

GROWTH SPURT

Catawba gets a manufacturing training center, Appalachian State University campus and revitalized downtowns.

The Manufacturing Solutions Center has been part of Catawba Valley Community College since 1990. It conducts more than 20,000 tests a year “on anything from apparel, industrial, automotive products, sound-proofing materials, firefighting turnout gear, military products and more,” according to the director Jeff Neville.

A \$9 million special appropriations state grant to the City of Conover is funding a second building for the center to better support U.S. manufacturers and create more manufacturing jobs. Construction on the 75,000-square-foot building known as MSC II began in April 2021. Operations will start moving in before the end of the year with a public opening in early 2023.

The expansion is a partnership

between CVCC, the city of Conover, the Whiskbroom private investment group and private investor Ingram Walters.

“The MSC only exists because of its strong partnerships with business and government on local, statewide and national levels,” Neville says. “The MSC has received strong support from the City of Conover and the NC state legislature as well as groups from throughout the region and state.”

The center’s expansion is among several projects impacting Catawba County’s future. Housing starts are plentiful along with mixed-use downtown centers and rural developments.

The widening of N.C. Highway 16 to four lanes between Charlotte and Newton is inspiring economic development along the corridor. Also Appalachian State’s new App State

at Hickory Campus will start classes in fall 2023, giving the county three higher education institutions.

Lenoir-Rhyne University in Hickory is adding degree programs in high-growth fields, including computer science/cybersecurity, human resources, professional sales, project management and supply chain management. Catawba Valley Community College is a longstanding educational resource.

“App State at Hickory and CVCC’s expansion of the Manufacturing Solutions Center will absolutely be transformational,” says County Manager Mary Furtado. “Those initiatives are only the tip of the iceberg in terms of the exciting things in store for Catawba County.”

In Newton, its four-phase Economic Infrastructure Revitalization

Project and a Strategic Plan penned in 2019 are nurturing business and entrepreneurial advancements. This paired with N.C. 16's upgrade, are what town manager Jonathan Franklin calls a "rapid transformation."

"Staff and elected officials are working to ensure growth in Newton is fostered in a way that makes life better for both longtime residents and newcomers by reviewing land use plans and zoning ordinances, and by making strategic investments in public infrastructure and services," Franklin says. "These investments are intended to encourage growth in a manner that avoids the pains of explosive development we've witnessed in some of Charlotte's neighboring communities while making it easier to live and work in Newton."

In Conover, town manager Tom Hart says a newly developed strategic plan will kick off in 2023.

"I presented a draft to the City Council in September, and I think we're about 90% complete," he says. "It's going to give the city a roadmap over the next couple years and will keep us focused. I mean that literally; the plan identifies focus areas including quality of life, infrastructure, responsible growth and others. Conover has always tried to be innovative and stay at the forefront, and I think you need a plan in place to accomplish that. If you don't have a game plan, you get stuck being reactive."

"Catawba County has enjoyed some wonderful success in growing jobs and private investment in our tax base," says County Manager Furtado. "We'd like to see the economic growth continue, and our collective focus on countywide workforce development efforts will be key to making that happen. We've got alignment of the right players, public and private, and we've got the

right strategies in place. "We need to be savagely focused on execution in order to ensure our employers are well-positioned to meet their labor needs and remain competitive economically."

APP STATE AT HICKORY

App State Chancellor Sheri Everts says there are "numerous possibilities for the Hickory area to engage with the university's sustainability initiatives."

In late September Everts said in a released statement, "In our meetings with Hickory area government, education, civic and business leaders, we have learned that the academic needs of the community include business, education, health care, engineering, design and building sciences."

Both Hart, Conover's town manager, and Franklin, Newton's town manager are App State graduates.

"The (Hickory) campus," Hart says, "is going to really open some opportunities for our area. ASU has a strong public administration program and a lot of city and county managers are alumni so I'm excited about the new campus so close to home. We have a great community college in Catawba County and there's a lot of industry and innovation here, so I think the opportunities for collaboration with ASU are endless."

ASU purchased the six-story, 225,900-square-foot former Corning Optical Communications building in Hickory in November 2021 for \$1 million and received \$9 million in support from the N.C. state budget for upgrades.

The building, on 15.7 acres with parking for 700 vehicles, is less than two miles from Hickory Regional Airport and four miles from Interstate 40.



Concept art provides an aerial view of the former Corning Optical Communications building in Hickory. The six-story, 225,800-square-foot facility is the largest in App State's building portfolio.

"The programs and resources driving workforce development in our community are largely in place thanks to years of effort from countless educators and stakeholders in the public and private sectors," Franklin says. "With ASU's new campus in Catawba County, our ability to attract, support and retain workers can only improve."

"App State has co-admission and articulation agreements with many community colleges, including Caldwell Community College & Technical Institute and Catawba Valley Community College," says the university's news and media relations director Anna Oakes. "We offer transfer students a robust array of services so they can complete a four-

year degree at App State in a timely and cost-effective manner."

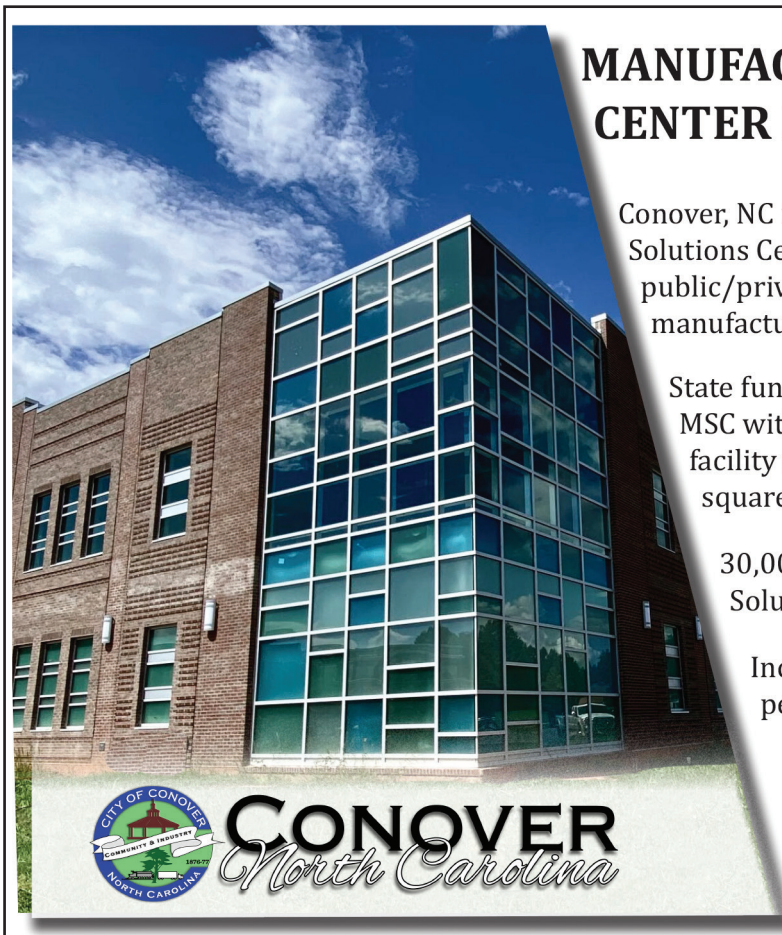
Everts says App's collaboration with Hickory has involved local government, education, civic and business leaders to ensure programs offered will "meet the educational needs of the region."

"These have included members of the General Assembly, representatives from local government entities, higher education, K-12 schools, business, civic and community development leaders," Everts says. "In July, I convened the first meeting of the App State at Hickory Advisory Council, which has representation from key leaders in the Hickory area." Many of the discussions and listening sessions we have had so far have

involved advancing educational attainment for the Hickory area. Common themes that have emerged include innovation, arts and culture, recreation, child care, student support and academic areas that include business, education, health care, engineering, design and building sciences. There are also numerous possibilities for the Hickory area to engage with the university's sustainability initiatives."

Signage, including the university's "A" logo, is visible from U.S. Route 321.

Everts notes that in addition to the \$9 million funding for upgrades, the state budget signed by Gov. Roy Cooper in July includes a 3.5% pay raise for full-time UNC System faculty, retroactive to July 1.



MANUFACTURING SOLUTIONS CENTER II

Conover, NC is the proud home of the Manufacturing Solutions Center (MSC). The MSC is an innovative public/private collaboration supporting U.S. manufacturing.

State funds have recently been used to grow the MSC with upfit and reinvestment in the existing facility and the addition of a second 75,000 square foot building all in downtown Conover.

30,000 square foot addition to Manufacturing Solutions Center I located right next door.

Includes labs to create new fabrics and personal protective equipment.



LIVE, WORK, PLAY

Mixed-use developments and more housing both are in demand in the county, says Roger Young, president with David E. Looper & Company in Hickory. Young is accredited with the designation LEED AP (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) and is an expert in green developments that implement sustainable practices that lessen environmental impact. His company recently constructed One North Center, a six-story mixed-use development in downtown Hickory with 95 residential units. It leased to capacity in less than two weeks. "Hickory and Catawba County are just starting to see the entry level housing that helps with first-time homebuyers," he says. "With the improvements to the downtown area, such as City Walk and River walk, the demand for 'suburban urban' like ONC is huge. We have plans for another facility downtown as well, as we are working with a partner on an urban active adult facility. Housing options of all kinds help to drive growth."

Location and work-from-home options also spur growth.

"This area is attractive for several reasons: close to the mountains, the beach is accessible in a few hours, lower cost of living, less traffic, low tax rates, lots of employment opportunities, good healthcare," Young says. "It used to be that you lived where you work; now you work where you live. Lots of people only go to the office once or twice a week. Why battle traffic every day when you don't have to?"

"Positioned in a great logistical location, this area is poised to continue to grow. And with the

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Conover Station is a community-based redevelopment project. The City of Conover is working to stimulate economic growth and encouraging sustainable downtown redevelopment.

addition of ASU's Hickory campus, we have three great higher-learning options for all," he added.

Young's company recently refurbished Redden's Tavern in downtown Hickory, another step in attracting young professionals.

Hickory isn't the only place pursuing a vibrant downtown.

"Downtown living, ironically, tends to be fairly balanced with young folks that want to live urban while empty nesters that don't want to mow grass and possibly have a second or third home," Young says. "And, I'm told there's also a demand for more restaurant-breweries, especially in the Newton area. As the population continues to increase, the demand for more services increases as well.

"This area is becoming a magnet for good beer, music, outdoor activities and family friendly spots. Hickory and Catawba County have done a great job of creating trails, greenways and parks that draw people. Secondary and tertiary markets are reinventing themselves in North Carolina," he says.

Furtado says housing growth is

about creating "a sense of place," which "creates an environment conducive to small business stepping in and carving out niches that meet some of these needs."

"Our area has some serious momentum in terms of the promising activity happening in each of our downtowns. It's all about creating a sense of place or a vibe that draws people to community gathering spaces," she says. "Practically, this looks like an emphasis on placemaking and creation or enhancement of thriving, walkable mixed-use districts. Because of the way our community has built out over the years, this type of placemaking is more concentrated in our municipalities."

CONOVER

Hart became town manager in March and has previous experience with Main Street downtown programs. He says he's looking forward to working with local businesses.

"I was previously the city manager in Clinton, which has an accredited

downtown, so I do have some experience with that process," he says. "Conover also has other staff in city hall with experience running accredited downtowns. We aren't pursuing formal accreditation at this time, but I am looking forward to working with our local businesses to collaborate and hopefully bring some of our staff's experience to the table to help benefit our downtown."

When he took office, Hart mentioned tackling local effects of "supply chain issues" and the "forward thinking" needed in his community.

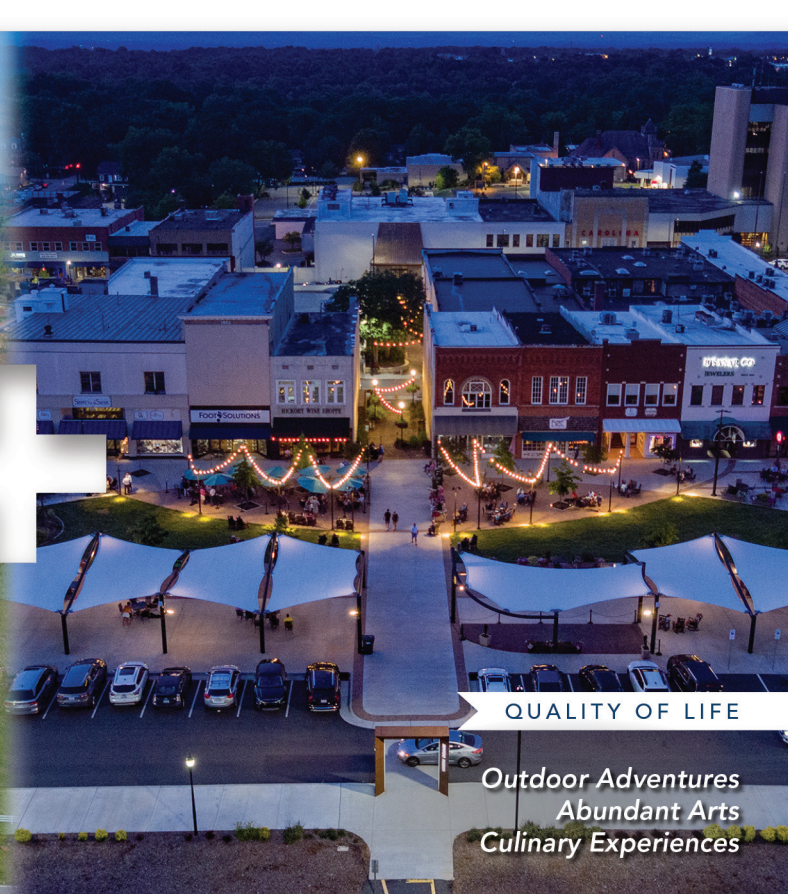
"Like any household or business, city governments purchase all kinds of supplies and services to keep themselves up and running," he says. "Most of Conover's services are mission-critical and many of the supplies we need are hard to find or have become exceedingly expensive.

"As just one example, we've had a hard time keeping even basic supplies and materials on hand like water meters. We've had new homes constructed and literally didn't have water meters to install for them. You



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have to adjust and try to be even more forward thinking in anticipating needs and when that fails you just have to improvise and adapt. He's also eager to see what MSC II brings.

"The MSC is a true public-private partnership; it's essentially a manufacturing R&D center component of the Catawba Valley Community College housed with private investments in the form of a business incubator," he says. "It creates this unique and innovative atmosphere, and there's a lot of groundbreaking, new textile technology coming out of the MSC. Keeping projects like that moving has been critically important."

NEWTON

The first two phases of the Downtown Newton Economic Infrastructure Revitalization project, Franklin says, "were administered by city staff, largely self-funded, and delivered under contract for roughly \$6 million. Sources of funding included grants from the state of North Carolina, Washington, D.C., and ElectriCities of North Carolina, as well as reimbursement from the N.C. Department of Transportation and a private bequest. The costs of the third and fourth phases of the project are estimated at \$6.2 million and \$1.8 million, respectively."

The project focuses on investments in Newton's core business district downtown.

"Each phase of the project includes replacement of outdated

underground utilities and infrastructure and the installation of water lines, sewer lines, electric lines and fiber optic lines that will serve residents and businesses for decades to come," he says. "Above ground improvements include new paving, widened paver sidewalks, decorative street lights and poles, trees, benches, and trash and recycle bins. The Frank & Sue Jones Amphitheatre on Main Avenue was completed during the first phase of the project. Yount Park, which is at the intersection of College Avenue and A Street, was doubled in size and received with new landscaping and pavers. Construction for the project's third phase on College Avenue and fourth phase on First Street is expected to begin in 2023."

The town's strategic plan emphasizes pathways for entrepreneurs and business owners to utilize the state's Small Business Technology and Development Center, Mountain BizWorks and other entities.

"The city of Newton is making strategic public investments and rethinking public services with a renewed focus on creating an environment where entrepreneurs and businesses continue to thrive," Franklin says. "Toward that end, the city recently purchased a vacant 5,000-square-foot building downtown that will soon become the offices of our planning department and Main Street Program. Bringing these key staff members under one roof and relocating them to the center of downtown Newton will make it easier than ever for potential developers and investors to work with city staff as they turn their vision into reality."

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MSC II

MSC II will have four purposes, Neville says.

- 1. An enhanced structural engineering department to provide testing for the furniture industry, as well as prototyping assistance for manufacturers with 3D printers, CNC (computer numerical control) machines and welding capabilities.**
- 2. A fabric formation lab with circular knitting equipment for training and work with manufacturers on product development and prototyping projects.**

3. A PPE (personal protective equipment) Textile Resource Lab with materials produced or supplied by U.S. manufacturers.

4. Meeting rooms and conference space.

“The Resource Lab will support U.S. manufacturers who want to produce PPE domestically, reducing the chance of PPE shortages in the future,” he says.

The new building also will house four local manufacturers graduating from MSC’s incubator space, Neville says.

“It really separates us from other communities,” says Tim Bolick, Catawba County’s marketing and administrative manager.

The center received a \$50,000 grant from the college to purchase PPE testing equipment to combat COVID-19. “When the pandemic hit, we all recognized that there was a shortage of PPE equipment – primarily masks and gowns – but we also saw that there was a great variation in their effectiveness in keeping us safe,” says PPE lab manager Jodi Geis. “This funding allowed us to purchase equipment to test the filtration efficiency and breathability of masks, as well as the amount of protection medical gowns and other products provide to the wearer.

“In addition to our testing services, we also work with PPE manufacturers during the product development process to make sure their products can meet or beat industry standards.”

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PPE testing, she says, goes beyond wearable protection.

“PPE expands to include fabrics used by other industries such as the automotive industry and industries with exposure to paints, oils, and other chemical substances,” she says. “We’re now in a position to support manufacturers of these products to make sure they’re meeting required safety standards and producing high quality products.”

Neuville notes that the MSC also houses a business incubator, with five start-up companies that have created more than 60 jobs with salary and educational attainment levels exceeding local and state averages.

FUTURE FOCUS

“If there’s one thing we have learned through our strategic planning work, there is no silver bullet to attracting and retaining population. Catawba County is in the business of producing quality of life, and all of the core services the county provides contribute to that,” Catawba County



“As four of these companies move their operations to MSC II, the Manufacturing Solutions Center is currently looking for new manufacturing start-ups who are interested in incubator space and MSC support.”

Jeffrey L. Neuville



Manager Furtado says. “We need to be holistic in our focus: People need economic opportunity to provide for their families, and they want to live in an affordable, safe place with strong schools, access to medical services and things to do in their free time. Each of these components is important in and of itself. Together, they’re what moves a community forward.

“Catawba County is in a good place and our future is bright. We’re open for business, having been active and deliberate in creating an environment conducive to job creation and private investment, and we’ve enjoyed solid success in this regard, with more than 3,600 (new) jobs and more than \$3 billion in investment since 2017,” she adds. “Our community-wide team is energized by the work before us. If you want to be a part of something bigger than yourself, you need to come check us out. We are making living better in Catawba County. It’s what we do.” ■

— Kathy Blake is a writer from eastern North Carolina.



MSC II building located in the center of Conover at Conover Station. It is expected to open in early 2023.



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Three-quarters of Appalachian State University’s 142,485 alumni live and work in North Carolina, contributing to our state’s growing economy and quality of life. As the premier public undergraduate institution in the Southeast, App State is actively engaged in endeavors to increase access to higher education, enhance the student experience and prepare tomorrow’s leaders and problem-solvers.

App State at Hickory Campus

In 2021, App State purchased a six-story, 225,800-square-foot building on 15.7 acres to establish the App State at Hickory Campus, which will begin offering classes in fall 2023. Prior to this purchase, Hickory was the largest metropolitan area in North Carolina that did not have a major, public university campus.



An aerial view of the App State @ Hickory Campus taken October 14, 2022.

Innovation District

The university broke ground earlier this year on the first phase of the Innovation District, a redevelopment of campus property to include renewable energy facilities, faculty and staff housing and the new Conservatory for Biodiversity Education and Research, which will bring together expertise across disciplines and facilitate collaborations throughout the region. The project is expected to have a lasting and powerful impact, broadening economic development opportunities across Northwestern North Carolina.



Artistic renderings for App State’s Innovation District depict concepts for the Conservatory for Biodiversity Education and Research as well as housing for faculty and staff (inset).