

July 2024



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## Acknowledgements

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## **Plan Adoption**

McDowell County Board of Commissioners – November 18th, 2024



This report was completed with assistance from the North Carolina Department of Commerce Appalachian Regional Commission program and the Main Street & Rural Planning program.





## **Executive Summary**

The population of McDowell County is approximately 45,000. The county has a total area of 440 square miles, of which 5.4 is water. McDowell County rises rapidly from the Piedmont on its extreme eastern border, to the Blue Ridge Mountains in the north and west. Interstate 40 runs from the eastern to western border of the county. McDowell County is blessed with an abundance of beautiful natural resources that attract residents and visitors alike. The county has two incorporated municipalities, Marion which is the county seat, and Old Fort.

This strategic plan was drafted using input from the McDowell County Commissioners, citizen surveys, and members of the local work group, which were appointed by the Commissioners, and staff of the North Carolina Department of Commerce.

The plan includes a total of 28 objectives and 79 recommendations related to 6 priority areas. These priority areas, identified by the Commissioners and local work group, include:

- 1. Public Service/County Organization
- 2. Economic Development and Infrastructure
- 3. Natural Resources and Recreation
- 4. Education
- 5. Health and Public Safety
- 6. Housing

These objectives and recommendations should serve as guideposts for the appointed and elected officials of McDowell County in serving residents and visitors alike.

## **Background**

## **Demographics**

#### Location

McDowell County is located in northwestern North Carolina. The county shares borders with Avery, Mitchell, and Yancey Counties to the north, Buncombe County to the west, Rutherford County to the south, and Burke County to the east.

Interstate 40 and US Highway 70 both run east and west through the county intersecting with Buncombe and Burke Counties. US Route 221 runs north and south through the county, entering Avery County to the north and Rutherford County to the south. US Highway 64 intersects the southeastern portion of the county connecting Burke and

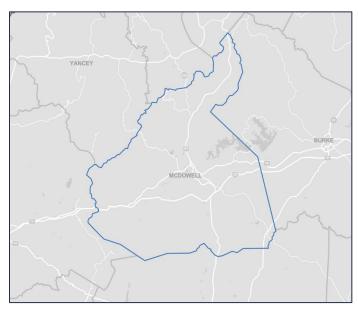


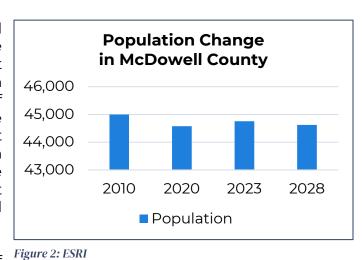
Figure 1: U.S. Census Bureau

Rutherford Counties. NC Highways 80 and 226 also pass through McDowell.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, McDowell County has a total land area of 440 square miles. The county seat is the City of Marion, and the Town of Old Fort is the only other municipality.

#### **Population**

The population of McDowell County declined slightly over the decade from 2010 to 2020. Over that period, the county's population decreased by 0.93% from a total of 44,996 in 2010 to 44,578 in 2020. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that the county will begin to see an additional decrease of 0.06% in the next five years. This trend is not dissimilar from that of other rural counties in the region.



The total number of households in McDowell County has seen a slight increase since 2010, rising from

17,838 to 18,058 in 2020. This number is estimated to continue rising to 18,484 by 2028. This increase is due to the average household size in the county decreasing from 2.43 persons in 2010 to an estimated 2.34 persons in 2028. This change is a potential signifier of an aging population in the county with few young families moving in or remaining in the community.

The population decline in McDowell County has been more moderate than several of the surrounding counties. Of the bordering counties, Burke, Mitchell, and Rutherford all saw more significant declines. Avery County's population remained relatively unchanged while Yancey County saw some growth. Buncombe County, which includes the City of Asheville and is the only non-rural county in the region<sup>1</sup>, saw the most significant population increase.

McDowell County Population Comparison with Neighboring Counties			
	2010	2020	% Change
McDowell	44,996	44,578	-0.93%
Avery	17,797	17,806	0.05%
Buncombe	238,318	269,452	13.06%
Burke	90,912	87,570	-3.68%
Mitchell	15,579	14,903	-4.34%
Rutherford	67,810	64,444	-4.96%
Yancey	17,818	18,470	3.66%

Figure 3: U.S. Census Bureau

As of 2020, approximately 19% of the county's population reside in one of two municipalities with the remaining 81% living in unincorporated areas of the county. The two McDowell County municipalities saw a slight decline in population in the decade between 2010 and 2020.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> NC Rural Center. (2023, August 8). About Us. Retrieved from NC Rural Center: <a href="https://www.ncruralcenter.org/about-us/">https://www.ncruralcenter.org/about-us/</a>

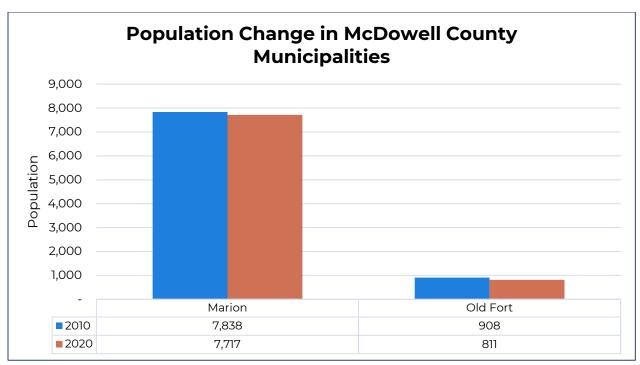


Figure 4: U.S. Census Bureau

## **Racial Diversity**

As of 2020, the population of McDowell County was 86% white with the next largest racial groups being "Two or More Races," "Some Other Race," and "Black Alone." Individuals of Hispanic origin made up 6.6% of the total population. Racial diversity in the county increased slightly between 2010 and 2020 with a decline of more than 4% of those identifying as "White Alone," while the category of "Two or More Races" increased by more than 3.5%. The number of people identifying as "Some Other Race" and those of Hispanic origin also grew by 0.8% and 1.3% over the same period. The U.S. Census Bureau projects that racial diversity in McDowell County will continue to increase through 2028 and likely beyond.

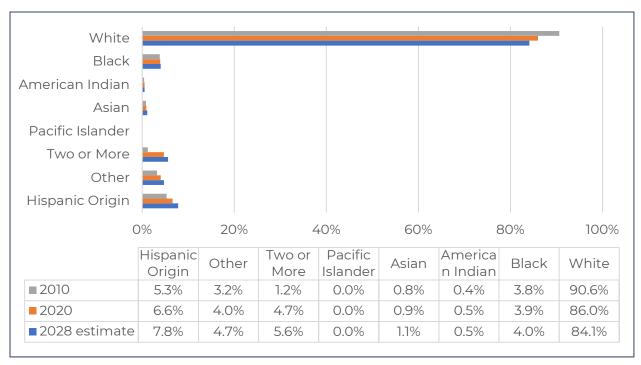


Figure 5: ESRI

## **Age Diversity**

According to U.S. Census Bureau, approximately 20% of McDowell County's population are under 18 years old, while another 20% are over 65 years old. The median age in the county is 44.2 years compared to the North Carolina median of 39.4 years.

According to Lightcast, the number of Millennials per capita in McDowell County is slightly lower than the national average and the number of persons close to retirement is above average. These numbers signal slowing growth in the county and potential workforce concerns.



national average for an area this size is 9.100.

national average for an area this size is 13,412 people 55 or older, while there are 16,132 here.

for an area this size is 18,404 racially diverse people, while there are 6,089 here.

#### Education

Educational attainment is highly correlated with measures of regional economic prosperity. Rural counties with higher levels of educational attainment face fewer instances of poverty, child poverty, unemployment, and population loss than other rural counties. In addition to lower poverty rates, rural counties with higher levels of educational attainment tend to have lower unemployment rates.

Of individuals in McDowell County 25 years of age and older, 32.7% have achieved at least a high school diploma, another 21.9% have attended some college, and 12.5% have achieved an associate degree. These figures are higher than both the state and national averages for those categories. However, more than 14% of McDowell residents have no high school diploma. The county also lags behind significantly in the number of individuals having achieved a bachelor's degree or higher.

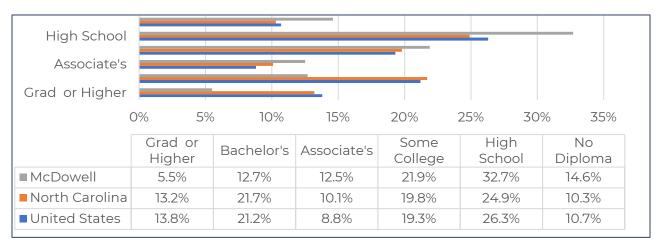


Figure 6: U.S. Census Bureau, 2021

McDowell County is accessible to educational opportunities. McDowell Technical Community College (MTCC) has its campus in Marion and the community is approximately 30 miles from the nearest public university, the University of North Carolina at Asheville. In addition, the county is located less than 30 miles from Mayland Community College in Spruce Pine and Western Piedmont Community College in Morganton. The McDowell County Public School System includes 8 elementary schools, 3 middle schools, and 3 high schools.

Approximately 29% of workers in McDowell County are potentially underemployed, meaning they are in positions which require less education than they have attained. Of all jobs in the county, 69% require a High School Diploma or Equivalent or No Formal Education while more than half of the population have attended at least Some College. This means that these workers must either work in jobs that require less education than they have attained or pursue work outside of the county.

McDowell County Underemployment (2023)			
Education Level	Jobs Requiring Education Level	Population at Education Level	Difference
No Formal Education Required	19%	14%	5%
High School Diploma or Equivalent	50%	32%	18%
Some College, Non-Degree Award	8%	22%	(14%)
Associate's Degree	1%	13%	(12%)
Bachelor's Degree	19%	13%	6%
Graduate Degree and Higher	3%	6%	(3%)

Figure 7: Lightcast



## **Economic Conditions**

#### Income

Income levels in McDowell County are generally lower than state and national figures. This is true for all measurements; however, the largest discrepancy is seen in average household incomes where McDowell residents make nearly \$15,000 less than other North Carolinians.

McDowell County Comparison with State and National (2024)				
	McDowell	North Carolina	United States	
Median Household Income	\$52,264	\$61,972	\$56,124	
Average Household Income	\$72,127	\$86,804	\$80,675	
Median Disposable Household Income	\$48,934	\$57,198	\$63,562	
Average Disposable Household Income	\$61,894	\$75,712	\$83,007	
Per Capita Income	\$29,528	\$ 34,209	\$ 37,638	

Figure 8: ESRI & U.S. Census Bureau

#### **Labor Force**

An analysis of McDowell County's labor force for March 2024, the most recent month for which data is available, indicates that there are 20,625 people in the local labor force. In March 2024, there was a participation rate of 57.47%, compared to North Carolina's labor force participation rate of 60.5%, and a national participation rate of 62.6% for the same period.

McDowell County Labor Force (2024)	
Level	Population
Total Working Age Population	35,891
Not in Labor Force (16+)	15,266
Labor Force	20,625
Employed	19,945
Unemployed	680
Under 16, Military, and Institutionalized	8,608

Figure 9: Lightcast

Local labor force participation in the county did see a slight drop during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, though not as significant as some surrounding counties. The rate began to rebound by 2022 and by March 2023 had surpassed pre-pandemic participation numbers.

McDowell County Labor Force Participation Rate (2019-2024)			
Timeframe	Labor Force Participation Rate		
2019	56.23%		
2020	55.25%		
2021	55.06%		
2022	56.30%		
2023	56.33%		
January 2024	56.71%		
February 2024	56.76%		
March 2024	57.47%		

Figure 10: Lightcast

## Unemployment

The unemployment rate in McDowell County was 2.88% in April 2023, compared to North Carolina's rate of 3.4% and the national rate of 3.4% for the same period. The table below indicates that the county unemployment rate reached a high of 6.88% in 2020 during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. By early 2021 the rate was steadily declining and by 2022 had fallen back to pre-pandemic levels.

McDowell County Unemployment Rate Trends (2019-2024)			
Timeframe	Unemployment Rate		
2019	3.79%		
2020	6.89%		
2021	4.61%		
2022	3.51%		
2023	3.22%		
January 2024	3.21%		
February 2024	3.33%		
March 2024	3.30%		

Figure 11: Lightcast

#### **Job Trends**

Between 2018 and 2023, the total number of jobs in McDowell County declined from 18,226 to 17,460, or a change of -4.2%. This fell short of the national growth average of 4.3% for the same period.

McDowell County Job Trends (2018-2023)	
Timeframe	Jobs
2018	18.226
2019	17,917
2020	17,388
2021	17,391
2022	17,327
2023	17,460

## **Business Size**

As in many communities of all sizes, the vast majority of businesses in McDowell County have fewer than 20 employees. This illustrates the importance that small businesses play on the county's economy.

McDowell County Business Size (2024)	
Number of Employees	Percentage
1 to 4 employees	37.2%
5 to 9 employees	27.3%
10 to 19 employees	20.3%
20 to 49 employees	10.3%
50 to 99 employees	3.1%
100 to 249 employees	1.3%
250 to 499 employees	0.4%
500+ employees	0.1%

Figure 12: Lightcast

## **Largest Employers**

The largest employers in McDowell County as of 2023 are listed below. These employers represent a mixture of industries that includes manufacturing, retail trade, health care and social assistance, and public administration and education. While 4 public employers made the list, the majority represent the private sector.

McDowell County Largest Employers by Jobs (2023)			
Company Name	Sector	Total Employees	
Baxter Healthcare Corp	Private	1,000+	
NC Public Schools	Public	500-999	
County of McDowell	Public	250-499	
Auria Solutions USA Inc	Private	250-499	

McDowell County Largest Employers by Jobs (2023)			
Mission Hospital McDowell LLLP	Private	250-499	
NC Department of Adult Corrections	Public	250-499	
Columbia Carolina Corp	Private	250-499	
Wal Mart Associates Inc	Private	250-499	
Westrock Services LLC	Private	250-499	
McDowell Technical College	Public	100-249	

Figure 13: NC Department of Commerce

## **Largest Industries**

The labor force of McDowell County is employed in the following North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) sectors. The three largest employment industries in the area are Manufacturing, Government, and Retail Trade. These three largest industries account for 10,755 jobs in the area, or approximately 50% of the local workforce. While the Manufacturing and Government sectors saw a combined decrease of 18% in the number of jobs from 2019 to 2024, Retail Trade sector jobs increased by 8%. Construction jobs increased by 19%, and Wholesale Trade by 67%.

The fastest growing sectors in the county by percentage are Wholesale Trade (67%) and Real Estate Rental and Leasing (55%). While accounting for a relatively small number of jobs, Mining, Quarrying, and Gas Extraction is also fast growing at (87%). Other industries that are growing quickly are Administrative and Support and Waste Management (17%), Transportation and Warehousing (23%), and Educational Services (16%). Finance and Insurance and Wholesale Trade are among the highest paying industries in the county.

McDowell County Largest Industries by Jobs (2022)				
Industry	2019 Jobs	2024 Jobs	% Change in Jobs	2023 Earnings Per Worker
Manufacturing	6044	5061	(16%)	\$64,015
Government	2599	2551	(2%)	\$61,942
Retail Trade	2112	2286	8%	\$37,274
Health Care and Social Assistance	1593	1601	0%	\$53,703
Accommodation and Food Services	1313	1279	(3%)	\$23,717
Other Services (except Public Administration)	1048	928	(11%)	\$34,634
Construction	850	1008	19%	\$54,735
Administrative and Support and Waste Management and Remediation Services	750	881	17%	\$39,603

Wholesale Trade	277	462	67%	\$77,698
Finance and Insurance	247	282	14%	\$87,017
Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	227	248	9%	\$72,473
Transportation and Warehousing	196	241	23%	\$66,214
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	255	128	(43%)	\$34,781
Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	100	144	44%	\$28,619
Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	97	150	55%	\$51,933
Educational Services	97	112	16%	\$35,700
Mining, Quarrying, and Oil and Gas Extraction	71	132	87%	\$70,691
Information	48	54	14%	\$46,561

Figure 14: Lightcast

The fastest growing occupations in McDowell County between 2019 and 2024 by percentage were Business and Financial Operations (30%), Management (24%), and Arts, Design, Entertainment, and Sports (26%). Sectors with the largest increase in real number of jobs were Management (+178), Business and Financial Operations (+141), and Sales and Related (68). Occupations which saw the largest decrease in jobs by percentage during this period were Production (-15%), and Personal Care and Service (-15%). In terms of real change in number of jobs, Production (-577), Food Preparation and Serving Related (-62), and Personal Care and Service (-70) saw the most significant decreases.

McDowell County Largest Occupations (2022)						
Occupation	2019 Jobs	2024 Jobs	Change in Jobs	% Change in Jobs	2024 Median Hourly Earnings	
Production	3833	3255	(577)	(15%)	\$19.31	
Sales and Related	1815	1883	68	4%	\$19.99	
Office and Administrative Support	1608	1665	57	4%	\$18.97	
Transportation and Material Moving	1397	1415	18	1%	\$18.22	
Food Preparation and Serving Related	1392	1,330	(62)	(4%)	\$13.16	
Management	739	917	178	24%	\$46.76	
Educational Instruction and Library	1004	980	(24)	(2%)	\$22.13	
Installation, Maintenance, and Repair	862	864	2	0%	\$24.05	

Construction and Extraction	802	823	21	3%	\$22.27
Healthcare Support	684	685	1	0%	\$15.25
Healthcare Practitioners and Technical	660	700	39	6%	\$36.72
Business and Financial Operations	466	608	141	45%	\$33.57
Building and Grounds Cleaning and Maintenance	608	559	(62)	(4%)	\$13.16
Personal Care and Service	464	394	(70)	(15%)	\$12.87
Protective Service	336	305	(31)	(9%)	\$20.11
Community and Social Service	257	271	14	5%	\$24.75
Architecture and Engineering	235	218	(17)	(7%)	\$37.37
Computer and Mathematical	151	160	9	6%	\$38.38
Life, Physical, and Social Science	203	208	5	3%	\$33.55
Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media	143	180	37	26%	\$27.12
Farming, Fishing, and Forestry	139	95	(45)	(32%)	\$17.86
Legal Military-only	49 46	49 44	0 (2)	0% (5%)	\$55.77 \$19.26

Figure 15: Lightcast

## **Location Quotient**

A location quotient (LQ) is an analytical statistic that measures a region's industrial specialization relative to a larger geographic unit (usually the nation). An LQ is computed as an industry's share of a regional total for some economic statistic (earnings, Gross Regional Product, employment, and similar measures) divided by the industry's share of the national total for the same statistic. For example, an LQ of 1.0 in farming means that the region and the nation are equally specialized in farming; while an LQ of 1.8 means that the region has a higher concentration in farming than the nation. Location quotients can help reveal what makes an area unique.

As shown below, the following occupations have a higher concentration in McDowell County than the rest of the nation:

- Production LQ of 3.55
- Installation, Maintenance, and Repair LQ of 1.21
- Sales and Related LQ of 1.18

Conversely, there are several occupations that are underrepresented in McDowell County. These occupations can be identified by their LQ numbers that are significantly lower than 1.0:

- Legal LQ of 0.33
- Computer and Mathematical 0.34
- Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media LQ of 0.49

McDowell County Top Occupation Quotients (2022)			
Occupation	2022	2022	2022 Median
Occupation	Jobs	LQ	Hourly Earnings
Production	3,401	3.55	\$18.18
Installation, Maintenance, and Repair	831	1.21	\$20.74
Sales and Related	1,813	1.18	\$13.62
Life, Physical, and Social Science	183	1.16	\$26.63
Construction and Extraction	791	1.01	\$18.03
Food Preparation and Serving Related	1,310	0.98	\$11.73
Building and Grounds Cleaning and	580	0.96	\$13.13
Maintenance	300		· ·
Transportation and Material Moving	1,419	0.94	\$15.90
Educational Instruction and Library	912	0.93	\$21.01
Community and Social Service	267	0.88	\$21.51
Farming, Fishing, and Forestry	106	0.87	\$12.94
Architecture and Engineering	239	0.87	\$33.13
Personal Care and Service	394	0.85	\$12.87
Healthcare Support	659	0.84	\$12.50
Protective Service	304	0.81	\$17.20
Office and Administrative Support	1,607	0.78	\$16.39
Management	928	0.74	\$36.56
Healthcare Practitioners and Technical	644	0.65	\$29.31
Business and Financial Operations	618	0.55	\$26.82
Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media	159	0.49	\$21.68
Military-only	48	0.46	\$14.22
Computer and Mathematical	187	0.34	\$26.87
Legal	49	0.33	\$34.35

Figure 16: Lightcast

The table below shows the LQ of occupations in McDowell County sorted by the highest median hourly earnings. Most of the top occupations in the county in terms of LQ and total number of jobs are in the middle of the spectrum for median hourly earnings for the area.

## McDowell County Top Occupation Quotients by Earnings (2022)

Occupation	2022 Jobs	2022 LQ	2022 Median Hourly Earnings
Management	928	0.74	\$36.56
Legal	49	0.33	\$34.35
Architecture and Engineering	239	0.87	\$33.13
Healthcare Practitioners and Technical	644	0.65	\$29.31
Computer and Mathematical	187	0.34	\$26.87
Business and Financial Operations	618	0.55	\$26.82
Life, Physical, and Social Science	183	1.16	\$26.63
Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media	159	0.49	\$21.68
Community and Social Service	267	0.88	\$21.51
Educational Instruction and Library	912	0.93	\$21.01
Installation, Maintenance, and Repair	831	1.21	\$20.74
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Office and Administrative Support	1,607	0.78	\$16.39
Transportation and Material Moving	1,419	0.94	\$15.90
Military-only	48	0.46	\$14.22
Sales and Related	1,813	1.18	\$13.62
Building and Grounds Cleaning and Maintenance	580	0.96	\$13.13
Farming, Fishing, and Forestry	106	0.87	\$12.94
Personal Care and Service	394	0.85	\$12.87
Healthcare Support	659	0.84	\$12.50
Food Preparation and Serving Related	1,310	0.98	\$11.73

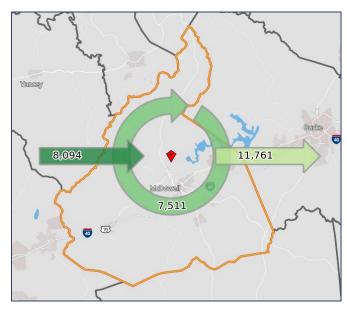
Figure 17: Lightcast



## **Transportation**

#### Inflow/Outflow

Figure 19 represents a 2020 jobs analysis with inflow and outflow. This analysis shows that 8,094 people are employed in McDowell County but live in another county; 11,761 people live in the county but commute out for work; and 7,511 people live and work in the county. The net flow of people that stayed within the county, left the county, and commuted to the county yielded a gain of 3,844. This means more people entered remained in the county for work than commuted out, therefore, increasing the daytime population of the county.



As of 2020, the largest share of workers from McDowell County also

Figure 18: U.S. Census Bureau

worked in the county and their top destinations were the City of Marion and the Town of Old Fort. Of those leaving the county for work, Buncombe County saw the highest influx followed by Mecklenburg and Burke Counties.

McDowell County Worker Destination (2020)		
Work Location	Count	Share
McDowell County	7,511	39.0%
Buncombe County	3,046	15.8%
Mecklenburg County	1,419	7.4%
Burke County	1,293	6.7%
Wake County	595	3.1%
Catawba County	500	2.6%
Henderson County	467	2.4%
Rutherford County	409	2.1%
Gaston County	272	1.4%
Cleveland County	263	1.4%
All Other Locations	3,497	18.1%

Figure 19: U.S. Census Bureau

Of those individuals commuting into McDowell County, the most common home destinations were Burke County followed distantly by Buncombe, Rutherford, and Mitchell Counties.

## **McDowell County Home Destination (2019)**

Work Location	Count	Share
Burke County	1,537	9.8%
Buncombe County	877	5.6%
Rutherford County	803	5.1%
Mitchell County	602	3.9%
Yancey County	344	2.2%
Avery County	292	1.9%
Caldwell County	291	1.9%
Cleveland County	283	1.8%
Catawba County	264	1.7%
All Other Locations	2,801	17.9%

Figure 20: U.S. Census Bureau

## **Traffic Count**

A traffic count is defined as the two-way Average Daily Traffic (ADT) that passes a location. The figure below shows traffic count numbers for the most travelled streets in McDowell County as measured by the NC Department of Transportation from 2018 to 2021. Some of the most travelled streets in the county include Valley Street, North Main Street, and US Highway 70 all within the City of Marion.

McDowell County Traffic Count (2018-2021)				
Street Name	Cross-Street	Daily Traffic Volume	Year of Count	
North Main Street	McDowell High School Road	16,500	2021	
North Main Street	McDowell High School Road	15,500	2019	
North Main Street	Ginger Drive	15,000	2019	
US Highway 70	Resistoflex Road	14,500	2021	
US 70-221 BUS/NC 226	Westwood Chateau Drive	14,000	2020	
US Highway 70	Highway 221 Bypass	13,000	2020	
US Highway 70	Stonebridge Drive	9,200	2019	
US Highway 70	Stonebridge Drive	9,100	2018	
US Highway 70	Stonebridge Drive	9,000	2021	
West Tate Street	Cross Memorial Baptist Church Loop	3,100	2018	
West Tate Street	Hoyle Street	3,000	2018	
Lake Tahoma Road	Old Clear Creek Road	2,800	2021	
State Route 1191	Veterans Drive Exd	2,300	2020	
Old NC 10 West	Green Street	1,800	2019	
State Route 1221	US Highway 70	1,500	2020	
Nix Creek Road	W View Drive	1,500	2018	
Nix Creek Road	Zion Hill Road	1,300	2021	
Old Greenlee Road	Resistoflex Road	800	2019	
Clear Creek Road	Shady Street	700	2019	

Roby Conley Road	Gallant Knight Dr	600	2019
Old Clear Creek Road	Lake Tahoma Road	450	2019
Major Conley Road	US Highway 70	350	2019
Valley Street	Howard Drive	350	2019
Poplar Road West	W Oak Street	150	2019

Figure 21: ESRI

## **NCDOT Projects**

The NC Department of Transportation has a number of projects prioritized as a part of the 2024-2033 State Transportation Improvement Plan (STIP) in McDowell County including the following.

Construction of sidewalks, crosswalks, and curb and gutter along the east side of Perry Street to US Highway 70/E Court Street in Marion is scheduled to begin in 2024.

Construction of a greenway as a part of the Fonta Flora State Trail from US Highway 70 to Resistoflex Road in Marion is scheduled to begin in 2024.

Widening of US-221 from Rutherford County to Goose Creek Road to multiple lanes with construction planned to begin in 2028.

Widening of US-221 Business near Georgia Avenue in Marion scheduled to begin in 2025.

A multi-county project to upgrade numerous intersections to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is scheduled to being construction in 2024.



## Housing

#### **Housing Availability**

The availability of housing options in a community is crucial for economic growth. In 2023 there were an estimated 21,648 total housing units in McDowell County. Nearly 85% of all units were occupied with nearly 63% of those being owner occupied. Only 15.5% of all housing units were classified as vacant, which includes all domiciles not occupied by permanent residents of the county. This signals relatively high rates of local homeownership in McDowell County as compared to some neighboring counties.

McDowell County Housing Units by Occupancy (2023)			
Occupancy Status	Number	Percent	
Total Housing Units	21,648	100.0%	
Occupied	18,291	84.5%	
Owner	13,528	62.5%	
Renter	4,763	22.0%	
Vacant	3,357	15.5%	

Figure 22: ESRI

## **Housing Affordability**

"Esri's housing affordability index measures the financial ability of a typical household to purchase an existing home in an area. A HAI of 100 represents an area that on average has sufficient household income to qualify for a loan on a home valued at the median home price. An index greater than 100 suggests homes are easily afforded by the average area resident. A HAI less than 100 suggests that homes are less affordable."<sup>2</sup>

Esri indicates a HAI of 130 for McDowell County with the average household spending only 19.7% of their income on a mortgage. Nearly 60% of owner-occupied housing units in the county were valued at under \$200,000. The median home value in 2023 is \$171,690 while the average value is \$251,129. These factors speak to the relative affordability of housing in the community.

McDowell County Owner Occupied Housing Units by Value (2023)			
Value	Number	Percent	
<\$50,000	1,216	9.0%	
\$50,000-\$99,999	2,323	17.2%	
\$100,000-\$149,999	2,324	17.2%	

 $<sup>^2\</sup> ArcGIS.\ (2022, 03\ 29).\ www.arcgis.com.\ Retrieved\ from\ Housing\ Affordability\ in\ the\ United\ States: \\ \underline{https://www.arcgis.com/home/item.html?id=a1263c2dcdf2464bbb7906821038eb2f}$ 

-		*
\$150,000-\$199,999	2,077	15.4%
\$200,000-\$249,999	1,093	8.1%
\$250,000-\$299,999	1,120	8.3%
\$300,000-\$399,999	1,128	8.3%
\$400,000-\$499,999	881	6.5%
\$500,000-\$749,999	796	5.9%
\$750,000-\$999,999	284	2.1%
\$1,000,000-1,499,999	145	1.1%
\$1,500,000-\$1,999,999	102	0.8%
\$2,000,000 and up	39	0.3%

Figure 23: ESRI

Median home values in McDowell County are rising at a moderate pace compared to its bordering counties. In the seven-county region, median home values in McDowell County are the second lowest, however, prices are expected to rise quicker than in several other counties. The only counties whose housing prices are expected to rise at a faster rate than McDowell are Burke and Buncombe Counties, both of which are situated along the I-40 corridor and are part of larger metro areas. Even with these expected gains of roughly 10% in cost, housing in McDowell County is still anticipated to be relatively low and competitive with surrounding counties over the next five years.

McDowell County Median Home Value Comparison with Neighboring Counties			
	2023	2028 Estimate	% Change
McDowell	\$171,690	\$189,896	10.60%
Avery	\$223,562	\$240,236	7.46%
Buncombe	\$372,056	\$413,497	11.14%
Burke	\$185,407	\$254,251	37.13%
Mitchell	\$211,849	\$223,651	5.57%
Rutherford	\$169,915	\$184,692	8.70%
Yancey	\$217,660	\$229,610	5.49%

Figure 24: ESRI

According to Zillow's Housing Affordability Calculator, a household in McDowell County making the area's median income, with average monthly debts of \$250, and a \$10,000 down payment can comfortably afford a house costing up to \$240,00. This

is well above the median home price for the county and again speaks to the relative affordability of housing in the county.<sup>3</sup>

It should be noted, however, that none of these figures speak to the quality and availability of the existing housing stock which has been a concern in much of western North Carolina as the regional population has grown. Though the existing and available housing may be affordable to locals, the supply may still be inadequate. Further research is needed into this topic.



<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Calculated on August 7, 2023 using current interest rates.

## **Tourism**

#### **Visitor Summary**

VisitNC reports that in 2022 about 11.5 million visitors came to the <u>Mountain Region</u> and 75% of those visitors stayed at least one night. Of these visitors, 88% traveled for leisure while 6% visited for business. Most visitors to the Mountain Region came during the summer or fall months.



Stephan Pruitt Photography

The average party size for Mountain Region visitors was 2.5 with just under one third of these parties including children. The average spending by overnight parties was \$822 in 2022. The average length of stay in the region was 3 nights. The most common accommodations used were hotels and motels at just over half of all stays, followed by private homes and shared economy properties.

More than 8 out of 10 overnight visitors to the Mountain Region in 2022 were repeat visitors, meaning they had previously visited their destination. More than third of overnight visitors were in-state residents. The next most common visitor origin locations in order were Georgia, South Carolina, Florida, Tennessee, Virginia, and

Pennsylvania. Mountain Region visitors were more likely to use website and general search engines to plan their travel experiences than visitors to other regions.

The most common activities participated in by overnight visitors in the Mountain Region were Hiking/Backpacking/Canyoneering (32%), Shopping (26%), Visiting Friends/Family (25%), Rural Sightseeing (25%), visiting Historic Sites (23%), and Fine Dining (21%). Other common activities could be categorized by outdoor recreation or nature viewing, enjoying local food and beverage establishments, and visiting cultural amenities such as art galleries or museums.

McDowell County Visitor Spending (2021)		
	Annual Visitor Spending (millions)	
Lodging (including 2 <sup>nd</sup> home spending)	\$23.42	
Food & Beverage	\$30.46	
Recreation	\$13.23	
Retail	\$8.08	
Transportation (including ground and air)	\$26.00	
Total	\$101.18	

Figure 25: VisitNC

McDowell County has seen a significant increase in visitor spending over the previous five years. Total spending grew by nearly \$35 million between 2017 and 2021.

Historic McDowell County Visitor Spending, in millions					
	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Annual Visitor Spending (millions)	\$66.86	\$70.92	\$75.80	\$70.51	\$101.18

Figure 26: VisitNC

Between 2020 and 2021, McDowell County saw average growth in visitor spending compared with bordering counties. Buncombe County, which includes the City of Asheville, saw the most significant growth at 81% while Yancey County saw the least growth at only 27.2%. Some of this regional growth may be attributed to visitation to rural regions during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Early data indicates that these numbers may fall slightly in future reporting though they are still expected to remain above pre-pandemic levels.

McDowell County Visitor Spending Comparison with Neighboring Counties (2021)		
	Annual Spending Total (millions)	Growth Rate (2020/2021)
McDowell	\$101.18	43.5%
Avery	\$239.27	45.9%
Buncombe	\$2,641.01	81.0%
Burke	\$121.27	46.9%
Mitchell	\$39.92	36.0%
Rutherford	\$272.96	33.6%
Yancey	\$68.0	27.2%

Figure 27: VisitNC

Tourism in McDowell County supported a total of 1,429 jobs in the county in 2021 and contributed to more than \$56 million in labor income. Visitor spending also contributed to \$8.6 million in state taxes and \$9.2 million in local taxes which resulted in an average tax savings of \$1,001.52 for McDowell County residents.

McDowell County Visitor Impacts (2021)		
	Total	
Jobs Supported	575	
Labor Income (millions)	\$22.2	
State Taxes (millions)	\$3.9	
Local Taxes (millions)	\$3.7	
State/Local Tax Savings Per Residents	\$171.09	

Figure 28: VisitNC

Note: Data contained in the background section of this report came from the most updated information available to staff of the N.C. Department of Commerce.



# **Planning Process**

## **Planning Committee & Meetings**

A full schedule of work group meetings and summary of each can be found in the table below.

Meeting Date		Topic(s)
November 1, 2023	•	Board of Commissioners conduct SWOT analysis, and begin identifying topics for vision statement, review demographic and economic data for county
December 7, 2023	•	Review SWOT analysis from Board of Commissioners, review and discuss community survey results, begin discussion of vision statement
February 8, 2024	•	Discussion of final SWOT analysis, review stakeholder comments, conduct vision statement exercise, review workplan format
March 21, 2024	•	Review vision statement, develop goals, objectives, and actions for workplan
May 2, 2024	•	Finalize vision statement, goals, objectives, and actions for workplan, discuss schedule for completion of project and public forum format
	•	Adoption

## **Development of Recommendations**

After reviewing the information gathered at a special Board of Commissioners meeting, citizen and workgroup surveys, stakeholder interviews, and several workgroup meetings, the following recommendations are presented. Recommendations are made for a McDowell County vision statement, goals, objectives, and action steps.



## **Vision Statement**

Ideally located in the foothills of western North Carolina, with an abundance of beautiful natural resources, McDowell County offers an unparalleled work and leisure experience for residents and visitors alike. Our economic prosperity, enjoyable living, and superior health and safety are driven by our dedicated workforce, excellent county services, and high-quality education system.



# Strategic Plan-Goals, Objectives, and Recommended Actions

## Goals & Strategies

## 1-Public Service/County Organization

Goal 1 – Provide a high level of services to residents and visitors by maintaining an effective and efficient county organization.

**Objective 1.1:** Ensure County employees are fairly compensated through salary and benefits and develop an employee succession plan.

Action 1.1.1: Update pay, and classification plan every five years.

Action 1.1.2: Review staff salaries and benefits annually and strive to align them with most recent pay and classification plan.

Action 1.1.3: Review job descriptions and amend as duties change.

Action 1.1.4: Offer continuing education and mentoring programs to current employees who show an interest in developing leadership skills for future roles in the organization.

Action 1.1.5: Develop cross training opportunities for employees interested in learning more about other departments and county-wide operations.

Action 1.1.6: Utilize county public high schools and McDowell Technical Community College for employee training and recruitment of new employees.

Action 1.1.7: Place emphasis on improving employee health care benefits and wellness opportunities.

**Objective 1.2:** Establish desired service level for residents and visitors and provide funding and written guidelines to maintain such a level of service.

Action 1.2.1: Survey citizens for input on desired services.

Action 1.2.2: Maintain written plan that includes strategies for staffing and funding to maintain desired services.

**Objective 1.3:** Address aging facilities.

Action 1.3.1: Acquire professional services to conduct overview of physical condition of county facilities, and space needs for respective departments.

Action 1.3.2: Include facility improvements in capital plan and explore funding options.

**Objective 1.4:** Continually explore revenue diversification options in an effort to maintain a strong financial position.

Action 1.4.1: Continue to explore potential grants, user fees, and review current user fee schedule on an annual basis and make necessary adjustments.

Action 1.4.2: Collaborate with state elected officials on potential new revenue sources for county governments.

Action 1.4.3: Maintain county fund balances in accordance with NC Local Government Commission guidelines.

**Objective 1.5:** Ensure elected and appointed officials communicate effectively with the public.

Action 1.5.1: Consider adding a full-time Public Information Officer position to county staff to help better coordinate and convey information to the public.

Action 1.5.2: Update county website and social media accounts on a regular basis.

Action 1.5.3: Utilize print, broadcast, and social media to keep the public abreast of key county programs and events.

## 2-Economic Development and Infrastructure

Goal 2 – Maintain County infrastructure in an effort to support existing, promote expansion, and encourage new businesses, tourism, and economic development.

Objective 2.1: Update and implement the capital improvement plan.

Action 2.1.1: Give highest priority to "ready to go" economic development projects.

Action 2.1.2: Undertake actions that extend the life of current infrastructure systems.

Action 2.1.3: Consider utilizing professional services to determine areas of greatest need for future utility extensions, placing an emphasis on growing the county water system.

Objective 2.2: Identify and pursue funding sources for capital projects.

Action 2.2.1: Continue to pursue and research funding opportunities from regional, state, and federal sources.

Action 2.2.2: Review on an annual basis water and sewer rates, tap fees, policies, and procedures to ensure continued efficiency.

Action 2.2.3: Seek funding and develop plans to expand county transit system.

**Objective 2.3:** Advocate for-motorized modes of transportation, i.e. sidewalks, bicycle lanes, and pedestrian crossings.

Action 2.3.1: Work with municipalities and developers within the county to create a sidewalk network that benefits businesses and pedestrians and collaborate with NCDOT to create a county wide pedestrian and bike plan.

**Objective 2.4:** Continue the build out of projects identified within the Tourism Master Plan.

Action 2.4.1: Continue collaboration with the TDA to prioritize projects that provide the most benefit to visitors.

**Objective 2.5:** Collaborate with the Economic Development Commission to increase the tax base and provide additional jobs.

Action 2.5.1: Utilize social, broadcast, print media, and website, and consider branding strategy to market county to potential developers.

Action 2.5.2: Emphasize in marketing campaign close proximity to Asheville, Charlotte, intersecting railroads, Interstate 40, and Highways 70, 221, and 226. Also emphasize natural resources, such as Pisgah Forest, Lake James, Linville Gorge, etc.

Action 2.5.3: Maintain list of potential sites for future industrial development and support necessary due diligence activities to better promote site readiness.

Action 2.5.4: Continue discussion with state elected and appointed officials to develop a fair and equitable tier ranking system for economic development projects.

#### 3-Natural Resources and Recreation

# Goal 3 – Protect and maintain amenities to promote good health for residents.

**Objective 3.1:** Maintain existing and explore new recreational facilities and programs for people of all ages, abilities, and skill levels.

Action 3.1.1: Develop programming to draw new users to park facilities for new activities such as competitive events (for example, running and cycling competitions) and social gatherings (for example, food truck rodeos or music and art events).

Action 3.1.2: Prioritize family friendly activities when developing new programming.

Action 3.1.3: Ensure balance between quality of life for residents and attracting new visitors to the community.

**Objective 3.2:** Take advantage of and promote natural assets as a healthy recreation option.

Action 3.2.1: Inventory natural assets throughout the county.

Action 3.3.2: Market natural assets as outdoor recreational options available to residents and tourists alike.

Objective 3.3: Develop new bicycle and walking trails.

Action 3.3.1: Maintain interdepartmental communication to identify practical areas of expansion and connection of existing and new biking and walking trails.

Objective 3.4: Support development of state, local, and regional trail networks.

Action 3.4.1: Maintain communication with local, regional, and state partners to identify ways in which the county can offer support for trail connections.

**Objective 3.5:** Develop blue ways and paddle trails.

Action 3.5.1: Advocate for marked and identified fishing access to stocked creeks and rivers.

Action 3.5.2: Identify and mark access for canoe and kayaking on appropriate water ways.

#### **Goal 4-Education**

# Goal – 4 Provide access to student centered high-quality, post-secondary, and lifelong learning programs.

**Objective 4.1:** Prepare K-12 graduating students equipped to join the workforce, military, or post-secondary education.

Action 4.1.1: Fund K-12 public schools to the median level, equal to the state tier ranking of North Carolina counties. Current funding rate 81, Tier rank 47: Improve by five places per year over the next five years.

Action 4.1.2: Improve the graduation rate to exceed that of the state by achieving a cohort rate of 90% by 2028.

Action 4.1.3: Provide funding necessary for early opportunities through Universal Pre-Kindergarten.

Action 4.1.4: Seek opportunities to partner in attracting the best teachers to McDowell County.

Action 4.1.5: Seek avenues to support MCS in growing opportunities for competitive wages.

Action 4.1.6: Recruit and retain beginning teachers with support in housing.

Action 4.1.7: Work with McDowell Technical Community College to develop employability strategies for students aged 16-24.

**Objective 4.2:** Enrich the community with access to student-centered, affordable, high-quality, lifelong learning opportunities that promote workforce development through McDowell Technical Community College.

Action 4.2.1: Expand learning opportunities and remove barriers to enrollment at MTCC, by increasing the percentage of McDowell High School graduates who enroll.

Action 4.2.2: Increase the number of students on the MTCC campus who come from backgrounds that have not traditionally sought post-secondary education and improve the college's affordability by expanding financial resources and assistance to students.

Action 4.2.3: Improve quality through intentional partnerships and finding equitable solutions to enhance the learning environment, by adopting a Universal Design for learning principles in all MTCC courses of study.

Action 4.2.4: Increase the number of dual-enrolled students with an emphasis on CTE college-level courses. MTCC will increase the number of students who participate in work-based learning courses, practicums, preceptorships, and apprenticeships.

Action 4.2.5: Reimagine and reinvent MTCC instructional offerings by adopting best practices to meet the needs of adult learners.

Action 4.2.6: Increase opportunities for student success and transitions to further education or employment by increasing MTCC completion rates for all students.

**Objective 4.3:** Foster continuous personal and professional growth among residents of all ages and backgrounds.

Action 4.3.1: Advocate for policies that support lifelong learning at the state and national level. Support initiatives that promote education and workforce development, such as adult education programs, vocational training, and apprenticeship opportunities.

Action 4.3.2: Provide facilities and infrastructure for lifelong learning activities, such as McDowell County Public Library branches and McDowell County Senior Center locations. Ensure that facilities are equipped with resources like audio/visual equipment, computers, internet access, books, and educational materials.

Action 4.3.3: Organize educational programming and events geared toward lifelong learning. This can include workshops, seminars, lectures, classes, and community events focused on topics like job skills, financial literacy, health and wellness, arts and culture, and personal development.

Action 4.3.4: Raise awareness about lifelong learning opportunities through outreach and promotion efforts.

Action 4.3.5: Partner with local educational institutions, businesses, and community organizations to provide access to specialized training programs and certifications.

Action 4.3.6: Seek funding to support lifelong learning initiatives.

### 5-Health and Public Safety

# Goal – 5 Provide a healthy and safe environment for businesses, residents, and visitors.

**Objective 5.1:** Recruit and retain skilled public safety officials.

Action 5.1.1: Provide competitive compensation and benefits to retain experienced employees.

Action 5.1.2: Work with the Human Resources department to recruit skilled public safety, health, and social workers.

**Objective 5.2:** Work with the Foothills Health District and other partners to identify important public health trends.

Action 5.2.1: Ensure findings of the Community Health Assessment are understood and shared with the community partners and the public.

Action 5.2.2: Monitor international and national health concerns in order to be prepared for emergencies and pandemics.

**Objective 5.3:** Provide accessible education, prevention, treatment, and support services for individuals with substance abuse disorders. The primary goal is to reduce the number of individuals needing treatment, reduce the number of overdose deaths, improve public health outcomes, and promote long term recovery and wellness within the community.

Action 5.3.1: Equip public safety employees and other community workers, such as health department employees and social workers, with the appropriate tools and medications to manage overdose situations.

Action 5.3.2: Provide substance abuse and overdose education, along with anti-bullying/social media warning educational programs in local schools.

**Objective 5.4:** Enhance mental health services, focusing on expanding access and promoting community engagement, with the goal of ensuring comprehensive and effective support for individuals experiencing mental health challenges, while fostering resilience, and enhancing overall well-being within the community.

Action 5.4.1: Engage with community mental health advocates to gain better understanding of challenges and develop plans together to enhance overall well-being within the community.

**Objective 5.5:** Provide support to county and other agencies to enhance the work surrounding homelessness.

Action 5.5.1: Form a committee with local partners to develop strategies for addressing homelessness the needs of the homeless population.

Action 5.5.2: Assist local churches and non-profit organizations to develop solutions for addressing the needs of the homeless population.

#### 6-Housing

# Goal – 6 Provide an environment that is conducive to safe and affordable housing for all.

Objective 6.1: Create an action plan for potential housing development.

Action 6.1.1: Research and understand the problem.

Action 6.1.2: Identify properties suitable for housing development.

Action 6.1.3: Identify potential developers and funding options.

**Objective 6.2:** Facilitate the development of housing development through partnerships.

Action 6.2.1: Work with local partners such as the City of Marion, the Town of Old Fort, and others to connect developers.

Action 6.2.2: Acquire and transfer property to development partners when necessary.

Action 6.2.3: Work with partners on utility extensions that facilitate housing development.

**Objective 6.3:** Help to establish a housing-oriented partnership organization.

Action 6.3.1: Research and understand the types of housing organizations that are successful in other communities.

Action 6.3.2: Work with local partners on establishing an organization.

Action 6.3.3: Appoint County representatives to the organization and provide startup financial assistance if necessary.

**Objective 6.4:** Ensure there are home repair funding opportunities for low income, elderly, and disabled residents.

Action 6.4.1: Apply for and receive grants for home repairs for eligible households.

Action 6.4.2: Work with local partners on the implementation of the housing repair program.

**Objective 6.5:** Evaluate opportunities to assist with housing development of special population groups.

Action 6.5.1: Identify population groups that need specialized housing such as those with special needs, those transitioning back into society after a period of incarceration, or those who have experienced homelessness.

Action 6.5.2: Work with local partner to identify funding sources and available properties to build specialized housing.

## **Appendices**

Appendix I: Workplan



### **McDowell County Work Plan**

<u>Vision Statement:</u> Ideally located in the foothills of western North Carolina, with an abundance of beautiful natural resources, McDowell County offers an unparalleled work and leisure experience for residents and visitors alike. Our economic prosperity, enjoyable living, and superior health and safety are driven by our dedicated workforce, excellent county services, and high-quality education system.

Public Service/County Organization	Economic Development and Infrastructure	Natural Resources and Recreation	
Goal 1: Provide a high level of services to	Goal 2: Maintain county infrastructure in effort	Goal 3: Protect and maintain amenities to	
residents and visitors by maintaining an	to support existing, promote expansion, and	promote good health for residents.	
effective and efficient county organization.	encourage new business, tourism, and		
	economic development.	Objective 3.1: Maintain existing and	
Objective 1.1: Ensure county employees are		explore new recreational facilities and	
fairly compensated through salary and	Objective 2.1: Update and implement the capital	programs for people of all ages, abilities, and	
benefits and develop an employee succession	Improvement plan.	skill levels.	
plan.	<b>Objective 2.2:</b> Identify and pursue funding	<b>Objective 3.2:</b> Take advantage of and	
<b>Objective 1.2:</b> Establish desired service level	sources for capital projects.	promote natural assets as a healthy	
for residents and visitors and provide funding	Sources for capital projects.	recreation option.	
and written guidelines to maintain such	<b>Objective 2.3:</b> Advocate for non-motorized	recreation option.	
level.	modes of transportation, i.e. sidewalks, bicycle	Objective 3.3: Develop new bicycle and	
	lanes, and pedestrian crossings.	walking trails.	
<b>Objective 1.3</b> : Address aging facilities.			
	<b>Objective 2.4:</b> Continue the build out of projects	<b>Objective 3.4:</b> Support development of	
<b>Objective 1.4:</b> Continually explore revenue	identified within the Tourism Master Plan.	state, local, and regional trail networks.	
diversification options in an effort to maintain			
a strong financial position.	Objective 2.5: Collaborate with the Economic	<b>Objective 3.5:</b> Develop blue ways and paddle	
<b>Objective 1:5:</b> Ensure elected and appointed	Development Commission to increase the tax base and provide additional jobs.	trails.	
officials communicate effectively with the	base and provide additional jobs.		
public.			
public.			
Action 1.1.1: Update pay and classification			
plan every five years.	<b>Action 2.1.1:</b> Give highest priority to "ready to go"	Action 3.1.1: Develop programming to draw	
	economic development projects.	new users to park facilities for new	
<b>Action 1.1.2:</b> Review staff salaries and benefits		activities such as competitive events (for	
annually and strive to align them with most	Action 2.1.2: Undertake actions that extend the	example, running and cycling competitions)	
recent pay and classification plan.	life of current infrastructure systems.	and social gatherings (for example, food	
Action 117: Deview ich descriptions and	Action 217. Consider utilizing professional	truck rodeos or music and art events).	
<b>Action 1.1.3:</b> Review job descriptions and amend as duties change.	<b>Action 2.1.3:</b> Consider utilizing professional services to determine areas of greatest		
amend as duties change.	services to determine areas or greatest		

need for future utility extensions, placing an

**Action 1.1.4:** Offer continuing education and mentoring programs to current employees who show an interest in developing leadership skills for future roles in the organization.

**Action 1.1.5:** Develop cross-training opportunities for employees interested in learning more about other departments and county-wide operations.

**Action 1.1.6:** Utilize county public high schools and McDowell Technical Community College for employee training and recruitment of new employees.

**Action 1.1.7:** Place emphasis on improving employee health care benefits and wellness opportunities.

**Action 1.2.1:** Survey citizens for input on desired services.

**Action 1.2.2:** Maintain written plan that includes strategies for staffing and funding to maintain desired services.

**Action 1.3.1:** Acquire professional services to conduct overview of physical condition of county facilities, and space needs for respective departments.

**Action 1.3.2:** Evaluate existing facilities for additions, renovations, and improvements when necessitated due to service enhancements. Also monitor and evaluate the need for new or replacement facilities where needed to improve service delivery.

Action 1.3.3: Include facility improvements in

emphasis on growing the county water system.

**Action 2.2.1:** Continue to research and pursue funding opportunities from regional, state, and federal sources.

**Action 2.2.2:** Review on an annual basis water and sewer rates, tap fees, policies, and procedures to ensure continued efficiency.

**Action 2.2.3:** Seek funding and develop plan to expand county transit system.

**Action 2.3.1:** Work with municipalities and developers within the County to create sidewalk network that benefits businesses and pedestrians, and collaborate with NCDOT to create a county wide pedestrian and bike plan.

**Action 2.4.1:** Continue collaboration with TDA to prioritize capital projects that provide most benefit to visitors.

**Action 2.5.1:** Utilize social, broadcast, print media, and website, and consider branding strategy to market county to potential developers.

**Action 2.5.2:** Emphasize in marketing campaign close proximity to Asheville, Charlotte, intersecting railroads, Interstate 40, and Highways 70, 221, and 226. Also emphasize natural resources, such as Pisgah Forest, Lake James, Linville Gorge, etc.

**Action 2.5.3:** Maintain list of potential sites for future industrial development and support necessary due diligence activities to better promote site readiness.

Action 2.5.4: Continue discussion with state

**Action 3.1.2:** Prioritize family friendly activities when developing new programming.

**Action 3.1.3:** Ensure balance between quality of life for residents and attracting new visitors to the community.

**Action 3.2.1:** Inventory natural assets throughout the county.

**Action 3.2.2:** Market natural assets as outdoor recreational options available to residents and tourists alike.

**Action 3.3.1:** Maintain interdepartmental communication to identify practical areas of expansion and connection of existing and new biking and walking trails.

**Action 3.4.1:** Maintain communication with local, regional, and state partners to identify ways in which the county can offer support for trail connections.

**Action 3.5.1:** Advocate for marked and identified fishing access to stocked creeks and rivers.

capital improvement plan and explore funding options.	elected and appointed officials to develop fair and equitable tier ranking system for economic	
Action 1.6.1. Continue to explore petential	development projects.	
<b>Action 1.4.1:</b> Continue to explore potential grants, user fees, and review current user fee		
schedule on an annual basis and make necessary adjustments.		
Action 1.4.2: Collaborate with state elected		
officials on potential new revenue sources for county governments.		
Action 1.4.3: Maintain county fund balances		
in accordance with NC Local Government Commission guidelines.		
Action 1.5.1: Consider adding full time Public		
Information Officer position to county staff to help better coordinate and convey		
information to the public.		
<b>Action 1.5.2:</b> Update county website and social media accounts on a regular basis.		
Action 1.5.3: Utilize print, broadcast, and		
social media to keep public abreast of key county programs and events.		

NC Department of Commerce: NC Rural Planning Center

## **McDowell County Work Plan**

<u>Vision Statement:</u> Ideally located in the foothills of western North Carolina, with an abundance of beautiful natural resources, McDowell County offers an unparalleled work and leisure experience for residents and visitors alike. Our economic prosperity, enjoyable living, and superior health and safety are driven by our dedicated workforce, excellent county services, and high-quality education system.

Education	Health and Public Safety	Housing
Goal 4: Provide access to student centered	Goal 5: Provide a healthy and safe environment	Goal 6: Provide an environment that is
high-quality k-12, post-secondary, and	for businesses, residents, and visitors.	conducive to safe and affordable housing
lifelong learning programs.		for all.
	Objective 5.1: Recruit and retain skilled public	
<b>Objective 4.1:</b> Prepare K-12 graduating	safety officials.	Objective 6.1: Create an action plan for
students equipped to join the workforce, military, or post-secondary education.	Chiesting F 2: Work with the Feetbille Health	potential housing development.
military, or post-secondary education.	<b>Objective 5.2:</b> Work with the Foothills Health District and other partners to identify important	<b>Objective 6.2:</b> Facilitate the development of
<b>Objective 4.2:</b> Enrich the community with	public health trends.	housing development through partnerships.
access to student-centered, affordable, high-	public ficultif treffus.	riousing development through partnerships.
quality, lifelong learning opportunities that	Objective 5.3: Provide accessible education,	<b>Objective 6.3:</b> Help to establish a housing-
promote workforce development through	prevention, treatment, and support services for	oriented partnership program.
McDowell Technical Community College.	individuals with substance abuse disorders. The	
	primary goal is to reduce the number of	<b>Objective 6.4:</b> Ensure there are home repair
Objective 4.3: Foster continuous personal	individuals needing treatment, reduce the	funding opportunities for low income,
and professional growth among residents of	number of overdose deaths, improve public	elderly, and disabled residents.
all ages and backgrounds.	health outcomes, and promote long term recovery and wellness within the community.	<b>Objective 6.5:</b> Evaluate opportunities to
	recovery and weimess within the community.	assist with housing development of special
	Objective 5.4: Enhance mental health services,	• • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • •
	focusing on expanding access and promoting	population groups.
	community engagement, with the goal of	
	ensuring comprehensive and effective support for	
	individuals experiencing mental health	
	challenges, while fostering resilience, and	
	enhancing overall well-being within the	
	community.	
	Objective 5.5: Provide support to county and	
	other agencies to enhance the work surrounding	
	homelessness.	

**Action 4.1.1:** Fund K-12 public schools to the median level, equal to the state tier ranking of North Carolina counties. Current funding rate 81, Tier rank 47: Improve by five places per year over the next five years.

**Action 4.1.2:** Improve the graduation rate to exceed that of the state by achieving a cohort rate of 90% by 2028.

**Action 4.1.3:** Provide funding necessary for early opportunities through Universal Pre-Kindergarten.

**Action 4.1.4:** Seek opportunities to partner in attracting the best teachers to McDowell County.

**Action 4.1.5:** Seek avenues to support MCS in growing opportunities for competitive wages.

**Action 4.1.6:** Recruit and retain beginning teachers with support in housing.

**Action 4.1.7:** Work with MTCC to develop employability strategies for students aged 16-24.

**Action 4.2.1:** Expand learning opportunities and remove barriers to enrollment at MTCC, by increasing the percentage of McDowell High School graduates who enroll.

**Action 4.2.2:** Increase the number of students on the MTCC campus who come from backgrounds that have not traditionally sought post-secondary education and

**Action 5.1.1:** Provide competitive compensation and benefits to retain experienced employees.

**Action 5.1.2:** Work with the Human Resources department to recruit skilled public safety, health, and social workers.

**Action 5.2.1:** Ensure findings of the Community Health Assessment are understood and shared with the community partners and the public.

**Action 5.2.2**: Monitor international and national health concerns in order to be prepared for emergencies and pandemics.

**Action 5.3.1:** Equip public safety employees and community workers, such as health department employees and social workers, with the appropriate tools and medications to manage overdose situations.

**Action 5.3.2:** Provide substance abuse and overdose education, along with antibullying/social media warning educational programs in local schools.

**Action 5.4.1:** Engage with community mental health advocates to gain a better understanding of challenges and develop plans together to enhance overall well-being within the community.

**Action 5.5.1:** Form a committee with local partners to develop strategies for addressing the needs of the homeless population.

**Action 6.1.1:** Research and understand the problem.

**Action 6.1.2:** Identify properties suitable for housing development.

**Action 6.1.3**: Identify potential developers and funding options.

**Action 6.2.1:** Work with local partners such as the City of Marion, the Town of Old Fort, and others to connect with developers.

**Action 6.2.2:** Acquire and transfer property to development partners when necessary.

**Action 6.2.3:** Work with partners on utility extensions that facilitate housing development.

**Action 6.3.1:** Research and understand the types of housing organizations that are successful in other communities.

**Action 6.3.2:** Work with local partners on establishing an organization.

**Action 6.3.3:** Appoint County representatives to the organization and provide startup financial assistance if necessary.

**Action 6.4.1:** Apply for and receive grants for home repairs for eligible households.

**Action 6.4.2:** Work with local partners on the implementation of the housing repair program.

improve the college's affordability by expanding financial resources and assistance to students.  Action 4.2.3: Improve quality through intentional partnerships and finding equitable solutions to enhance the learning environment, by adopting a Universal Design for learning principles in all MTCC courses of study.  Action 4.2.4: Increase the number of dualenrolled students with an emphasis on CTE college-level courses. MTCC increase the number of students who participate in work-based learning courses, practicums, preceptorships, and apprenticeships.	Action 5.5.2: Assist local churches and non-profit organizations to develop solutions for addressing the needs of the homeless population.	Action 6.5.1: Identify population groups that need specialized housing such as those with special needs, those transitioning back into society after a period of incarceration, or those who have experienced homelessness.  Action 6.5.2: Work with local partners such to identify funding sources and available properties to build specialized housing.
<b>Action 4.2.5:</b> Reimagine and reinvent MTCC instructional offerings by adopting best practices to meet the needs of adult learners.		
Action 4.2.6: Increase opportunities for student success and transitions to further education or employment by increasing MTCC completion rates for all students.		
<b>Action 4.3.1:</b> Advocate for policies that support lifelong learning at the state and national level. Support initiatives that promote education and workforce development, such as adult education programs, vocational training, and apprenticeship opportunities.		
<b>Action 4.3.2:</b> Provide facilities and infrastructure for lifelong learning activities,		

such as community centers, libraries, and recreational spaces. Ensure that facilities are equipped with resources like audio/visual equipment, computers, internet access, books, and educational materials. 4.3.3: Action Organize educational programming and events geared toward lifelong learning. This can include workshops, seminars, lectures, classes and community events focused on topics like job skills, financial literacy, health and wellness, arts and culture, and personal development. Action 4.3.4: Raise awareness about lifelong learning opportunities through outreach and promotion efforts. Action 4.3.5: Partner with local educational institutions, businesses, and community organizations to provide access to specialized training programs and certifications. Action 4.3.6: Seek funding to support lifelong learning initiatives.

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