

Views of the renovated Union Square and City Walk during the annual Swingin' Under the Stars event in Hickory.

# A NEW LOOK

While staying true to its furniture-industry past, Catawba County is investing, upgrading and expanding for its future.

Hickory and furniture are a longtime match. Catawba County's largest city, it has been home to manufacturers and showrooms for more than a century. The industry remains alive and well — 27% of jobs are categorized as manufacturing, according to the Catawba County Economic Development Corp.

But the region is undergoing a makeover that mixes classic features with modern twists. "We kind of went through a transition from the manufacturing age," says Hickory City Manager Warren Wood. "We're geared for family-oriented activity. We have the Crawdads [minor league baseball], the lake [Hickory]. We're close to the mountains. Our family numbers are really strong. We're optimistic about our future."

Similar tales are told across

Catawba County. Its cities and towns are crafting live-work-play downtowns that host family-centered activities. Colleges are preparing a new generation of workers. Data centers are booting up, and longtime businesses are investing. "Conover, Newton, Hickory — all have invested in sort of reinventing themselves in order to encourage growth in the 20 to 44 age group," county EDC President Scott Millar says. "They've built or are building things such as extensive walking trails, greenways, quality of life improvements, breweries. 'Reinvention' is a trite term, but anybody that explored Catawba County and Hickory and this region in the past would be astonished now at the differences that are out there. You don't imagine downtown Hickory having a

multistory apartment complex right over a restaurant, but it does."

Millar says the transformation is just beginning. "The world is changing," he says. "You better get on and ride this thing."

## TRAIL MIX

The 5.2-mile Hickory Trail has three segments, a quarter-mile buffer on each side and crosses the path of 26% of city residents. City leaders' 20-page playbook labels it "a catalyst for economic growth and revitalization" and a "major asset in the community's effort to build a strong economy." The project, funded by a \$40 million bond referendum and \$10 million in grants, includes recreation, shopping, hospitality, residential, medical services and education components.



It's expected to bring 8,000 jobs, 1,750 housing units, 3,500 residents and \$500 million in private investment by 2035.

The Trail's Riverwalk section starts at the Catawba River. It has mountain bike trails, and public water access for paddle boards and kayaks is planned. A small spot is zoned residential. The middle section — the Old Lenoir Road Phase, which goes to 9th Street NW before the final stretch carries it to Lenoir-Rhyne University — is zoned general business and office/institutional on its south side and medium-density residential on its north side. The average single-family home value along the Trail's entirety is estimated as \$250,000, a total of \$41.5 million.

Catawba County is proving to be a popular place to live. Its population was 160,732 in 2020, according to N.C. Office of State Budget and Management. That's an increase of more than 6,000 from a decade before.

"We're seeing a lot more growth, really all over," Wood says. "We understand the value of economic activity. We understand what's meant to improve our quality of life. And all of those things are coming together."

It's a busy time in Hickory, even with a global pandemic. "I have never seen, from the housing side, the commercial side, the industrial, more activity in the 30 years I've been here," Wood says. "Our challenge is building enough housing for people to move in to. We're a family friendly community. A lot of homegrown businesses are here. We understand the value of economic activity, and the Trail system was meant to improve our quality of life, which it has done. And it attracts a high-quality workforce. So, all of those things come together. The whole bond initiative was to attract and retain the working-age workforce, and we've really been successful."

## A NEW NEWTON

The largest employers in Newton skew overwhelmingly toward manufacturing. There's Bassett Furniture, Corning, Flowers Foods, Lee Industries and Renwood Mills, which makes Southern Biscuit and Tenda-Bake flours and baking mixes. And while these longstanding companies provide jobs for the city's residents, which the N.C. Office of State Budget and Management says numbered 13,059 in 2019, local leaders are banking on upgrades to attract residents, visitors and businesses. And they start downtown.

The Newton Streetscape Revitalization Project was adopted in 2016. "[It's] the largest infrastructure investment in Newton in generations," says Alex Frick, the city's public information officer. "The ongoing Newton Streetscape Revitalization Project is the city of Newton's primary



Clockwise from top left: Hickory's Riverwalk under construction; construction of the double-helix arches of the City Walk's pedestrian bridge over NC 127; side view of the Riverwalk under construction next to Lake Hickory; renderings of the Riverwalk overwater bridge.

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plan to make downtown Newton more vibrant. Completed streetscape projects across the country indicate that similar municipal investments yield a return in private investment many times larger than the initial municipal investment, and we have already seen significant private investment that is at least partially a result of the city's investments downtown. The project is about halfway complete, and we are looking forward to completing the remaining phases of the project."

Outdated underground utilities — water, sewer, electric, cable, fiber — are being replaced under the plan. Frick says above-ground improvements include newly paved travel lanes, bike lanes and parking, wider paver sidewalks, decorative lights and poles, streetside trees, benches, and trash and recycle bins.

Entertainment is expanding, too. "The first phase included the addition of the Frank & Sue Jones Amphitheatre, across from the 1924 Courthouse, which is the perfect setting for outdoor concerts and performances," Frick says. "The amphitheater was funded thanks to a generous bequest from the estate of Sue Jones." It hosts Downtown Newton Development Association's Bright Future Concerts series, which resumed in June. Held monthly, the concerts include a musical act, children's activities and food trucks.

The project's second phase included construction work at Yount Park, which is at the intersection of College Avenue and A Street. "The park doubled in size to allow for a new performance space and greater accessibility," Frick says. "New landscaping and pavers make the space more inviting to residents and visitors."

Newton also pushes its industrial sites and business parks, underscoring its proximity to Charlotte. "With the expansion of N.C. 16 to four lanes between Newton and Charlotte, there



is a direct, 40-minute link between the two cities,” Frick says. “We expect to see significant growth as a result of this new link and plan to embrace the changes that growth will bring while maintaining the attributes that make Newton such a special place to live and do business. We are pleased to be seeing increases in private investment as a direct result of significant municipal infrastructure investments throughout the city, and we plan to continue making those investments to make Newton increasingly attractive to residents and businesses.”

### CONOVER’S MAKEOVER

After Broyhill Furniture shut the doors to its downtown Conover factory in 2005, city officials purchased the property. They wanted to repurpose the site into a central business district. They described the move as a mix of downtown revitalization and economic development.

Most of the former factory’s structures were demolished within five years. Conover officials say that created “a clean slate, where a variety of uses could be undertaken.” Renamed Conover Station, the site sits near N.C. 16, U.S. 70 and U.S. 321 Business. Hop in a car and Hickory is minutes away. Charlotte is about an hour’s drive.

While Conover Station is slated to eventually become a multimodal transportation center that offers passenger rail service, it already is home to a Catawba County Library branch, coffee shop, community meeting room and city park. Catawba Valley Community College moved its Manufacturing Solutions Center here about a decade ago. It offers product testing for textiles, structural furniture and plastics; resources for product development; workforce training on manufacturing basics such as software and equipment; product sourcing; cut-and-sew production; business incubation; and support for companies



**Yount Park, across from the 1924 Courthouse in Newton, was revitalized as part of the streetscape improvements and is now a beautiful spot for taking a rest, having a picnic and enjoying small outdoor performances.**

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August 2021 photo of the 270-acre Trivium Corporate Center.

that work with nontextile products such as rubber, plastic, wood and metal.

In April, Conover and CVCC officials met at Conover Station to break ground on a project that will renovate the Manufacturing Solutions Center and open a two-story expansion. Its first floor will house labs for structural engineering and fabric formation. A personal protective equipment and textile resource lab and rooms for conferences and meetings will be upstairs. The N.C. General Assembly allotted \$9 million in CARES Act funds for the project, which also received grants from N.C. Community College System and N.C. Manufacturing Extension Partnership.

## WORKFORCE CREATION

Catawba County is home to Lenoir-Rhyne University, an Appalachian State University campus and CVCC. Specialized training centers include N.C. Center for Engineering Technologies, Apprenticeship Catawba, NCWorks and high school career and technical education programs. “We call ourselves Charlotte’s Great Northwest because of all the education and training we have here,” Wood says.

Local workforce-development

initiatives are educating, training and segueing students and residents into local jobs. They target industries such as automotive parts manufacturing, food processing, advanced textiles and data centers. “There are new community college improvements, like new programs with the K-64 initiative and the Manufacturing Solutions Center — it’s a new development phase in Conover,” Millar says. “It looks a lot different than it did two or four years ago.”

Led by CVCC, K-64 launched after a 2016 survey revealed a gradual decline in the county’s working-age population. A collaboration that includes local business, community partners, Catawba EDC, Catawba County, The Chamber of Catawba County and local school systems, its goal is to “increase student and employer engagement in educational programs proven to prepare a qualified workforce.” That includes helping students with curriculum choices and assisting adults seeking employment. In less than two years, it raised \$6 million, invested more than \$300,000 in teacher training and saw more than 300 businesses partner with the CVCC Workforce Solutions Center.

## ROOM TO GROW

Catawba EDC’s website lists move-in ready locations for businesses and industries, including the 270-acre Trivium Corporate Center, which is jointly developed by the EDC, Catawba County and Hickory. It’s zoned for office and light-industrial use and is less than a mile from CVCC. Current tenants include Toyota Motor Corp. affiliate Cataler and Corning, which plans to add 110 jobs and invest \$60 million over five years. They’re joined by American Fuji Seal, which announced a 260,000-square-foot factory — a \$52 million investment that will create 101 jobs — in December, and Gusmer, which announced in April it was investing \$38.2 million in a 135,000-square-foot manufacturing center for liquid filtration products that will create 73 jobs. “There are only three lots left, and we’re fairly confident by October there will be another announcement in advanced manufacturing,” Wood says. “We anticipate in the next year the original footprint will be full.”

Catawba County recently purchased 100 acres adjacent to Trivium. “We’re going to get it ramped up and put it on the market,” Wood says. “We originally thought it would take us 20 years to fill this thing up, but it’s going to be full in its first five or six years.”

The North Carolina Data Center Corridor slices through North Carolina’s western third, from Catawba County southwest toward Forest City. Powered by the same abundant sources of electricity that spun the textile industry a century ago, it’s populated by technology giants, including Google and Facebook. Apple chose Catawba County for a \$1 billion data center that handles its iCloud and iTunes services in 2009.

The county has courted the industry since 2006. “We made 40% of the world supply of fiber optic cable

Photo by Chad Austin Inc.





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**A Century Furniture Plant 2 pattern-maker creates a tufting design for an upholstered piece of furniture.**

in 2000," Millar says. "We want to position ourselves at both ends of the spectrum. CommScope and Corning make the fiber, and at the other end of the spectrum there are the data center folks. We want to continue to build clusters of technology companies."

There is room to grow, including at the 89-acre The Power Center @ Maiden. This industrial site is 2 miles east of Apple's data center and 28 miles south of Google's \$600 million data center in Lenoir. Conover's Data Site is 83 acres, 3 miles from where Interstate 40 and N.C. 16 intersect. Lyle Creek Technology Park, east of Hickory, is 55 acres, and Claremont has the 50,000-square-foot Powered Shell Data Center.

## LONGSTANDING COMPANIES INVEST

Some Catawba County businesses have deep regional roots. The Shuford family, for example, traces its tree to 1880, when Abel Shuford founded Shuford Mills in Granite Falls, just across the line in Caldwell County. In 1955, the textile manufacturer tried something new. "[It] leveraged some of the existing manufacturing assets and production talent to start a tape

division, capturing the growing demand for basic crepe and flatback paper tapes, commonly known as masking tape," says Shurtape spokeswoman Caitlyn Ward.

Shuford Mills formally created Shurtape Technologies in 1996. Its headquarters, research and development, and three of seven domestic manufacturing operations are in Hickory. It opened a distribution center in the town of Catawba last year. Shuford's great-great-grandson Jim is chairman of Shurtape's board, and great-great-grandson Stephen is vice chairman. But they aren't the only family members to helm a local business. Their uncle, aunt and first cousins founded Century Furniture, now part of Rock House Farm, which owns several furniture companies, including Hickory Chair.

Shurtape produces professional and industrial tapes under several brands. Its 1,500 employees are spread across 13 sites in the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Mexico, Peru, China, United Arab Emirates and Australasia. But there's no place like home. "Hickory, along with Catawba County, offer both geographic and talent benefits," Ward

says. "Geographically, this area is well-placed among Shurtape's network of manufacturing and distribution facilities in the Unifour area, while also providing convenient and easy access to a number of key shipping lanes. This area not only provides a supportive business climate but is also ripe with talent, providing a wealth of highly skilled workers who take pride in getting the job done right."

In 1931, brothers Alex and Lee George bought Hickory-based Merchants Produce Co., which distributed food to small grocers, restaurants, schools and hospitals. What began with 12 employees and three trucks became grocery-store supplier Merchants Distributors in 1956. MDI was an early user of technology — IBM punch cards in the 1940s and mainframe computers in the 1950s. It eventually separated its grocery business from other food service distribution before acquiring Lowes Foods, one of its customers, in 1984. MDI also acquired Institution Food House, combining it with Lowes Foods and MDI to form Alex Lee in 1992.

In February, Alex Lee — which distributes grocery and nonfood items to 600 stores — announced a 200,000-square-foot expansion to its MDI warehouse in adjacent Caldwell County and a partnership with Dematic iQ software, an automated system that will palletize 165,000 cases of product per day. "We are excited to continue to grow in Hickory, where we were founded nearly 90 years ago," says MDI Chairman and CEO Brian George. "The quality of life and the business support from North Carolina and our local community makes the Hickory area an ideal location to continue to grow our business." ■

— Kathy Blake is a writer from eastern North Carolina.





## Alex Lee is celebrating 90 years of growth and innovation rooted in Hickory, North Carolina!

Founded in 1931, Alex Lee is a family-owned and operated company delivering food to communities across the Southeast. Alex Lee is the parent company of wholesale distributor Merchants Distributors, LLC, Souto Foods, and W. Lee Flowers. With locations in Hickory, NC; Atlanta, GA; and Lake City, SC, the company supplies independent grocery retailers, Latino-focused retailers, and its own stores. Alex Lee is also the parent company of 135 retail grocery stores including Lowes Foods, KJ's Markets, Just\$ave food stores, and a number of IGA stores.

We're committed to delivering fresh food to the communities we serve and supporting independent retail entrepreneurs in the American dream. With approximately 16,000 Alex Lee employees, we are proud to be one of Catawba County's largest employers and a partner in growing our hometown.



Dining room from Great South Bay, a Thomas O'Brien for Century Furniture collection.

## COMMUNITY CLOSE-UP CATAWBA COUNTY

# CATAWBA COUNTY REMAINS A MAJOR PIECE OF THE FURNITURE INDUSTRY

Hickory Furniture Mart's four stories are filled with retailers, showrooms and factory outlets. Shoppers travel from around the world to purchase quality pieces of furniture at affordable prices from nearly 200 companies. They receive expert help with styles, fabrics and a host of other related decorating decisions. Many time their visit with sales, including over Labor Day Week-end or the Fall After Market Sale in November. Some make a weekend of it.

But in Catawba County, furniture is more than a good deal today. It has been a long-term investment. A March 2019 *House Beautiful* magazine article about the High Point Furniture Market tradeshow references Catawba's largest city — Hickory. "Even in our ever-globalized world, though, there's still plenty of manufacturing going on within a short distance of [High Point]," its author writes. "Heritage brands ... as well as younger companies ... make their furniture in factories in the area, some over a hundred years old."

The Hickory Chair Furniture Co. was tasked with crafting one made-to-order dining chair in 1911. More than a century later, it makes 90% of its products in its Hickory workroom, where it specializes in custom upholstered furniture and woodworking. It's part of the Shuford family's Rock House Farm. The parent company of Century, Highland House, Hancock & Moore, Jessica Charles and Cabot Wren furniture brands, it took on Pearson and Maitland Smith after Heritage filed for bankruptcy in 2018. RHF employs about 1,000 workers in Catawba County, 275 in Alexander

County and 100 in Guilford County.

Catawba County remains a furniture manufacturing mecca. "The furniture industry in Catawba County is incredibly strong and vibrant, particularly in the upholstery industry," says Comer Shuford Wear. The granddaughter of Hickory Chair's founder, Harley Ferguson Shuford Sr., she's vice president of marketing for RHF, which takes its name from the stone house situated between the nearby Jacobs Fork and Henry Fork rivers, where she grew up. "I fear that over the years, furniture has seen its reputation as a career option tarnished by the closing of some older factories and companies, which struggled in dealing with a changing global competitive landscape and shifting ownerships from investors who come from outside the industry. Looking deeper shows that most companies have done very well and grown their business as well as their workforce."

Raleigh-based Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina counts more than 36,000 workers in the state's furniture manufacturing sector. It says the



A student tufting a piece of furniture at the Catawba Valley Furniture Academy.

Photos courtesy of Century Furniture and Catawba Valley Community College



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sector's "value chain" of 860 establishments is fed by more than 550 lumber and wood suppliers and a collection of trade groups, such as American Home Furnishings Alliance, and educators. N.C. State's College of Engineering, for example, supplies research and technical assistance to furniture manufacturers. And Catawba Valley Community College, less than a mile from Hickory Furniture Mart on U.S. 70, is home to Catawba Valley Furniture Academy. It teaches furniture fundamentals, pattern making, manual cutting, automated cutting, sewing and upholstery. Since it opened in 2014, all of its 303 graduates have received job offers in the sector.

Bill McBrayer is Lexington Home Brands' human resources manager. Headquartered in High Point with distribution and manufacturing in Hickory, it is one of the Furniture Academy's five founders. "I think custom furniture will always be in demand simply because customers have the opportunity to make it personal," he says. "Our need for skilled labor continues to be in high demand. Our industry doesn't have feeder programs like in sports. This is the main reason we developed the Catawba Valley Furniture Academy, to be able to feed our industry with new talent to replace the ever-aging workforce."

Lori Miller is CVCC's director of furniture workforce development. She sees the industry's demand for workers, too. "We continue to receive job postings on a weekly basis," she says. "All of our programs at the academy prepare graduates for highly skilled, in-demand careers within the furniture industry. Sewing and upholstery seem to be popular choices among students. We greatly appreciate the scholarship funds from the American Home Furnishings Alliance. These scholarships have provided an opportunity for many students to be able to attend the academy and are used to cover the cost of the classes."



**Bill McBrayer giving a tour of the Catawba Valley Furniture Academy to Thomas Stith, president of the North Carolina Community College System.**

Century, also a Furniture Academy founder, and now RHF drink from CVCC's talent pipeline. They also contribute to it. "Over the years, we have contributed teachers — employees who teach at CVCC in addition to their duties at the company — as well as supplies to the program," RHF's Wear says. "We're proud to employ a number of their graduates."

McBrayer says America was built on manufacturing. "America needs to make products to sustain its continued growth," he says. "The manufacturing sector has numerous opportunities for employment for everyone. It's not all about 'sweat equity' jobs. Within the companies, there are [information-technology], management, maintenance and customer-service opportunities, and the possibilities continue. We tout the [Furniture Academy] as allowing people to have meaningful careers, not jobs. We say we help change people's lives."

But even with a growing supply of skilled workers, the past year and a half hasn't been all smooth sailing for anyone in the furniture industry. Wear says the COVID-19 pandemic caused a "massive collapse" in consumer demand. There was a rebound in late fall 2020, when interest in remodeling and redecorating increased. McBrayer believes stay-at-home orders fueled it. "People sat in their furniture more than

they were accustomed," he says. "I think they realized how uncomfortable and worn their furniture really was. Also, people didn't go out and spend a lot of disposable income, so they invested it in their home furnishings."

Despite those bright spots, the furniture industry still faces pandemic induced challenges. "In early 2021, the industry experienced a series of supply chain disruptions that continue even today, along with rapidly rising costs across all the materials and logistics components used in our products," Wear says. "It's been the hardest 18 months anyone in the industry can recall."

But like most challenges, these will pass, too. And Catawba will remain intertwined with the furniture industry, offering opportunities for businesses and workers. "Employees looking for a place to learn and practice a valued, artisanal craft should look no further than the furniture industry," Wear says. "Catawba County is famous for its furniture skill, and the next decade looks incredibly strong for our industry as new generations of buyers start families, buy homes and look to invest in quality products that will last." ■

— Kathy Blake is a writer from eastern North Carolina.





# SMALL CITY BRIGHT FUTURE



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With ample infrastructure, opportunities for employment growth, along with space for residential development, Conover is ready to welcome residents and businesses alike. While Conover has close ties to the Charlotte market, we also boast our own resilient local economy rooted with our strong employment base.

Manufacturing and other related industries have always been a top priority in Conover. In fact, manufacturing and distribution comprise the largest employment in the city, and with our growing utility capacity, we are ready to support more. Conover maintains a strong diversified manufacturing sector, which helps to provide sustainability to the economic base. Conover is home to Manufacturing Solutions Center (MSC); which serves as a testing lab and incubation space for national clients seeking to supplement their manufacturing sectors close to home, and across the globe. Currently, MSC is completing a 75,000 square foot expansion, which will allow Conover to further support industry partners. In addition to the work underway with the MSC, an additional 600,000 square feet of manufacturing space is under construction in the city. Looking ahead to additional development, Conover recently rezoned an additional 250 acres of prime undeveloped land for industrial use. Over the five-year horizon, Conover is also working to prepare an additional 275 acres for industrial expansion by investing in roadway improvements and utility infrastructure.

In Conover, we invite you to not only work, but to live and play in our growing community. Conover continues to support the growth of residential development, seen in the various new residential development proposals that Conover City Council has approved. Currently, over 600 residential units have either been previously approved, or are under construction in Conover. These include single family homes, townhomes, and apartments; housing that suits everyone. Conover prides itself on providing a high quality of life for residents by providing safe neighborhoods, diverse housing options, and investing in our parks, special events, and downtown.