, and 84% of participants have no plans to leave their current employer. Of the employees that are considering leaving their current position, most are doing so because of personal advancements such as growing a family or furthering their education. Some stated that the lack of affordable housing in the region, unhealthy working environment, feeling overworked, and retirement were listed as reasons why they were considering leaving or have left their employer in the past.

On August 25, 2021 members of the Regional Steering Committee gathered to meet with the Western Carolina University SBTDC, regional Community College representatives, and the Southwestern Commission's Workforce Development director to discuss training needs identified by both CREATE business owners and their workforce. These trusted community resources indicated a desire and willingness to either develop new trainings or promote existing trainings that will meet the needs identified in the BRE and Employee Engagement surveys. However, they also shared that there has been a drop in interest by the incumbent and potential workforce to attend courses offered to build skills important to advancement within the CREATE sector. An early strategy suggested at this meeting was to develop some form of incentive that would appeal to the incumbent and potential CREATE workforce.

Absent from the August 25, 2021 meeting were representatives of the Department of Public Instruction and CTE (Career and Technical Instruction). These representatives have been invited to participate in the CREATE Academy on September 22, 2021 and plan to attend the 2021 Strategy Sessions to provide guidance on how best to engage high school students in the CREATE sector. Very few apprenticeship and intern opportunities have historically been made available in this sector.

REGIONAL WORKFORCE

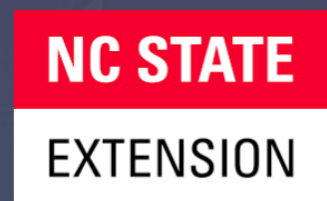
MOUNTAIN-WEST EMPLOYEE SURVEY

Share Your Experience of working in the Retail,
Entertainment, Accommodations, and Tourism
Industries

Take the survey at
<https://go.ncsu.edu/mwworkforcesurvey> or
scan the QR Code with your phone camera



Contact Chanel Nestor at canestor@ncsu.edu
Visit <https://go.ncsu.edu/fpec8mn> for more information



EMPLOYEE SKILLS TRAININGS

Regional workforce development is a central focus of the CREATE BRIDGES initiative. The project funder, the Walmart Foundation, is specifically interested in increasing career promotion within the retail sector in Rural America. As part of both the Employee Perspective survey and the Business Retention and Expansion survey, participants were asked to speak about their personal skill sets and the skill sets of their employees, respectively. Questions pertaining to skill sets complimented each participant population.

The surveys showed that overwhelmingly, employee respondents felt that they are generally getting to work on time 94.44%, have basic math skills 97.22%, and reading and writing skills 97.30%. Also, employees felt that they held the ability to understand, speak, and write in English 100.00% and possessed a professional phone etiquette level 88.89%. On the other hand, when employers were asked the complimentary question, 60% of employers believed that their employees possessed the ability to work on time, their employees possessed basic math skills 95.24%, and reading and writing skills 90.91%. Employers also believed that 79.17% of their employees possessed the ability to understand, speak and write in English and 70.37% possessed a professional phone etiquette level.

Along with being asked about their current skills, employees also had the chance to identify those skills that they would like to improve upon within the next year. 35.29% Employees stated that the ability to understand, speak, and write in a language other than English was a desired skill. Also, employees stated that Marketing (42.42%), Database management (44.12%), Specialized Equipment skills (46.88%), Safety, CPR, SafeServ(51.43%), and Spreadsheet functionality (56.76%), were amongst the top desired skills.

When asked complimentary questions, 68.97% of employers stated that face to face communications was the most desired skill for their employees to improve upon. Employers also stated that Database management (60.00%), Time management (57.69%), Spreadsheets functionality (64.71%), and Being to work on time (60.00%) were amongst the top desired skills for their employees.

Factors Impacting an Employee's Ability to Work

Employers indicated that lack of housing (45%), transportation (42%), and childcare (39%) were the biggest factors affecting their employees' ability to work. In contrast, employees indicated that the ability to rely on fellow co-workers, healthcare benefits, housing access, and broadband access were listed as factors which make work harder. While transportation access, criminal record, alcohol and drug use, and relationship with co-workers were listed as factors that do not hurt their ability to work.

2021-2022

THE CREATE ACADEMY, AND BEYOND: NEW STRATEGIES & ACTIONS, AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT & BUSINESS SUPPORT

CREATE Academy

The Mountain West CREATE Academy is scheduled to take place as a virtual event on September 22, 2021. Originally combined with a Business Fair and planned as an in-person event at the Harrah's Casino in Cherokee (Qualla Boundary), the CREATE Academy has pivoted to a virtual format because of the region's current high COVID-19 infection rates.

The CREATE Academy will be conducted in three parts. The first segment of the event will review the data collected from the BRE and Employee Perspective Surveys. The second segment will consist of a discussion of best employee culture practices by a panel of CREATE sector business owners. The third and final segment of the CREATE Academy will invite attendees to participate in a visioning session for each of the four sub-sectors: Retail, Accommodation, Entertainment, and Tourism.

Strategy Sessions and October-December of 2021

Regional Steering Committee members and CREATE Academy participants will be invited to attend a minimum of two strategy sessions dedicated to the creation of paths to prosperity for both the CREATE business sector and its workforce. These strategy sessions will take place on October 27 as well as on a to-be-determined date in mid-November. A third strategy session is being considered for early 2022.

Its focus will be on how community residents and policymakers can strengthen the CREATE sector and its employees.

2022

Between January and July 2022 the Regional Steering Committee and interested community members will convene regularly to refine CREATE sector workforce training initiatives and launch programming and other suggested strategies identified in the 2021 Strategy Sessions. The NC State Extension CREATE BRIDGES project staff and coaches will coordinate meetings and monitor the region's progress in implementing strategies. They will also facilitate the distribution of grant funds awarded by the Walmart Foundation in support of the CREATE sector.

In the Fall of 2022 NC State Extension CREATE BRIDGES project staff will conduct a Ripple Effect Mapping process to collect stories on the impact of the CREATE BRIDGES initiative in the Mountain West Region.

2021-2022

2020-2022

THANK YOU FROM THE CREATE BRIDGES TEAM

The CREATE BRIDGES Team would like to thank the Mountain-West region of North Carolina for their commitment to this project. Without the time and effort that has been contributed by not only the Regional Steering committee but also the project coaches, community members, business representatives, and regional employees, this project would be merely an idea. We look forward to continuing this processes throughout the year 2022 and implementing community led change for the CREATE sectors and all those who rely on the sustainability of these industries.

APPENDIX

Appendix A- Civic Forum Deliverables

**Appendix B- Current Economic
Development Initiatives**

Appendix C- Regional Profile

RESOURCE LISTING

FOUNDATIONS

Blue Cross Blue Shield Foundation

<https://www.bcbsncfoundation.org>

Blue Ridge National Heritage Area

<https://www.blueridgeheritage.com>

Carolina Small Business Development Fund

<https://carolinasmallbusiness.org>

Cashiers Historical Society

<https://www.cashiershistoricalsociety.org>

Cherokee Preservation Foundation

<http://cherokeepreservation.org>

Dogwood Health Trust

<https://dogwoodhealthtrust.org>

Duke Energy Foundation

<https://www.duke-energy.com/community/duke-energy-foundation>

Friends of Panthertown

<https://panthertown.org>

Golden LEAF

<https://www.goldenleaf.org>

Highlands-Cashiers Land Trust

<http://www.hicashlt.org>

Kate B. Reynolds

<https://kbr.org>

Main Street Sylva Association

<https://www.mainstreetsylva.org>

2020-2022

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Mainspring Conservation Trust

<https://www.mainspringconserves.org>

Natural Capital Investment Fund

<https://www.ncifund.org>

North Carolina Community Foundation

<https://www.nccommunityfoundation.org>

RTI International

<https://www.rti.org>

The Community Foundation of Western North Carolina

<https://cfwnc.org>

The Friends of the Macon County Public Library Inc.

<http://maconlibraryfriends.org>

The Sequoyah Fund

<https://www.sequoyahfund.org>

Vecinos, Inc.

<https://www.vecinos.org>

W. K. Kellogg Foundation

<https://www.wkkf.org>

Z Smith Reynolds

<https://www.zsr.org>

2020-2022

TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

Franklin Tourism Development Commission

<https://franklin-chamber.com/>

Graham County Tourism Development Authority

<https://grahamcountytravel.com/>

Jackson County Chamber & Visitor Center

<https://www.mountainlovers.com/>

Jackson County Tourism Development Authority

<https://www.discoverjacksonnc.com/tda-docs/>

Lake Santeetlah

<http://www.discoversanteetlah.com/>

Lake Santeetlah Tourism Development Authority

TownOfLakeSanteetlah.org

Robbinsville Tourism Development Authority

http://www.townofrobbinsville.com/MDB%20Blog/travel_tourism.html

Smoky Mountain Host of North Carolina

<https://www.smokymountainhost.org/>

Smoky Mountain Visitor Center

<https://www.visitsmokies.org/>

Swain Tourism Development Authority

<https://www.greatsmokies.com/chamber/>

2020-2022

SMALL BUSINESS SUPPORT

Carolina Small Business Development Fund

<https://carolinasmallbusiness.org/>

Mountain BizWorks

<https://www.mountainbizworks.org/>

Southwestern Community College Small Business Center

<https://www.southwesterncc.edu/workforce-innovations/small-business-center/small-business-center>

Tri-County Community College Small Business Center

<https://www.tricountycc.edu/community-business/small-business-center/>

Western Carolina University Small Business Technical Development Center

<https://www.wcu.edu/learn/departments-schools-colleges/cob/outreach-engagement/sbt/dc.aspx>

Western Women's Business Center

<https://www.wwbccnc.org/>

2020-2022

ARTS AND CULTURE

Bardo Arts Center

<https://www.wcu.edu/bardo-arts-center/>

Cowee School Arts & Heritage Center

<https://www.coweeschool.org/>

Gallery 1

<https://www.gallery1sylva.com/>

Jackson County Arts Council

<https://jacksoncountyarts.org/>

Jackson County Public Library

<https://fontanalib.org/sylva>

LEAF Festival

<https://theleaf.org/>

Mountain Heritage Center

<https://www.wcu.edu/engage/mountain-heritage-center>

NC Arts Council

<https://www.ncarts.org/>

Oconaluftee Indian Village

<https://visitcherokeenc.com/play/attractions/oconaluftee-indian-village/>

Qualla Arts and Crafts Mutual, Inc.

<https://quallaartsandcrafts.com/>

Sylva Public Art Committee

https://www.facebook.com/pg/sylvapublicart/about/?ref=page_internal

The Village Green

<https://www.villagegreencashiersnc.com/>

2020-2022

WCU Fine Art Museum

<https://www.wcu.edu/bardo-arts-center/fine-art-museum/index.aspx>

WCU School of Stage and

Screen<https://www.wcu.edu/learn/departments-schools-colleges/fpa/stagescreen/>

BUSINESS MARKETING

Hello NC

<https://www.ncdcr.gov/about/featured-programs/hello-nc>

NC IDEA

<https://ncidea.org/>

Visit NC Farms App

<https://visitncfarmstoday.com/>

NC State University- Poole College of Marketing and Communications

<https://poole.ncsu.edu/marketing-media-relations>

Visit NC

<https://edpnc.com/>

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS

Cashiers Chamber of Commerce

<https://www.cashiersareachamber.com/>

Economic Development Partnership of NC

<https://edpnc.com/>

Graham County Economic Development

www.grahamcountyedc.com

GREAT (Graham Revitalization Economic Impact Team)

<https://www.grahamcounty.net/great/great.htm>

Jackson County Chamber of Commerce

<https://www.mountainlovers.com/>

Jackson County Economic Development

<https://www.jacksonthrive.jacksonnc.org/>

Main Street Sylva Association

<https://www.mainstreetsylva.org/>

Southwestern Commission

<https://regiona.org/>

Tennessee Valley Authority

<https://www.tva.com/>

Venture Asheville

<http://ventureasheville.com/>

2020-2022



THE COMMUNITY CAPITALS FRAMEWORK

A community capitals framework was created by Flora and Flora (Iowa State, 2008) to map the strategies and impact capitals are playing in a community's well being. Through their research, Flora and Flora identified that if successful communities learned to leverage all of their capitals in a useful way, more vibrant communities emerged. The seven community capitals are natural, cultural, human, social, political, financial, and built. Strong and resilient communities strive for balanced investments in these seven capitals. If communities place too much emphasis on one or two of the capitals, they can end up suppressing the growth of the other community capitals, a condition that can damage the overall health of the community. *During the civic forums two Community capitals emerged as strongest in the Mountain West Region: **Natural and Cultural***

NATURAL CAPITALS



- Cheoah Lake
- Fontana Dam
- Fontana Lake
- Lake Santeetlah
- Tuckasegee River
- Nantahala National Forest
- Lake Nantahala
- Blue Ridge Mountains
- Appalachian Mountains
- Great Smoky Mountains

Natural capital refers to “the landscape, air, water, soil, and biodiversity of both plants and animals” (Flora and Flora, 2008) – in other words, our environment. It is also referred to in the literature as “natural amenities” (McGranahan, 1999) – assets that are linked to a particular place, such as weather, geographic location, natural resources, and natural beauty (Emery and Flora 2006). Since people and the communities of which they are a part are embedded in the environment, one could argue that natural capital undergirds several of the other capitals. A healthy and functioning environment provides valuable ecosystem services, such as food, timber, wildlife habitat, flood control, and recreational opportunities, which are essential for human life. Moreover, people and their communities are unable to thrive in areas where natural capital is neglected and depleted.

CULTURAL CAPITALS



- Pumpkin Row Festival
- Highlands Food and Wine Festival
- Highlands Cashiers Chamber Music Festival
- Bardo Arts Center
- Cowee School Arts & Heritage Center
- Gallery 1
- Jackson County Arts Council
- Jackson County Public Library
- LEAF Festival
- Mountain Heritage Center
- NC Arts Council
- Oconaluftee Indian Village
- QUALLA ARTS & CRAFTS MUTUAL, INC.
- Sylva Public Art Committee
- The Village Green
- WCU Fine Art Museum
- WCU School of Stage and Screen

The concept of culture provides a frame of reference for understanding the fabric of community life. This fabric is often connected by a common language, symbols, gestures, beliefs, values, and resources. In a classic textbook definition, culture consists of the material and nonmaterial aspects of a way of life, which are shared and transmitted among members of a society (Rogers et al., 1988). Culture is viewed as a "tool kit of symbols, stories, rituals, even the world-view that shapes individuals" (Swidler, 1986). It includes the values and symbols reflected in clothing, music, industry, art, language, and customs. It also encompasses events, materials (paintings, books), festivals, museums, and other activities occurring in communities (Flora and Flora, 2008).

REGIONAL CHALLENGES



-TOP CHALLENGES-

LACK OF QUALIFIED WORKFORCE

BROADBAND INTERNET ACCESS

LACK OF AFFORDABLE WORKFORCE HOUSING

2021 MOUNTAIN WEST ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES

In Summer 2021 the CREATE BRIDGES Initiative asked Mountain West Regional Stakeholders about their current economic development initiatives. Here is what they said.

BROADBAND

HOUSING

REGIONAL TOURISM

**SMALL BUSINESS
DEVELOPMENT**

**ENTREPRENEURIAL
DEVELOPMENT**

**WORKFORCE
DEVELOPMENT**

**MAIN STREET
DEVELOPMENT**

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

THE CREATE BRIDGES INITIATIVE WILL STRENGTHEN BUSINESSES AND WORKFORCE ENGAGED IN THE RETAIL, ACCOMMODATION, ENTERTAINMENT, AND TOURISM SECTORS. SUPPORTING THESE SECTORS WILL ENHANCE THE IMPACTS OF OTHER ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES, PARTICULARLY WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT, SMALL BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT, AND YOUTH ENGAGEMENT.

NC STATE
EXTENSION



2020-2022

Broadband

- The Southwestern Commission received \$7 million in grant funding for broadband expansion in the last 24 months. Funding was awarded through ARC and NC Great Grants. Affected counties are Jackson, Macon, Swain, and Graham Counties. Contact: Russ Harris.
- Western Carolina University has entered an agreement to allow Morris Broadband use of WCU electric grid infrastructure to provide fiber to approximately 2800 homes.
- Graham County received two GREAT grant awards to strengthen broadband access. Award was through NC DIT. Contact: Sophia Paulos.
- Graham County received funding through CBDG-CV program to improve digital access in the Graham k-12 schools. Contact: Angie Knight.

Housing

- The Southwestern Commission received \$540,000 annually to address housing in the region with an additional \$1.9m through ARPA. Funding was awarded through HUD and ARPA. Affected counties are Jackson, Macon, Swain, and Graham Counties. Contact: Caroline LaFrienier.
- Graham County Rural Development Authority was awarded funding from USDA to purchase 13 home sites for affordable housing. Contact: Brian Johnson and Edd Satterfield.

2020-2022

Regional Tourism

- The Center for Environmental Farming Systems received \$1.1mm in funding for its EmPowering Mountain Food Systems project, which supports regional food and farming businesses- grants, loans, scholarships and supply chain connections. Funding was awarded through ARC. Contact: Laura Lauffer.
- Western Carolina University is currently reviewing the impact of current WCU programs and making recommendations for improvements, including the identification of regional partners. Affected area includes all of Western North Carolina, Upstate SC, Northeastern GA, East TN. Contact: Rich Price.

Small Business Development

- Western Carolina University is developing an initiative to create a physical location housing a number of small business resources to improve access to small business resources. Affected area includes Haywood, Jackson, Macon, Swain, Clay, Graham, Cherokee, EBCI. Contact: Rich Price.
- The Southwestern Commission has funds to help eligible businesses effectively train and retain, existing, employees by providing skills upgrades and process improvement. Contact: Linda Lamp.
- The Southwestern Commission has \$1.8 million in funding for small business loans. Contact: Ryan Scaggs.
- Southwestern Community College offers a paid Intern Program for Sylva Downtown for College Credit. Contacts: Bernadette Peters and Mike Despeaux.

2020-2022

Entrepreneurial Development

- WRESA is exposing students 8-12 to entrepreneurship--mindset and business skills. There are several schools with excellent CTE programs that also include Entrepreneurship, Pitch contests, work with mentors from the community, etc. ESTEAM is in Graham, Jackson, Swain, Cherokee, Haywood, Madison counties and six other states. Contact: Carol Douglas and Ann Bass.
- The Imagine Hub in Graham County offers entrepreneurial and nonprofit support services. Funding is through UMC and CBDG-CV. Contact: Eric Reece.
- Western Carolina University is developing an initiative to create a physical location housing a number of small business resources to improve access to Haywood, Jackson, Macon, Swain, Clay, Graham, and ECBI. Contact: Rich Price.
- The Center for Environmental Farming Systems received \$1.1 mm in funding for its EmPOWERing Mountain Food Systems project, which supports regional food and farming systems. Funding was awarded through ARC. Contact: Laura Lauffer.

2020-2022

Workforce Development

- The Southwestern Commission has training funds to hire dislocated workers with skills gaps into full-time employment with benefits. Affected area includes Jackson, Macon, Swain, and Graham Counties. Funding is from WIOA. Contact: Linda Lamp.
- Western Carolina University is strengthening partnerships with area community colleges to create a workforce development & recruitment coalition. Contact: Rich Price.
- WestBridge has a training program for disabled workers with one-day tester with advocate and funding for several weeks of training. The program is offered in Jackson County. Contact: Bernadette Peters.
- Graham County offers Recovery to Work programming through ARC. Contact is Beth Booth.
- NC Works Career Centers offer Career Fairs, Veteran Services, Skills Based Testing, Federal Bonding, WOTC, Hiring Services. WIOA Case Managers are at each career center with youth and adult programs. Affected counties include Jackson, Swain, Graham, and Macon Counties. Federal and state funding sources support these services. Contacts: Paula Alter for Jackson, Macon, Swain Counties and Tom Brownback for Graham County.
- Southwestern Community College offers a paid internship program for Downtown Sylva. The program includes the opportunity to earn college credit. Contacts: Bernadette Peters and Mike Despeaux.

2020-2022

Main Street Development

- Graham County has funds through its Tourism Development Authority and GREAT grants to install Wayfinding signage, create an asset map, develop an app and destination brand. Funding is provided through ARC. Contacts: Daniel Allison and Michelle Shiplette.
- NC Main to Main Trail through the NC Department of Commerce includes Sylva. Sylva also offers a paid internship for downtown development.
- Robbinsville is revitalizing its main street through funding from the NC Department of Commerce and the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation. Contacts: Michelle Shiplette, John Colwell and Brian Johnson.
- Graham County is renovating its History Museum and Visitor Center through funding from the NC Department of Commerce and private donations.

Youth Engagement

- NC Cooperative Extension offers a variety of youth development and career readiness programming for youth. Contact: Rob Hawk.
- NC Department of Public Instruction works with Career and Technical Education representatives in all counties on career readiness suitable to the region. A number of apprenticeship and internship opportunities could be developed to serve CREATE sector businesses. Contact: Anna Hair.

2020-2022

2020-2022



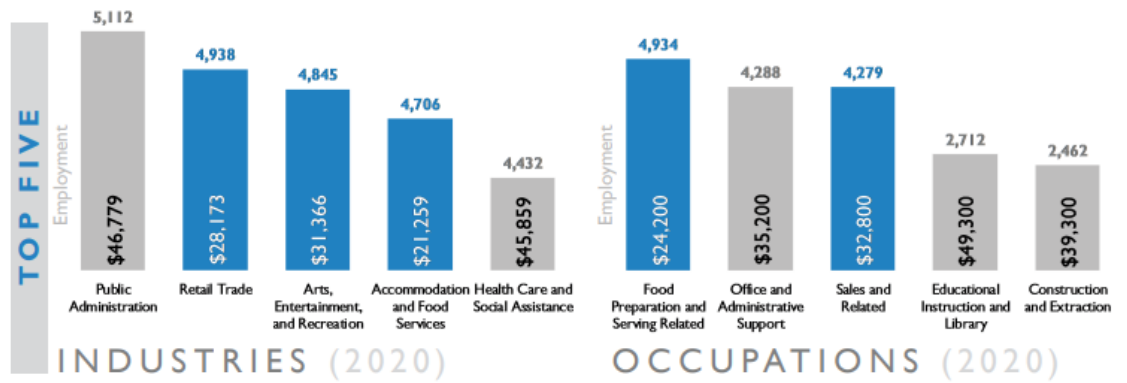
Regional Economic Profile
Mountain West NC

106,492
Total Population,
2020

3.9%
Population Growth,
2019-2023

52.9%
2019 Labor Force Participation Rate

62.0%
North Carolina



TOP 3 INDUSTRY SUBSECTORS (2020)

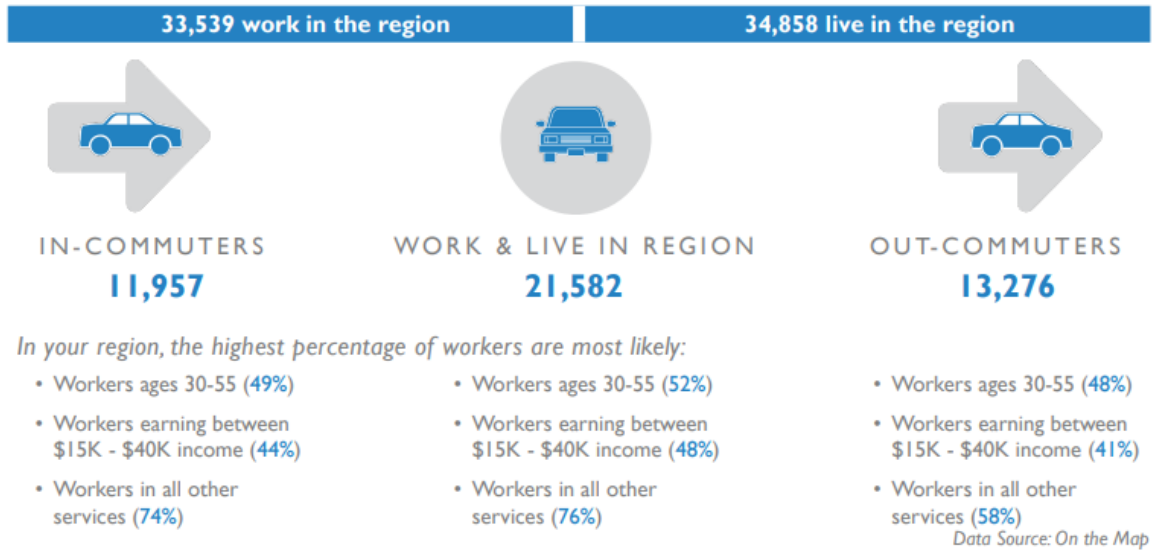
Industry Subsector	Employment	Average Annual Wages
RETAIL TRADE	4,938	\$28,173
Supermarkets and Other Grocery (except Convenience) Stores	1,078	\$21,997
General Merchandise Stores, including Warehouse Clubs and Supercenters	549	\$21,209
Gasoline Stations with Convenience Stores	347	\$19,541
ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT	213	\$28,527
Independent Artists, Writers, and Performers	85	\$26,569
Historical Sites	72	\$21,468
Nature Parks and Other Similar Institutions	25	\$64,996
ACCOMMODATION & FOOD SERVICES	4,706	\$21,259
Restaurants and Other Eating Places	3,052	\$19,494
Hotels (except Casino Hotels) and Motels	884	\$26,007
Food Service Contractors	415	\$23,344
TOURISM	4,633	\$31,626
Casinos (except Casino Hotels)	3,472	\$29,581
Golf Courses and Country Clubs	666	\$42,413
All Other Amusement and Recreation Industries	300	\$22,449

Data Source: JobsEQ



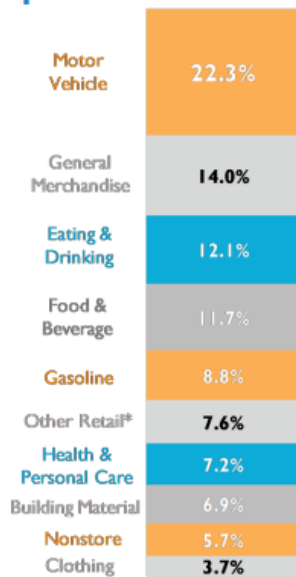
2020-2022

COMMUTING PATTERNS (2018)



RETAIL SALES (2020)

\$153.4 billion



Data Source: Woods & Poole

*Other Retail includes: Furniture (2.4%), Miscellaneous (2.1%), Electronics (1.8%), and Sporting Goods (1.4%)

SALES TAX (2019-2020)

Industry	Sales tax revenues
3% and 4.75% Tax	\$148,164
Apparel	\$2,541,243
Automotive	\$4,062,873
Food	\$11,594,309
Furniture	\$2,308,908
General Merchandise	\$18,579,352
Lumber and Building Material	\$10,301,039
Unclassified	\$19,451,898
Total for the Region	\$68,987,786

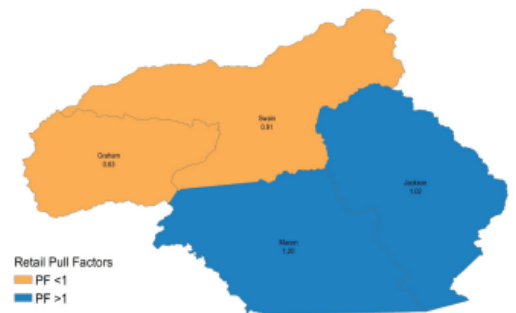
Data Source: North Carolina Department of Revenue

PULL FACTORS (2020)

A Pull Factor (PF) measures a county's ability to attract shoppers in the retail sector.

PF > 1: the county is pulling retail shoppers from another county.

PF < 1: the residents are shopping in another county.



Data Source: Woods & Poole