



HICKORY

CREATING OUTDOOR RECREATION ECONOMIES

STRATEGIC PLAN

2024-2029



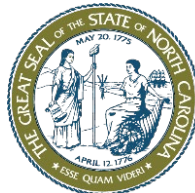
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The REDD announced the technical assistance program offering Outdoor Recreation Economy Strategic Planning and Asset Development services in late 2022. Communities from across the state applied to engage with strategic planning services and 34 local governments were accepted to participate. Main Street & Rural Planning (MS&RP) staff, who is responsible for facilitating strategic economic development planning and implementation services, worked with local government staff to communicate the goals of the program, identify local opportunities, and assemble a planning work group.



**NC DEPARTMENT
of COMMERCE**
**RURAL ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT**



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Hickory City Council

Executive Summary

Through CORE, the City of Hickory collaborated with the N.C. Department of Commerce, Rural Economic Development Division staff members and local stakeholders through a strategic planning process to identify and develop outdoor recreation assets that present economic growth opportunities. Strategy development focused on leveraging outdoor recreation assets to increase tourism, encourage small business development, enhance quality of life for residents, plan for outdoor recreation assets and infrastructure development, and position communities to grow and attract outdoor gear manufacturing industries. The planning process was tailored to meet the specific needs, goals, and opportunities that local stakeholders identified.

The plan proposes strategies, goals, objectives, and actions that Hickory can take to increase economic vitality by leveraging outdoor recreation. For the purposes of this strategic planning program outdoor recreation is defined as all recreational activities undertaken for leisure that occur outdoors, with an emphasis on those activities that involve some level of intentional physical exertion and occur in nature-based environments. Furthermore, other community assets and economic institutions that benefit from or complement the outdoor recreation economy are addressed in the plan.

Background

There is a long tradition of outdoor recreation in North Carolina. From the mountains to the coast and everywhere in between there are incredible landscapes and unique places to pursue a wide variety of outdoor recreation activities. Participation in these activities generates a large economic impact. In recent years statistics show that participation in outdoor recreation is increasing, particularly in the wake of COVID-19. Continued growth in participation leads to the opportunity for the increased economic impact of outdoor recreation, particularly in rural locations where many of the state's outdoor recreation assets are located. Also, there is great potential to expose and engage people that have historically not participated in outdoor recreation activities at the same rate as others. It is important for all individuals to have the opportunity and access to enjoy recreational pursuits, and to have an opportunity to benefit economically from outdoor recreation. These factors, combined with other on-going outdoor recreation initiatives across the state, make it an ideal time to think critically about how this sector can continue to be leveraged to benefit local economies.

Economic Impact

Outdoor recreation activity and associated expenditures generate a large economic impact. This is a broad economic sector that comprises a diverse range of industries including

manufacturing, retail, arts, entertainment and recreation, as well as many supporting activities such as construction, travel and tourism, accommodation and food service, and many more.

According to the U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of Economic Analysis' Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, nationwide, in 2022, the outdoor recreation economy represented \$563.7 billion in current-dollar gross domestic product (GDP), or 2.2 percent of the United States' total GDP. The outdoor recreation sector of the economy is growing at a faster rate than the overall economy. "Inflation-adjusted ("real") GDP for the outdoor recreation economy increased 4.8 percent in 2022, compared with a 1.9 percent increase for the overall U.S. economy, reflecting a deceleration from the increase in outdoor recreation of 22.7 percent in 2021. Real gross output for the outdoor recreation economy increased 7.5 percent, while outdoor recreation compensation increased 9.1 percent, and employment increased 7.4 percent (national table 9)." Employment in the outdoor recreation industry increased in all 50 states during 2022.

At the state level, outdoor recreation contributed \$14.5 billion in total value-added economic impact to North Carolina's GDP. North Carolina ranked as the 11th highest state in "Value-Added Outdoor Recreation in Total outdoor recreation activities" in 2022. This includes employment for over 146,000 individuals that resulted in over \$6.8 billion in total compensation. Employment in key industries within the outdoor recreation sector includes over 7,600 in manufacturing, 51,000 in retail, 27,000 in accommodation and food service, and over 29,000 in arts, entertainment, and recreation.¹

Outdoor Recreation Participation

According to the 2022 Outdoor Industry Association 'Outdoor Participation Trends Report', "outdoor participation continues to grow at record levels. More than half (54%) of Americans ages 6 and over participated in at least one outdoor activity in 2021, and the outdoor recreation participant base grew 2.2% in 2021 to 164.2M participants. This growing number of outdoor participants, however, did not fundamentally alter long-term declines in high frequency or 'core' outdoor participation."²

Studies show that approximately 56% of North Carolinians participate in some form of outdoor recreation each year.³ This includes more than 22.8 million visitors to North Carolina state parks in 2021 — three million more than any other year on record. Many parks, national

¹ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis. Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, U.S. and States, 2022. <https://www.bea.gov/data/special-topics/outdoor-recreation>

² Outdoor Industry Association. 2022 Outdoor Participation Trends Report. <https://outdoorindustry.org/resource/2022-outdoor-participation-trends-report/>

³ The Citizen-Times. North Carolina outdoor recreation is a \$28 billion industry, poised for further growth. October 11th, 2019. <https://www.citizen-times.com/story/news/2019/10/11/outdoor-economy-conference-asheville-highlights-28-billion-industry/3923846002/>

forests, and other public recreation areas report increased visitation as well. These numbers represent a solid base of individuals participating in outdoor recreation and contributing to associated economic activity. But there is still room to engage more individuals and continue to increase participation in outdoor recreation, particularly among populations that have not historically participated in outdoor recreation at levels comparable to others. Also, people increasingly want outdoor recreation opportunities that are convenient to where they live so they can participate on a regular basis without the need to travel long distances.^{4 5}

Setting

The City of Hickory (population 43,490)⁶ is located in western Catawba County along Interstate 40 and US 321. The city is in close proximity to several neighboring towns within Catawba County including Conover, Long View, and Newton, as well as Bethlehem in Alexander County, approximately 22 miles from Morganton, 28 miles to Statesville, and within an easy drive of several regional cities including Asheville and Charlotte. Hickory is bordered by Lake Hickory to the north and west.

Locally, there are many destinations for residents and visitors alike to engage in outdoor recreation. This includes the Hickory Trail, a centerpiece of the city that will transform the community by providing a 10-mile cross city trail improving bicycle and pedestrian safety while connecting popular destinations and amenities including downtown, the Riverwalk, the Aviation Walk, Historic Ridgeview, and the OLLE Arts District when complete. Lake Hickory offers a plethora of recreational opportunities including paddle sports, motorboating, fishing and more. Lake Hickory Trails offer over 5 miles of professionally designed mountain bike trails, with both beginner and intermediate loops, as well as a skills park and pump track. The City of Hickory's park system boasts 27 individual parks for all to enjoy, in addition to numerous parks



⁴ Headwaters Economics. Recreation Counties Attracting New Residents and Higher Incomes.

<https://headwaterseconomics.org/economic-development/trends-performance/recreation-counties-attract/>

⁵ Outdoor Foundation. 2022 Outdoor Participation Trends Report. <https://outdoorindustry.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/2022-Outdoor-Participation-Trends-Report.pdf>

⁶ US Census Bureau. 2020 Census. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/decade/2020/2020-census-main.html>

and recreational opportunities nearby in Catawba County. Two regional trails systems, the Carolina Thread Trail and the Wilderness Gateway State Trail, will pass through Hickory to connect the city to an extended network of trails and attract visitors.

The City's proximity to many world-class outdoor recreation attractions makes it a great base from which to explore. Both Lake James State Park and South Mountain State Park are a 40-minute drive. Trailheads within Pisgah National Forest can be reached from Hickory within a one-hour drive. NC



Wildlife Resource Commission Public Mountain Trout Waters, including Hatchery Supported streams, can also be accessed within a one-hour drive. Many other recreational opportunities offering access to a great variety of outdoor activities exist within a convenient day trip distance from the City of Hickory.

The business and industrial base in and around Hickory is strong. Hickory serves as the economic hub for a multi-county region and well-connected transportation networks facilitate the economic activity in the area. "While manufacturing remains a large component of the local and regional economy, diversification has taken a larger role, with the growth and expansion of retail and service-based industries."⁷

As of February 2024, Catawba County has a labor force of 78,886.⁸ Alexander, Burke, Caldwell and Catawba Counties, served by the Western Piedmont Workforce Development Board, have a labor force of 174,836 as of March 2024.⁹ Of these workers approximately 17,500 commute into Catawba County for employment from the other 3 neighboring counties.¹⁰ Overall, approximately 43,000 workers commute into Catawba County for employment.¹¹

As of Q3 of 2023, 27.4% of Catawba County jobs are within the manufacturing sector. This compares with 11% statewide at the same time period, marking a high concentration of

⁷ Hickory by Choice 2030 Comprehensive Plan. Pg. 6.1. <https://www.hickorync.gov/planning-documents>

⁸ NC Department of Commerce, LEAD. February 2024. Catawba County. Local Area Unemployment Statistics, Not Seasonable Adjusted

⁹ NC Department of Commerce, LEAD. March 2024. Western Piedmont WDB. Local Area Unemployment Statistics (LAUS), Not Seasonally Adjusted.

¹⁰ Western Piedmont Council of Government. 2019 Hickory MSA Job Flows. <https://www.wpcog.org/regional-data>

¹¹ Catawba County. 2021. US Census Bureau, Center for Economic Studies, LEHD, private primary jobs

manufacturing in the area.¹² Manufacturing in Catawba County provides a relatively high average wage compared to other sectors, particularly based on the number of positions available¹³. Other high wage sectors include information, construction, financial activities, education and health services, and professional and business services.

Existing Plan Review

In an effort to complement and build upon subsequent community planning efforts, staff assembled and reviewed other relevant plans and documents. This review provides valuable insight and helps avoid duplication or contradictions of past planning proposals. The following documents were reviewed and considered during the CORE planning process.

Western Piedmont Council of Governments Community Economic Development Strategy (CEDS)

Hickory is located within the Western Piedmont Council of Governments (WPCOG) Economic Development District (EDD). The WPCOG *CEDS* is a document that intends to help guide the region “as it becomes more vibrant, healthy, and prosperous over the next 5 years.” Outdoor recreation-based economic development is a key component for advancing each of these goals.

Numerous strategies outlined in the *CEDS* are supported by objectives of this plan including:

- Infrastructure Strategies: Strategy 1 – “Improve and expand the bicycle and pedestrian network in the region to include greenway opportunities adjacent to existing, connecting to, or creating a connection to economic opportunities.”
- Infrastructure Strategies: Strategy 5 – includes language that directs member governments to “support the outdoor economy” in addition to corresponding and complementary environmental goals.
- Community Life Strategies: Strategy 7 – “Develop methods to encourage relocation to the region” with subsequent actions to “promote the region as an ideal location to live.”

The WPCOG *CEDS* outlines that “...an opportunity and challenge exists to target and attract new members of this age group through our marketing and branding efforts. Strategies described in this portion of the *CEDS* intend to build upon the region’s efforts to convene a regional marketing task force, develop a regional marketing approach, and identify and promote regional attractions, events, and natural resources that appeal to younger age groups.” This language aligns directly with this plan’s workforce development marketing and promotion strategies. The *CEDS* also emphasizes that economic development is directly correlated to

¹² Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages - Bureau of Labor Statistics. Q3 2023

¹³ Bureau of Labor Statistics. Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages Private, High-Level Industries, Catawba County, North Carolina. All establishment sizes. Q3 2023.

“enhancing community life”. The quality-of-life enhancement objectives in this plan directly align with the *CEDS*.

Hickory By Choice 2030 Comprehensive Plan

The *Hickory By Choice 2030 Comprehensive Plan* is a document that seeks to address how the City of Hickory will serve “the long-range health, safety and welfare of the community” and outline steps “addressing those concerns, and to achieving, through opportunities that growth may bring, improvements residents have long hoped to make.” Many components of this plan involve outdoor recreation and address economic development concerns. This includes input on future land use decisions, transportation needs, economic development goals, public facilities, the environment, parks and recreation, community health and more. The CORE plan builds upon the *Hickory By Choice* planning effort, and uses the same economic development goals in an effort to encourage uniformity between the two plans.

Comprehensive Parks, Recreation, & Sports Tourism Master Plan: 2023 – 2033



The *Comprehensive Parks, Recreation, & Sports Tourism Master Plan* seeks to guide decision making about investment and programming for parks and recreation in the City of Hickory over the next decade. The plan emphasized public input to determine recommendations which advocate for improvements to existing facilities as a priority, situates the

department to secure grant funding, remaining on par with peer communities, and using data driven decision-making. The outcomes of the plan include the goal to advocate for “increasing focus on natural assets and education,” improving “communication of existing assets”, and emphasizing “equitable and inclusive access to recreation”, all of which align with the goals of the Hickory CORE plan.

Certain recommendation of this plan that most closely align with goals, objectives, and actions of the CORE plan include:

- Developing marketing and communications plans that promote the assets of the city
- Market to niche interests
- Orient community to current water-based recreation and private opportunities and promote use. This includes emphasizing proximity to nearby Lake Hickory Access
- Introduce nature based programming
- Seek partnerships that promote natural education, environmental stewardship and sustainability
- Increase walkability and bikeable footprint of city through prioritization of the Walk. Bike. Hickory Pedestrian + Bicycle Plan
- Emphasize Hickory Trail as key to community connectivity

The Hickory CORE plan supports the *Comprehensive Parks, Recreation, & Sports Tourism Master Plan* and encourages continuing activities that increase the opportunity for residents, visitors, and businesses to participate in outdoor recreation.

Several other relevant plans were consulted throughout the planning process including the Catawba County Chamber Foundation's *Catawba County Talent Profile*, Hickory Downtown Development Association's *Downtown Economic Development Implementation Plan – 2022*, Carolina Thread Trail *Master Plan for Catawba Communities*, and the *Wilderness Gateway State Trail Plan*.

Planning Process

Under the REDD, MS&RP Center staff facilitates the CORE strategic planning process with participation from the local government and an established local work group. This work group is comprised of individuals who have a vested interest in leveraging outdoor recreation to enhance economic development. The planning process employs established planning methods including presenting economic and associated data, asset mapping, economic driver identification, SWOT analysis, local work group discussions, and more. The planning process was tailored to meet the specific needs, goals, and opportunities that local stakeholders identified.



Situational Analysis

The MS&RP staff began the planning process by having conversations with town leaders to convey the intent of the CORE program and receive feedback on the overarching goals and expectations of what the town hopes to achieve through this strategic planning process. A site tour was hosted so that MS&RP staff could have a better understanding of local recreational and economic assets. A questionnaire was developed to obtain feedback from the local planning committee prior to the formal work group meetings. The intent of this questionnaire was to obtain more detailed information on local assets, potential opportunities, and a better understanding of local priorities. As indicated above, a review of existing planning documents was also performed.

Local Work Group Establishment and Involvement

The local work group was assembled by the local government's lead contact and included individuals with a vested stake in the Hickory community. These individuals included local government staff, business leaders, business support resource providers, economic development professionals, Economic Development District staff, and individuals involved on statewide outdoor recreation committees. These individuals provided local knowledge, input via questionnaires and topical discussion, and helped to shape the vision, strategies, goals, and actions outlined in this plan. As with any plan, these work group members will be essential participants in following through after the planning process to begin addressing goals and objectives outlined in this plan and are critical to achieving the potential for economic impact outlined in these strategies.

Economic Positioning Statement Development

Based on the findings and discussions throughout the planning process, the local planning committee drafted an economic positioning statement for the City of Hickory's CORE plan. This statement should guide their vision for future economic progress in the outdoor recreation space over the next five years. There was an effort to maintain consistency and complement previous strategic planning visions including the *Hickory By Choice 2030 Comprehensive Plan*. The CORE goals outlined in this plan were adapted from the *Hickory By Choice Plan's* Economic Development Goals to ensure consistency between the two plans and build off one another.

Once the economic visioning statement was outlined the work group determined the economic development strategies that will be implemented in order to achieve this desired vision. Based on findings and opportunities identified throughout the planning process the group developed strategies, goals, objectives, and action items that, collectively, will help the town become more economically vibrant. From this the work group can identify action teams, committees, and partner organizations who will then develop specific tasks to accomplish the action/project.

Plan Review and Adoption

The draft Hickory CORE plan was presented to the local planning committee on April 22nd, 2024, and taken before the Hickory Business Development Committee on June 26th, 2024 and the Hickory City Council on August 6th, 2024. Following review, the Hickory City Council adopted the plan on August 6th, 2024.

Economic Positioning Statement

Hickory, located in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, is building upon a tradition of craftsmanship to enhance the city as the regional center of an outdoor recreation economy that creates quality jobs, supports business development and entrepreneurship by emphasizing a high quality of life, embracing a spirit of community collaboration, and fostering outdoor recreation culture.



Cyclists enjoying the Hickory Trail which, when complete, will connect popular destinations and amenities including downtown, the Riverwalk, the Aviation Walk, Historic Ridgeview, and the OLLE Arts District.

Hickory CORE Strategic Plan 2024 - 2029

Vision: Hickory, located in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, is building upon a tradition of craftsmanship to enhance the city as the regional center of an outdoor recreation economy that creates quality jobs, supports business development and entrepreneurship by emphasizing a high quality of life, embracing a spirit of community collaboration, and fostering outdoor recreation culture.

Strategy: Business Development

Goal 1: Grow the economy based on diverse industries and commerce *including the outdoor recreation sector*.

Objective 1.1: Maintain a group that meets regularly and is dedicated to advancing the goals of this plan.

Actions/Projects:

1. Develop a local alliance of stakeholders that are invested and engaged in the outdoor recreation space, particularly local businesses, to increase networking and support within this sector.

Objective 1.2: Coordinate collaboration and engagement between outdoor recreation- oriented businesses and the Outdoor Business Alliance (OBA), including a Hickory business hosting at least one OBA networking event annually, and encouraging two Hickory businesses to join as new members.

Actions/Projects:

1. Host an OBA networking event at a business in Hickory.
2. Host an OBA “Weekly Ride” event wherein OBA members and other associates gather for a group mountain bike ride. This will need to be coordinated with OBA and event organizers.

Objective 1.3: Promote the region as an ideal location for outdoor recreation product manufacturing and recruit one new business annually to relocate/expand and cultivate four new start-up businesses over the next five years in the outdoor recreation sector.

Actions/Projects:

1. Develop marketing package for outdoor companies looking to grow or expand in Hickory.
2. Consider advertisement and marketing efforts in industry trade publications and other industry specific media promoting Hickory as a great place to start, relocate, or expand a business.
3. When targeting business recruitment in this sector, leverage and promote the proximity, technical expertise, and partnerships of Manufacturing Solutions Center, Catawba County EDC, Small Business Center, Small Business and Technical Development Center, The Chamber of Catawba County and other associated business development resources.

Objective 1.4: Engage in programs and promotional activities to improve talent attraction to strengthen regional workforce.

Actions/Projects:

1. Develop promotional materials and programs which seek to change the perception and narrative on the modern manufacturing industry and highlight career opportunities available locally, as well as exceptional quality of life amenities available in Hickory.
2. At least one outdoor recreation business partner with The Chamber of Catawba County's 'HKY4VETS (Hickory4Vets)' program to attract workforce talent.
3. Establish marketing strategy for promoting unique, high-quality goods and distinctive businesses to promote civic pride in the products made in Hickory.

Goal 2: Support development of regional commercial centers

Objective 2.1: Incorporate outdoor recreation activities and businesses into downtown Hickory where appropriate to help leverage downtown's role as a destination for "business, recreation, entertainment, shopping, and dining."

Actions/Projects:

1. Promote downtown for other recreation related retail and service businesses such as climbing gyms, bike rentals, fitness centers, golf simulators, etc.

Objective 2.2: Leverage the Innovation District as a regional economic driver and incorporate outdoor recreation and other quality of life amenities into the fabric of this district to complement institutional, commercial, and residential components.

Actions/Projects:

1. Incorporate outdoor recreation amenities within this district to enhance vibrant placemaking.
2. Incorporate bike and pedestrian friendly design options within transportation corridors within this district.

Strategy: Quality of Life

Goal 3: Support Hickory as the regional center for cultural events *and outdoor recreational activities*

Objective 3.1: Support development of a unit of the State Parks System within Catawba County.

Actions/Projects:

1. Advocate for additional state funding toward this objective and support other organized efforts to achieve this objective.

Objective 3.2: Incorporate additional outdoor recreation-oriented activities into existing and new events that occur within the city.

Actions/Projects:

1. Encourage at least 1 business to sponsor and/or host a recurring (weekly, monthly, etc.) activity such as a run club, group cycling outing, or walking group.
2. Add outdoor recreation-oriented activities (bike ride, paddling activity, youth fishing exhibition, etc.) into an existing festival or event where appropriate.

Objective 3.3: Promote enhancements along Lake Hickory area to create a more vibrant district.

Actions/Projects:

1. Continue development of the Lackey Project which will directly connect to the river at Geitner Park and include amenities such as event space, improved dock access, and potential commercial space.

Objective 3.4: Support continued development, expansion, and utilization of the regional trails including the Carolina Thread Trail (CTT), Wilderness Gateway State Trail, Burke River Trail, etc.

Actions/Projects:

1. Contact CTT organization and ensure all public information (including website) about Hickory's portion of the CTT is accurate and up to date reflecting current trail development.
2. Advocate for continued implementation of CTT building out and connecting to other trail systems.
3. Support continued development and completion of "Wilderness Gateway State Trail Plan: 2022-2027."

Objective 3.5: Become an official VisitNC OutdoorNC 'Trail Town Stewardship Designated Program'.

Actions/Projects:

1. Confirm Visit Hickory Metro's (TDA) commitment to partnering with VisitNC to participate in this program.
2. Visit Hickory Metro would be responsible for completing the requirements and expectations for participation as outlined in VisitNC's program guidelines.

Strategy: Business Development

Goal 4: Encourage educational achievement, *and workforce development efforts within the outdoor recreation sector*

Objective 4.1: Partner with area Universities and Colleges to connect students to outdoor recreation sector businesses and otherwise encourage students to become an active part of the Hickory community.

Actions/Projects:

1. Present this plan's concept and objectives to the University-City Commission and utilize this standing committee to connect with most applicable university and college programs.
2. Conduct a survey of all majors and programs available at local institutions of higher learning and identify specific programs which can lead to employment success in the outdoor recreation industry.

Objective 4.2: Partner with local school systems to connect students to career and educational opportunities that are connected to the outdoor recreation sector businesses.

Actions/Projects:

1. Develop programs and materials to educate students about current industry and job opportunities within the Hickory area and promote quality job availability.
2. Maintain presence of outdoor recreation-oriented businesses at local career fairs and other programs which highlight and expose students to local industry and employment opportunities.

Goal 5: Develop Entrepreneurial Initiatives

Objective 5.1: Map the entrepreneurial ecosystem to identify all available business support organizations, committees, and other resources available to encourage entrepreneurial success.

Objective 5.2: Engage with The Chamber of Catawba County entrepreneurship initiatives including "The Catalyst: Entrepreneurs Supporting Entrepreneurs," "Founder's Meet-Ups", and other similar groups.

Actions/Projects:

1. Maintain engagement of outdoor recreation-oriented businesses at these groups' meetings, and promote the potential for outdoor recreation-oriented entrepreneurship opportunities.

Objective 5.3: Identify at least one (1) outdoor recreation-oriented business to apply to and enroll in the Waypoint Accelerator program.

Actions/Projects:

1. Seek out an emerging business with growth potential and encourage the business owners to apply for and enroll in the Waypoint Accelerator.

Plan Implementation, Monitoring, and Evaluation

The City of Hickory will be responsible for monitoring, evaluation, and reporting accomplishments on the objectives of this plan to the Rural Economic Development Division.

Plan Implementation

Maintaining a dedicated group to follow through after the planning process to begin addressing goals and objectives outlined in this plan is critical to attaining the potential economic impact of these strategies. This could be the same work group that helped develop this plan, or another similar group that is representative of the community and can advance the goals of this plan. The sustained presence of such a group builds ‘social capital’ within the group that improves their ability to work together and effectively address common goals. Furthermore, a dedicated group ensures continuity from planning stage through implementation, provides accountability to ensure that objectives are being met, and allows the community to react and respond quickly when an opportunity is presented. But this group should not be the sole entity responsible for implementing all the goals of the plan. Instead, the group should function as a convener and point of contact to connect to other individuals, businesses, organizations, and other resources to help the broader community achieve these goals. Maintaining a regular meeting schedule will also help increase the effectiveness of the group, and the overall plan.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Regular monitoring and evaluation to review progress on the goals, objectives, and action steps in this plan, via regular review sessions with the strategic planning team and other community stakeholders, is critical to ensuring it remains a viable, living document. REDD staff will periodically communicate and provide assistance as needed to help advance the goals and document the outcomes of the plan.

Focus Areas

Strategy development focuses on leveraging outdoor recreation assets to increase tourism, encourage small business development, enhance quality of life for residents, plan for asset and infrastructure development, and/or position communities to grow and attract outdoor product manufacturing industries. Each subsection below provides supplemental information about a general goal, objective, or action item identified in the plan’s strategy chart.

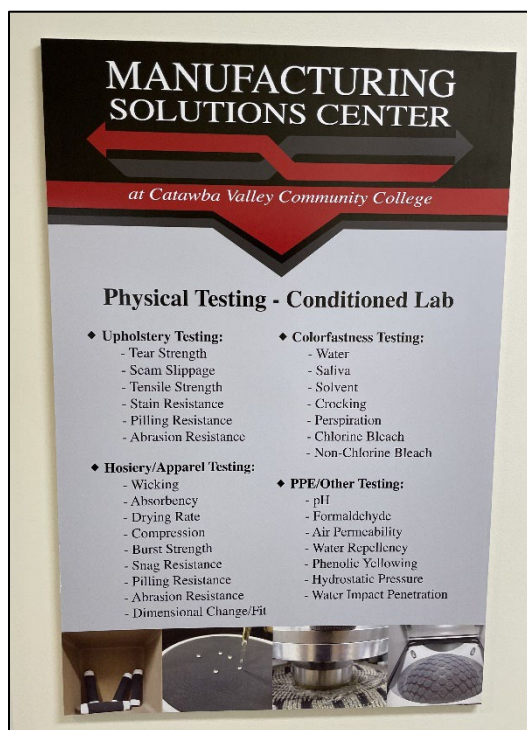
Maintain a Local Alliance of Stakeholders with Vested Interest in Outdoor Recreation

One of the most important steps to achieving the overall vision and specific goals outlined in this plan is to have a dedicated group to help carry out the actions necessary for implementation. This was recognized as a critical step by work group members early in the

process and as such the group is committed to continue working together to achieve the desired objectives. Sustaining a dedicated group builds ‘social capital’ within the group that improves their ability to work together and effectively address common goals. Furthermore, this familiarity allows the group to react and respond quickly when an opportunity is presented that will help improve this economic sector. It is up to the group to determine appropriate organizational and administrative structure. The first steps should be to outline roles, responsibilities, and administrative structure, and identify additional members outside of the Hickory CORE work group which are beneficial to the group’s sustained success and attainment of goals.

Business Growth and Development within the Outdoor Recreation Economic Sector

The primary, overarching intent of this plan and planning process is to increase the economic impact and vitality of businesses that are associated with outdoor recreation. This includes retail, manufacturing, tourism and hospitality, and experiential companies. Currently, there are at least 39 businesses within the City of Hickory that pertain to outdoor recreation providing a strong existing business base within this sector.



A key objective to advance this goal is to continue promoting the region as an ideal location for product manufacturing and other businesses associated with outdoor recreation. The group determined that creating marketing and promotional materials, connecting the workforce to and increasing the general public’s knowledge about the industry, and engaging with business support resources such as the Manufacturing Solutions Center, small business support, the Outdoor Business Alliance, Waypoint Accelerator, The Chamber of Catawba County, and other local groups are critical steps to advancing this goal. Leveraging the Hickory Downtown Development Association and the on-going revitalization of downtown Hickory by integrating outdoor recreation businesses and events will support the district’s economic vitality.

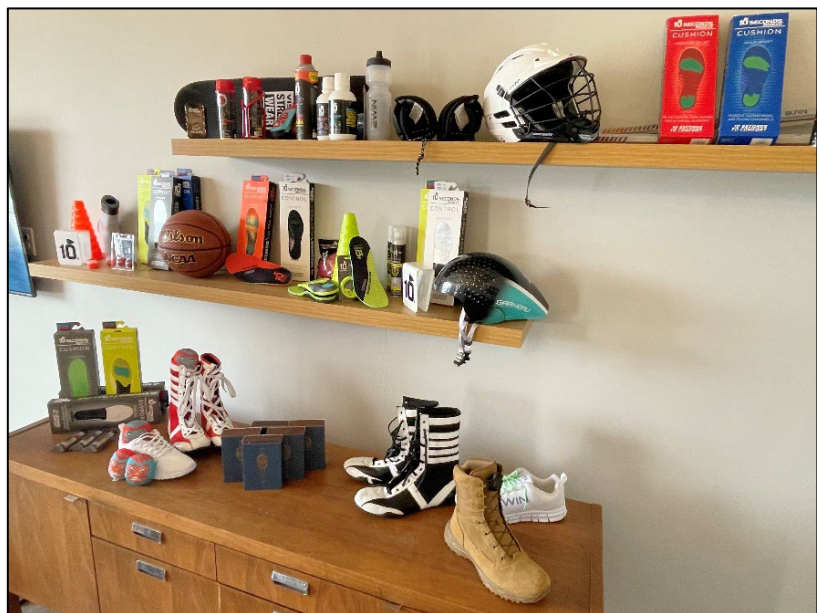
One business support organization that is unique to the region and directly supports the intent of this plan is the Outdoor Business Alliance. The Outdoor Business Alliance is an industry support group with a mission of “Fostering a prosperous outdoor business community by cultivating, connecting, and supporting western North Carolina’s outdoor industry.” The OBA

regularly hosts networking events, workshops, training activities, and more to connect and support this emerging industry cluster. Capitalizing on this unique organization by continuing to increase engagement and collaboration with this group and their member companies can help highlight on-going initiatives, economic development, and opportunity for future business growth in Hickory.

Outdoor Recreation Product Manufacturing

There is potential for increased manufacturing of outdoor recreation products, including supply chain materials, across the state of North Carolina. Attention to this sector should be paid from a perspective of attracting companies to expand their operations in the community, or for a local startup business to emerge.

Of the total \$14.5+ billion impact that outdoor recreation contributes to the state's annual GDP, more than \$2.3 billion of that is contributed from manufacturing. This sector employs over 7,600 people.¹⁴ The existing industrial base, active economic development organizations, and business support that is available locally situates Hickory in a great circumstance to develop and grow outdoor recreation product manufacturing.



Display showcasing the variety of products that use Hickory Brands, Inc. manufactured materials within their finished products, including many products used in outdoor recreational pursuits.

From a broader industry perspective, the City of Hickory and surrounding areas have a high concentration of manufacturing firms when compared to the nation as a whole.¹⁵ This is even more pronounced when examining specific industries including “apparel knitting mills”, “nonwoven fabric mills”, “plastics product manufacturing” and several other manufacturing industry sectors which support and complement many of the products that are made to serve the outdoor recreation industry. Each of these specific industry sectors have a very high

¹⁴ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis. Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, U.S. and States, 2022. <https://www.bea.gov/data/special-topics/outdoor-recreation>

¹⁵ Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages - Bureau of Labor Statistics. Private, High-Level Industries, Catawba County, North Carolina. 2023 First Quarter, All establishment sizes

employment within Catawba County compared to the rest of the nation.¹⁶ With the existing industrial base, availability of unique and applicable business support resources, workforce development resources, and proximity to world-class outdoor recreation destinations the City of Hickory is primed to continue to capture and increase manufacturing associated with outdoor recreation products.

As referenced in the “Settings” section, as of Q3 of 2023, 27.4% of Catawba County jobs are within the manufacturing sector. This compares with 11% statewide at the same time period, marking a high concentration of manufacturing in the area.¹⁷ At the same time, within the Western Piedmont Workforce Development Board jurisdiction 34.7% of the population is 55 years of age or older, approaching a typical age of retirement. While 36.4% of the population is between the ages of 25-54, data shows that this demographic has been declining in total number since the early to mid-2000s.¹⁸ Observing these challenges, the *Catawba County Talent Profile* provides several approaches to address the issues. Addressing potential workforce shortcomings is critical to ensuring the continued future for a strong manufacturing base.

Connecting Education and Workforce Development to the Outdoor Recreation Sector

There are multiple institutions of higher learning in Hickory, including Appalachian State University’s Hickory Campus, Catawba Valley Community College, and Lenoir Rhyne University. This is one of the foremost assets available that can benefit the local economy. These students should, upon matriculation, be able to fill a diverse set of employment roles within the local economy. Engagement with these colleges and their student populations while they are in school and getting them integrated into the fabric of the Hickory community will serve a variety of benefits associated with this plan. This would help fulfill the demand for talent attraction and recruitment which was a need demonstrated throughout the planning process. Programs of study that are available at each institution should be identified as supportive of outdoor recreation industries and connections made to help these programs serve as a workforce pipeline to local businesses. In addition to career opportunities, promoting the livability, and quality of life aspects of Hickory will help advance these goals. The Hickory University-City Commission offers a great avenue to begin making connections and forging relationships between this industry and these institutions.

Talent attraction is one area that received ample attention and discussion throughout the planning process. The Chamber of Catawba County’s *Catawba County Talent Profile*, a report which examined local workforce needs and opportunities, noted that “this year’s data confirms

¹⁶ Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages - Bureau of Labor Statistics. Private, NAICS 6-Digit Industries, Catawba County, North Carolina 2023 Third Quarter, All Establishment Sizes

¹⁷ Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages - Bureau of Labor Statistics. Q3 2023

¹⁸ NC Department of Commerce, LEAD. Western Piedmont WDB Area Profile. Accessed May 17th, 2024.

that talent continues to prioritize quality of life as an initial motivating factor causing them to begin to consider relocation.” Several stakeholders within the outdoor recreation industry mentioned that outdoor recreation opportunities are often primary concerns of prospective employees when attempting to fill vacancies. It is not a stretch to determine that quality of life considerations are a key factor in workforce retention for existing and emerging workforce participants as well as attracting new residents to the area. Thus, quality of life enhancements continue to play a critical role in sustaining and bolstering the local workforce. Relatively low cost of living, proximity to outdoor recreation opportunities, and a vibrant social scene, particularly within downtown Hickory, are all highlights that should be emphasized for talent attraction and retention purposes.

The need to engage and inform individuals about career opportunities in the area, particularly those that may not seek a secondary education beyond high school, is also a workforce development need that was expressed by members of the work group. Much of this should focus on the improvements within modern manufacturing industry including the emphasis on safety, better working conditions, on the job training, and the potential for well-paying careers. In addition, outdoor recreation-oriented companies often emphasize work-life balance and positive workplace culture, thus making them desirable places to work.

The Chamber of Catawba County’s *Catawba County Talent Profile* report highlighted several associated needs. Within this report experts noted a gap of “a lack of people to do all the work that needs to be done”. One key observation with potential to counter this lack of labor force is focusing efforts to target “Opportunity Youth”, which are defined as individuals between ages 16-24 that are neither working nor enrolled in school. This demographic is higher in Catawba County than other comparable counties. Better engagement with this demographic could help offset the challenges associated with an aging and retiring workforce. Outdoor recreation-oriented industry could potentially serve as an enticing career field to encourage this demographic entering the labor force.

There are multiple on-going programs focusing on workforce development concerns. The group that forms to implement this plan should continue to engage with the local organizations addressing workforce development issues and ensure the outdoor recreation industry is represented by and benefits from these efforts.

Marketing and Promotion

Several of the goals, objectives, and actions identified within this plan indicate the need to improve marketing and promotion associated with advancing Hickory’s outdoor recreation economy. Enhanced promotion spans the themes of business development, workforce

development, supporting downtown Hickory, tourism, and more generally informing the public about the great opportunities for recreation in and around the City of Hickory.

One idea that emerged is to promote unique, high-quality goods made locally and publicize distinctive businesses located in the city. This has a variety of impacts including increasing knowledge of and civic pride in the products that are made here, and educating prospective workforce participants about the type of industries that operate locally. For example, DeFeet, a



Photo Credit: MADE X MTNS. DeFeet tent at the Outdoor Business Alliance's 2024 Get in Gear Fest.

“microsockery” based in the area with a storefront headquarters in Hickory, manufactures Made in the USA high-performance socks specifically designed for many types of activities including cycling, hiking, running, and more. These socks are world-renowned among cyclists, including being the preferred sock of Tour de France racers.

Similarly, the HBi company manufactures a wide variety

of narrow textiles that are incorporated in many different uses including high quality outdoor recreation gear, including the shoestrings in the famous Jordan brand sneakers. Highlighting these innovative products that have ties to Hickory based companies will help grow local awareness, civic pride, and increase the potential for more companies to start, relocate, and expand in Hickory. Continuing to build upon the legacy craftsmanship and “Well Crafted” branding can help distinguish Hickory as an ideal location for high-quality, and distinctive products.

Fostering an Outdoor Recreation Culture

Many of the themes referenced throughout this document culminate in an overarching goal to foster an outdoor recreation culture within the City of Hickory.

The individuals that participate in outdoor recreation activities, whether hiking, biking, paddle sports, fishing or other activities, are the most likely entrepreneurs to start a new business associated with these pursuits. Therefore, the more individuals engaged in outdoor recreation the more likely for new business creation. Encouraging increased participation in outdoor recreation activities, including by individuals with little or no previous experience, will continue

to benefit local businesses that are engaged in the outdoor recreation economy. This can be accomplished by continuing to provide recreational infrastructure (parks, trails, access points, etc.), promoting programming that encourages people to participate, and incorporating recreation into events that occur throughout the city. This “critical mass” of individuals participating also increases the likelihood of businesses existing to serve the needs of recreationists.



Proximity and accessibility to both local and regional outdoor recreation destinations is a key facet of fostering an outdoor recreation culture. Increasingly, there are outstanding recreational opportunities in and around the city that can be enjoyed at a moment’s notice without traveling outside the local area. The network of regional trails, including the Carolina Thread Trail and Wilderness Gateway State Trail, connecting to Hickory continues to develop contributing to a great network of local trail systems. Regionally, the City of Hickory is located within a convenient day trip to an abundance of outdoor recreation destinations. This includes Lake James State Park, South Mountain State Park, Pisgah National Forest and many more. Nearly any outdoor recreation activity that you can think of is possible within a short drive of Hickory making it a great base camp from which to seek outdoor adventure. Promoting the proximity to both local assets and regional recreation destinations is a key component that supports multiple facets of this plan.

In an effort to continue increasing the economic impact of the individuals engaging in these pursuits, local businesses should be incorporated and engaged whenever possible. This includes ancillary businesses in the tourism and hospitality sectors. Identifying businesses to host or sponsor recurring activities such as group runs or cycling activities provides multiple benefits. These businesses provide a gathering space for participants “before

and after the ride” to enjoy food or beverages and recount the day’s activities. This encourages social interaction, continues to build the recreation community, and often provides the business a new customer base, particularly during non-peak times. There are many examples across the state of how these events can contribute to the vitality of individual businesses.

All elements associated with outdoor recreation combine to develop an ecosystem where each component helps to strengthen the potential for growth of the local and regional outdoor recreation economy.



The Hickory Trail spans 10 miles across the city connecting various neighborhoods and commercial districts, including downtown. The trail promotes cycling and pedestrian safety, while connecting popular destinations and amenities, which advances economic development and creates desirable quality of life for residents and visitors.

Appendix

Hickory CORE Strategic Plan and Implementation Schedule: 2024 – 2029

Vision: Hickory, located in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, is building upon a tradition of craftsmanship to enhance the city as the regional center of an outdoor recreation economy that creates quality jobs, supports business development and entrepreneurship by emphasizing a high quality of life, embracing a spirit of community collaboration, and fostering outdoor recreation culture.

Strategy: Business Development Support

Goal 1: Grow the economy based on diverse industries and commerce *including the outdoor recreation sector.*

Objective 1.1: Maintain a group that meets regularly and is dedicated to advancing the goals of this plan.

Action 1.1.1: Develop a local alliance of stakeholders that are invested and engaged in the outdoor recreation space, particularly local businesses, to increase networking and support within this sector.

Tasks	Organization/Entity Responsible	Partners / Assistance
1. Identify group membership	Hickory CORE Work Group	City of Hickory Office of Business Development; Business Support Organizations
2. Determine appropriate organizational and administrative structure for this group. Outline roles, responsibilities, and administrative structure of group and members		Group membership
3. Serve as a liaison to advocate for effort to create a Hickory area regional sub-group of the Outdoor Business Alliance (OBA).		Outdoor Business Alliance

4. Engage and increase presence with the NC Outdoor Recreation Coalition.		NC Outdoor Recreation Coalition
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Goal 1: Grow the economy based on diverse industries and commerce *including the outdoor recreation sector.*

Objective 1.2: Coordinate collaboration and engagement between outdoor recreation- oriented businesses and the Outdoor Business Alliance (OBA), including a Hickory business hosting at least one OBA networking event annually, and encouraging two Hickory businesses to join as new members.

Action 1.2.1: Host an OBA networking event at a business in the city.

Tasks	Organization/Entity Responsible	Partners / Assistance
1. Contact OBA Executive Director to plan and organize an event that is of interest of local businesses and broader OBA membership.	Hickory CORE Work Group	Local businesses; Outdoor Business Alliance;
2. Host a Roundtable – facilitating small group connections – targeted topic specific discussion (i.e. marketing, supply chain, workforce)		Local businesses; Outdoor Business Alliance; other pertinent parties dependent upon topic;
3. At any events, highlight the assets and resources of Hickory and surrounding area, particularly those that pertain to making Hickory attractive to companies and individuals engaged in outdoor recreation.		Hickory Downtown Development Association; The Chamber of Catawba County; Colleges and Universities; Business Support Organizations

Action 1.2.2: Host an OBA “Weekly Ride” event wherein OBA members and other associates gather for a group mountain bike ride. This will need to be coordinated with OBA and event organizers.

Tasks	Organization/Entity Responsible	Partners / Assistance
1. Contact OBA Member who organizes these “weekly rides” and discuss logistics for the potential to host such a meetup.	Hickory CORE Work Group	Outdoor Business Alliance; City of Hickory Parks, Recreation, and Sports Tourism; Local Businesses; Cycling Groups
2. Engage relevant local businesses and rider groups that would participate in and support this event.		Same as above
3. Identify local hospitality, or similar, business that would host the group for “after the ride” activities such as food and drinks.		Same as above

Goal 1: Grow the economy based on diverse industries and commerce *including the outdoor recreation sector.*

Objective 1.3: Promote the region as an ideal location for outdoor recreation product manufacturing and recruit one new business annually to relocate/expand and cultivate four new start-up businesses over the next five years in the outdoor recreation sector.

Action 1.3.1: Develop marketing package for outdoor companies looking to grow or expand in Hickory.

Action 1.3.2: Consider advertisement and marketing efforts in industry trade publications and other industry specific media promoting Hickory as a great place to start, relocate, or expand a business.

Action 1.3.3: When targeting business recruitment in this sector, leverage and promote the proximity, technical expertise, and partnerships of Manufacturing Solutions Center, Catawba County EDC, Small Business Center, Small Business and Technical Development Center, The Chamber of Catawba County and other associated business development resources.

Tasks	Organization/Entity Responsible	Partners / Assistance
1. Develop marketing and promotion plan for all outdoor recreation economic development related activities.	City of Hickory Office of Business Development	The Chamber of Catawba County; Visit Hickory Metro; Catawba EDC
2. Add specific “call to action” with any promotions. Include a specific event or activity people can follow up on.		
3. Consider having representation of Hickory area businesses and economic development organizations host exhibit tables at various outdoor recreation-oriented conferences, including but not limited to Outdoor Economy Conference, Outdoor Retailer, 360 Adventure Collective, and others.	Hickory CORE Work Group	City of Hickory Office of Business Development;

Goal 1: Grow the economy based on diverse industries and commerce *including the outdoor recreation sector.*

Objective 1.4: Engage in programs and promotional activities to improve talent attraction to strengthen regional workforce.

Action 1.4.1: Develop promotional materials and programs which seek to change the perception and narrative on the modern manufacturing industry and highlight career opportunities available locally, as well as exceptional quality of life amenities available in Hickory.

Tasks	Organization/Entity Responsible	Partners / Assistance
1. Support and leverage findings from the 'Catawba County Talent Profile'	The Chamber of Catawba County	NCWorks; WPCOG; City of Hickory Office of Business Development
2. Target the "Opportunity Youth" (those individuals that are neither attending school or participating in the workforce) demographic as potential workforce participants.		Same as above
Action 1.4.2: At least one outdoor recreation business partner with The Chamber of Catawba County's 'HKY4VETS (Hickory4Vets)' program to attract workforce talent.		
Tasks	Organization/Entity Responsible	Partners / Assistance
1. Identify business to engage in the 'HKY4VETS' workforce recruitment program.	The Chamber of Catawba County	Local businesses; Catawba County EDC
Action 1.4.3: Establish marketing strategy for promoting unique, high-quality goods and distinctive businesses to promote civic pride in the products made in Hickory.		
Tasks	Organization/Entity Responsible	Partners / Assistance
1. When promoting local products utilize branding or messaging that emphasizes "Made in Catawba County" or similar.	City of Hickory Office of Business Development	Local businesses; The Chamber of Catawba County; Catawba County EDC

Strategy: Business Development Support

Goal 2: Support development of regional commercial centers

Objective 2.1: Incorporate outdoor recreation activities and businesses into downtown Hickory where appropriate to help leverage downtown's role as a destination for "business, recreation, entertainment, shopping, and dining."

Action 2.1.1: Promote downtown for other recreation related retail and service businesses such as climbing gyms, bike rentals, fitness centers, golf simulators, etc.		
Tasks	Organization/Entity Responsible	Partners / Assistance
1. Incorporate NC Main Street Business Recruitment practices.	Hickory Downtown Development Association	City of Hickory Office of Business Development; NC Main Street Program

Goal 2: Support development of regional commercial centers

Objective 2.2: Leverage the Innovation District as a regional economic driver and incorporate outdoor recreation and other quality of life amenities into the fabric of this district to complement institutional, commercial, and residential components.

Action 2.2.1: Incorporate outdoor recreation amenities within this district to enhance vibrant placemaking.

Action 2.2.2: Incorporate bike and pedestrian friendly design options within transportation corridors within this district.

Tasks	Organization/Entity Responsible	Partners / Assistance
1. Support advancement of City of Hickory Bicycle + Pedestrian Plan		

Strategy: Quality of Life

Goal 3: Support Hickory as the regional center for cultural events *and outdoor recreational activities*

Objective 3.1: Support development of a unit of the State Parks System within Catawba County.

Action 3.1.1: Advocate for additional state funding toward this objective and support other organized efforts to achieve this objective.

Tasks	Organization/Entity Responsible	Partners / Assistance
1. When appropriate, begin promotional campaigns to garner public support for this asset development.		NC Department of Natural and Cultural Resources; The Chamber of Catawba County; Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina; WPCOG

2. Research and communicate with other recent additions to the State Park system to understand processes and best practices.		Pisgah View State Park; Other State Trails
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Goal 3: Support Hickory as the regional center for cultural events *and outdoor recreational activities*

Objective 3.2: Incorporate additional outdoor recreation-oriented activities into existing and new events that occur within the city.

Action 3.2.1: Encourage at least 1 business to sponsor and/or host a recurring (weekly, monthly, etc.) activity such as a run club, group cycling outing, or walking group.

Tasks	Organization/Entity Responsible	Partners / Assistance
1. Identify business willing to sponsor and/or host a recurring activity. Ideally the start/end location of this activity would be a location where the participants can gather and socialize “after the ride.”	TBD	Hickory Downtown Development Association; The Chamber of Catawba County; Local Businesses; City of Hickory Parks, Recreation, and Sports Tourism; Running/cycling groups
2. Encourage these activities during non-peak times for local businesses to encourage an expanded revenue stream. This also promotes HDDA goal to “Increase night and weekend business.”		Same as above

Action 3.2.2: Add outdoor recreation-oriented activities (bike ride, paddling activity, youth fishing exhibition, etc.) into an existing festival or event where appropriate.

Tasks	Organization/Entity Responsible	Partners / Assistance
1. Research best practices and other events that successfully incorporate outdoor recreation activities into their events.	Organizations that host the event	Event organizers; Visit Hickory Metro; City of Hickory Parks, Recreation, and Sports Tourism
2. Host a “demo” event for local retail gear businesses, product manufacturing companies, and other partners to demo mountain bikes, and other gear as appropriate.	City of Hickory Parks, Recreation, and Sports Tourism	Hickory CORE Work Group; The Chamber of Catawba County; Local cycling or other user groups;

Goal 3: Support Hickory as the regional center for cultural events *and outdoor recreational activities*

Objective 3.3: Promote enhancements along Lake Hickory area to create a more vibrant district.

Action 3.3.1: Continue development of the Lackey Project which will directly connect to the river at Geitner Park and include amenities such as event space, improved dock access, and potential commercial space.

Tasks	Organization/Entity Responsible	Partners / Assistance
1. Research and promote innovative ways to support business development that utilizes the assets and amenities at Lake Hickory (kayak rentals, food trucks, mobile vendors on the lake, etc.)	City of Hickory Office of Business Development	City of Hickory Parks, Recreation, and Sports Tourism; Business Support Organizations

Goal 3: Support Hickory as the regional center for cultural events and outdoor recreational activities

Objective 3.4: Support continued development, expansion, and utilization of the regional trails including the Carolina Thread Trail (CTT), Wilderness Gateway State Trail, Burke River Trail, etc.

Action 3.4.1: Contact CTT organization and ensure all public information (including website) about Hickory's portion of the CTT is accurate and up to date reflecting current trail development.

Action 3.4.2: Advocate for continued implementation of CTT building out and connecting to other trail systems.

Tasks	Organization/Entity Responsible	Partners / Assistance
1. Promote Hickory as a destination along the Carolina Thread Trail.	Hickory Business Development or other	Carolina Thread Trail; Hickory Parks and Recreation' Visit Hickory Metro; Hickory Downtown Development Association; The Chamber of Catawba County; WPCOG
2. Engage with a CTT annual event, such as National Trails Day, and have presence of Hickory based businesses at the event. Prepare business marketing package, auction items which promote Hickory businesses and products, and more.	Hickory CORE Work Group	Catawba Lands Conservancy; Carolina Thread Trail;
3. Advocate for continued development and improvements along Wilderness Gateway State Trail Plan "Segment 10: Catawba County Loop.		Carolina Thread Trail; Catawba County; City of Hickory; Town of Newton; NC State Parks; Foothills Conservancy of NC; WPCOG;

Action 3.4.3: Support continued development and completion of "Wilderness Gateway State Trail Plan: 2022-2027."

1. For all completely constructed trail segments within the planned corridor, obtain approval designation by the Secretary of the	Foothills Conservancy of NC	NC Department of Natural and Cultural Resources; Local trail administrators; WPCOG
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Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, which is required to be officially recognized as part of the State Trail.		
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Goal 3: Support Hickory as the regional center for cultural events *and outdoor recreational activities*

Objective 3.5: Become an official VisitNC OutdoorNC ‘Trail Town Stewardship Designated Program’.

Action 3.5.1: Confirm Visit Hickory Metro’s (TDA) commitment to partnering with VisitNC to participate in this program.

Action 3.5.2: Visit Hickory Metro would be responsible for completing the requirements and expectations for participation as outlined in VisitNC’s program guidelines.

Tasks	Organization/Entity Responsible	Partners / Assistance
1. Communicate with VisitNC regarding participation.	City of Hickory Office of Business Development	Visit Hickory Metro; VisitNC; Tourism Partners

Strategy: Business Development Support

Goal 4: Encourage educational achievement, *and workforce development efforts within the outdoor recreation sector*

Objective 4.1: Partner with area Universities and Colleges to connect students to outdoor recreation sector businesses and otherwise encourage students to become an active part of the Hickory community.

Action 4.1.1: Present this plan’s concept and objectives to the University-City Commission and utilize this standing committee to connect with most applicable university and college programs.

Action 4.1.2: Conduct a survey of all majors and programs available at local institutions of higher learning and identify particular programs which can lead to employment success in the outdoor recreation industry.

Tasks	Organization/Entity Responsible	Partners / Assistance
1. As needed, connect with a student enrolled in parks and recreation oriented degree programs to serve as an intern and work on projects	Hickory Parks and Recreation	Colleges and Universities; NC Works; WPCOG

included but not limited to trail maintenance, event organizing, and more.		
2. Work with a local university to develop a joint project connecting an outdoor recreation business with students from appropriate majors and courses of study, such as Appalachian State University's Industrial Design, Product Design program, Recreation Management, and Marketing	City of Hickory Office of Business Development	University-City Commission; HBInc.; Business Support Organizations

Goal 4: Encourage educational achievement, and workforce development efforts within the outdoor recreation sector

Objective 4.2: Partner with local school systems to connect students to career and educational opportunities that are connected to the outdoor recreation sector businesses.

Action 4.2.1: Develop programs and materials to educate students about current industry and job opportunities within the Hickory area and promote quality job availability.

Action 4.2.2: Maintain presence of outdoor recreation-oriented businesses at local career fairs and other programs which highlight and expose students to local industry and employment opportunities.

Tasks	Organization/Entity Responsible	Partners / Assistance
1. Conduct outreach to area school systems, particularly within their Career & Technical Education programs		Local School Districts and CTE programs; NCWorks; WPCOG

Strategy: Business Development Support

Goal 5: Develop Entrepreneurial Initiatives

Objective 5.1: Map the entrepreneurial ecosystem to identify all available business support organizations, committees, and other resources available to encourage entrepreneurial success.

Action 5.1: Encourage collaboration between existing business support organizations and private sector businesses to strengthen connections.

Tasks	Organization/Entity Responsible	Partners / Assistance
1. Work with Catalyst Group and Business Development Services 2. Arrange a local manufacturing summit to connect area businesses	City of Hickory Office of Business Development	Hickory CORE Work Group; The Chamber of Catawba County; EDC; SBTDC; SBC; MSC

Goal 5: Develop Entrepreneurial Initiatives

Objective 5.2: Engage with The Chamber of Catawba County entrepreneurship initiatives including “The Catalyst: Entrepreneurs Supporting Entrepreneurs,” “Founder’s Meet-Ups”, and other similar groups.

Action 5.2.1: Maintain engagement of outdoor recreation-oriented businesses at these groups’ meetings, and promote the potential for outdoor recreation-oriented entrepreneurship opportunities.

Tasks	Organization/Entity Responsible	Partners / Assistance
1. Once a local alliance of outdoor recreation business stakeholders is formed, ensure membership is represented at these meetings regularly.	Hickory CORE Work Group	The Chamber of Catawba County; City of Hickory Office of Business Development

Goal 5: Develop Entrepreneurial Initiatives

Objective 5.3: Identify at least one (1) outdoor recreation-oriented business to apply to and enroll in the Waypoint Accelerator program.

Action 5.3.1: Seek out an emerging business with growth potential and encourage the business owners to apply for and enroll in the Waypoint Accelerator.

Tasks	Organization/Entity Responsible	Partners / Assistance
1. Maintain contact and engagement with the Outdoor Business Alliance and Mountain BizWorks CDFI, which jointly administer this business accelerator. Promote information about the program and encourage identified businesses to apply when the program window is open.	City of Hickory Office of Business Development	Outdoor Business Alliance; Mountain BizWorks; The Chamber of Catawba County; SBTDC; Small Business Center; Business Support Organizations

2. Hickory based entrepreneurship support groups should attend events hosted by this organization and continue to engage, promoting the business development opportunities that are available in the Hickory area for new and growth-oriented businesses.	Hickory CORE Work Group	Same as above
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