



Catawba Valley Health System is proud to share with you why we feel Catawba County is a gem in this state and beyond. Catawba County and its municipalities consistently rank high in national lists and publications. Forbes.com ranks the Greater Hickory Metro as having the lowest business costs in the nation. Since 2006 the metro area has been ranked no lower than 6th. *Travel & Leisure* magazine ranks Hickory as the #1 Most Affordable and Beautiful Place to Live in the nation. *U.S News & World Report* has named the Hickory MSA as #1 in their list of Most Affordable Places to Live in the U.S.

Also, *U.S. News & World Report* named Hickory as 3rd for Best Places to Live in N.C., 31st for Best Places to Live in the U.S., 3rd for Best Places to Retire in the U.S., and one of the Top Ten Best Places to Live Near the Mountains in the U.S.

What makes this county such a strong and attractive option for living, working, investing, and even retiring?

Alongside strong Economic Development and Chamber leadership, among others, Catawba Valley Health System plays an important role. Staying innovative with new cardiology and emergency facilities, robotics technology that outpace our regional competitors, offering progressive care and treatment options, and being nationally recognized for safety and quality tell only part of our story. Recently we were named a Top 100 Hospital in the U.S. for patient experience, a testament that we can be high-touch as well as high-tech.

Catawba Valley Health System is honored to be a key component in a county that celebrates vibrant downtown scenes, myriad outdoor activities, amazing higher education opportunities, and a perfect location that places us close to everything you could want to enjoy life – personally and professionally.

Every year, businesses from a variety of industries choose Catawba County as the place to relocate, expand, and tap our skilled workforce. You're invited to see all that Catawba County has to offer. Welcome!



**Dennis Johnson**  
President and CEO  
Catawba Valley Health System



# MAKING IT WORK

From its roots in textiles, Catawba County has grown into manufacturing, higher ed and ‘well-crafted’ lifestyle.

Long ago, in a less-automated era, textile mills lined the Catawba River, their water wheels churning power to spin cotton yarn, grind grain and saw timber, a precursor to Catawba County’s immersion in manufacturing.

Today, 31.5% of Catawba County’s workforce, or about 25,000 people, work some facet of manufacturing jobs at more than 400 companies, mainly automotive components, fiber optic cable, food processing, textiles and handcrafted custom furniture.

Instead of riverside mills, a Manufacturing Solutions Center in Conover and 75,000-square-foot MSC II that opened in March 2023 house an all-encompassing fusion of training, testing, marketing, product development, engineering and business incubator with a mission of supporting U.S. manufacturers and product developers.

The region has become known as the Data Center Corridor because of the area’s data offices for Apple, Facebook, AT&T and others. It includes two employers, Corning Optical Communications and CommScope, with more than 1,000 on their payrolls.

Microsoft broke ground April 1 for its initial Boyd Farms data center in Maiden, where construction should be finished next spring. The company plans four such centers, marking a \$1 billion investment.

“We found a niche in data centers years ago, and we are hoping to pair our marketing efforts, our sites, our workforce providers and our utilities toward the opportunity sectors that prove through the SSG analysis to be in good alignment,” says Scott Millar, president of the Catawba County Economic Development Corp., of its current Industry Growth

Analysis project. “This allows our marketing efforts to make good sense to companies and consultants.”

In March, Steel Warehouse announced a \$27 million investment over four years and the eventual creation of 58 jobs when it constructs a processing center/supply chain link in Hickory.

“With Microsoft and Steel Warehouse, the huge tax base commitment assures that the cost of services to every man, woman and child are shared by a much larger pool. No one wants less police and fire protection, less education or dirtier water, but the costs of these go up just like groceries and gasoline,” says Millar. “Having companies share these costs allows the rates to stay lower, and certainly having these types of industries in town provides schoolchildren the benefit of new job opportunities in new sectors.”





1

- 1 MSC II Building
- 2 MSC II Fabric Formation Lab, Santoni Equipment
- 3 MSC II Cut & Sew Line Operation



2



3

evolved into an attraction open to the public and used by customers across the United States and internationally.”

“The non-textile prototyping center includes welding and woodworking equipment, as well as 3D printers to assist entrepreneurs with the product development process prior to going into full production,” he says.

“The fabric formation lab contains seven Santoni circular knitting machines capable of creating apparel, foundation wear and undergarments,” says Neuville. “The lab also features sewing equipment to finish developments created on knitting machines, allowing entrepreneurs and brands to develop product lines and finalize product specifications before garments go into production with domestic manufacturers.”

The lab began taking on development projects in fall 2023 and is working with 10 clients.

CVCC collaborates with local businesses, community partners, local school systems, county government, the EDC and the Chamber to pair students with career development through a process called K-64.

“Our workforce efforts have been greatly enhanced with the Academy approach (short-course, job-specific classes) developed by CVCC several years ago,” Millar says. “This approach, coupled with the K-64 effort and partnerships with related higher-ed participants such as ASU-Hickory, Lenoir-Rhyne University, Western Carolina (in Cullowhee, in Jackson County) and UNC Charlotte, are all working with us to make these arguments cohesive and compelling to support both existing industries and new industry decision-makers.”

## HIGHER ED, THE MSC & JOBS

Three colleges, Catawba Valley Community College, Lenoir-Rhyne University in Hickory and Appalachian State University’s Hickory campus, help with career and workforce training. The latter campus opened last fall.

The Manufacturing Solutions Center and MSC II are connected with Catawba Valley CC as a way to support their economic impact on the community and region.

The MSC II, says Center Director Jeff Neuville, “serves as the operating locations for four private companies, which graduated from the MSC incubator program. The building is a 75,000-square-foot public/private project funded by the city of Conover

and private equity group Whiskbroom and managed by the MSC.”

Furniture also remains a big business with the Hickory Furniture Mart attracting 500,000 annual visitors. Creators and entrepreneurs can partner with the MSCs.

The MSC’s structural engineering lab, Neuville says, “focuses on standardized and custom testing for the furniture industry, featuring universal testing equipment that can test the weight and pressure of furniture frames and other products” and has increased its testing by more than 50% during the last year.

“The furniture mart grew out of a need to connect the region’s furniture manufacturing with retailers across the country,” says CEO Brad Lail, son of founder Leroy Lail. “Over time, it’s



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Hickory Furniture Mart has been selling locally made products for more than 50 years. It now features four levels of furniture from dozens of manufacturers.

Another education partnership is happening between the Hickory Regional Airport, the city and Catawba Valley CC. "Aviation and education are coming together," says Hickory Mayor Hank Guess. "The new facility will house the Hickory Aviation Museum while simultaneously becoming the focal point for STEM education and workforce development in our region."

## INDUSTRY EXPANSION & LEADERSHIP

Catawba County has 72 industrial and office building sites in its database. The Chamber of Catawba County has two initiatives that work with the EDC's Industry Growth Analysis. They are a Talent Attraction, Retention and Development program and Leadership Catawba, a training course for local business representatives.

"Last fall, the Chamber of Catawba County and the Catawba County Chamber Foundation took a decisive step in understanding our workforce



dynamics by commissioning a comprehensive Workforce Scan," says Lindsay Keisler, Chamber president and CEO. "This initiative enabled us to identify our strengths and areas for improvement, laying a solid foundation for informed decision-making. More recently, we engaged over 100 private sector leaders to pinpoint critical areas for talent attraction, retention and development."

The MSC II building has hosted numerous economic development meetings and trade events, Neville says.

"The MSC is also pleased to be part of the North Carolina Textile Innovation and Sustainability Engine, a group of textile and educational organizations that have been recognized by the U.S. National Science Foundation and selected as a Regional Innovation Engine in January," he says.

Other partners include the Gaston College Textile Technology Center, N.C. State's Wilson College of Textiles and Western Piedmont Community College. The leadership team also includes the state Department of Commerce



Office of Science Technology and Innovation, NC IDEA and RTI (Research Triangle Institute). RTI will lead the engine's evaluation efforts.

## INFRASTRUCTURE & TRANSPORTATION

Catawba's EDC markets the area's proximity to Mecklenburg County, with the southern corner of Catawba at Killian Crossroads only 30 miles up N.C. 16 from Charlotte. Interstate 40 and U.S. 70 run east-west, through Claremont, Conover and Fairgrove to just below Hickory. U.S. 321 and N.C.16 run north-south. The county sits in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, where the Catawba River migrates above Hickory before turning south toward Lake Norman.



Family owned Cargo Transporters is a local success story. The Claremont-based company employs 725.

"The close proximity to I-40, U.S. 321 and N.C. 16 make Catawba County a perfect location for transportation and distribution," says John Pope, board chair of Cargo Transporters in Claremont, which operates 525 trucks and almost 2,000 dry van trailers. Pope, third generation in the family-owned business, has been with

the company since 1985 and seen it grow, along with the county. Cargo Transporters has about 725 workers.

"We have been at the same Claremont site, a quarter-mile from I-40, since 1982 when Cargo Transporters was started," he says. "This site has been expanded numerous times. The parent company was founded on this same site in 1966 and started as a truck rental and leasing company, Catawba Truck Rental. Our next largest location is Rocky Mount, followed by our Charlotte location and Anderson, South Carolina."

## INTERSTATES AND LOCAL EDUCATION ARE BENEFITS

"We have been long-time supporters of Lenoir-Rhyne and Catawba Valley Community College on various programs," Pope says.

The company invests an average of \$15 million to \$20 million annually "with our constant replacement of trucks and trailers to keep a new, reliable, high-tech, safe fleet, most of which are for trucks built at the Daimler Truck plant in Cleveland, N.C.," he says. "Catawba County has a very diverse industrial, manufacturing and distribution base, which makes it a great place for us to be located."

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Hickory has excellent outdoor recreation options, including an extensive greenway system and mountain biking trails. Pickleball courts and other venues add to the mix.



Hickory's restaurant scene is flourishing as seen from these eating places downtown and in the Lenoir-Rhyne University area.



PHOTO CREDIT: VISIT HICKORY



## LIFESTYLE

Catawba has added 6,000 residents in four years, bringing its population to 164,645, according to 2023 census data. Part of its livability lies in its arts and culture scene, small-town boutique shopping, professional sports and a pedestrian-and-bike friendly Hickory Trail connecting popular destinations.

Since passing a \$40 million bond referendum in 2014, Hickory has invested in its 10-mile multi-modal urban trail system and a 378-acre business park. "The bond money has been leveraged to gain an additional \$75 million in grants for complementary projects," Guess says. "This has allowed the city to invest more than \$115 million into trailblazing projects that create a high quality of life, spur economic growth and attract residents and businesses."

Growth along that Hickory Trail includes residential, retail and dining

establishments, including Center Crossing's affordable housing and the One North Center mixed-use project. Two blocks east, One Eleven Main is a \$20 million project that forecasts 107 apartments. An adjacent warehouse has been reworked into a brewery, distillery and barbecue restaurant.

"A drive through Hickory today reveals a revitalized city, abundant with opportunities for a well-crafted life," says Guess, referring to the city's motto of 'Life. Well Crafted.'

The motto mirrors the Furniture Mart's work. "This is quality furniture handmade by craftsmen who have been doing this for generations," Lail says. "The less-expensive big box store stuff is generally not associated with Hickory. It used to be that 60% of furniture in the U.S. came from our region, and while that number may not be the same, there is very little furniture sold in the country in which Hickory hasn't played

a role in manufacturing, marketing, technology, equipment or retail."

Hickory recently was ranked No. 9 in *USA Today's* '10 Best Readers' Choice Awards in 2024 for 'Best Main Street,' Guess notes. The article stated Hickory "is a charming and vibrant destination for shopping, dining and entertainment. Visitors can enjoy a variety of retail shops and restaurants, as well as a park-like setting and outdoor dining."

Leroy Lail, who died in February at age 85, initiated the concept for a convention center in the 1980s, funded by a hotel rooms occupancy tax. "He had the idea to build the convention center and let the Tourism Development Authority, which collects the tax, rent the facility with the option to buy," Brad Lail says. "Now, it's one of the most successful in the Southeast, the largest west of Charlotte and plays host to dozens of meetings and events each year."



# CATAWBA COUNTY, NC

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The SALT Block brings science, art and literature together.

Mandy Pitts Hildebrand, CEO of the Hickory Metro Convention Center and Visitors Bureau, cites some top visitor attractions:

- The SALT (Science, Art, Literature, Together) Block, home of the Catawba Science Center and Hickory Museum of Art and offices of the Western Piedmont Symphony,

Hickory Choral Society, United Arts Council and public library.

- Hickory Motor Speedway's season runs March through October, and Texas Rangers affiliate Hickory Crawdads play summer-long at LP Frans Stadium.
- Semi-pro soccer debuted in 2024 with the Hickory FC playing home games at Lenoir-Rhyne's Moretz Stadium.
- Hotels under construction in Hickory, with target openings of late 2025 or early 2026, include Home2Suites by Hilton (90 rooms) and TownePlace Suites by Marriott (100 rooms).

"There also are numerous walking and hiking trails, mountain bike trails and blueway trails along the Catawba River and throughout the county," Hildebrand says. "Hickory's trail system



Hickory has added miles to its greenway system in recent years.

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App State Hickory is now part of the Catawba community.



## DOWN FROM THE MOUNTAIN

Two years after announcing a \$1 million purchase of the former Corning Optical building on 17th Street NW in Hickory, Appalachian State University opened its Catawba County campus in fall 2023, with 363 students enrolled.

App State previously offered distance education through Catawba Valley Community College. Now, a Hickory campus with 225,800-square-feet of floor space is expanding. The Beaver College of Health Sciences Interprofessional Clinic, offered through its Appalachian Institute for Health and Wellness, recently opened a location on the north side of campus.

"The clinic offers support groups for stroke and traumatic brain injury patients and caregivers as well as aging-well programs, with free screenings for people ages 60 and above focusing on cognition and fall risk assessment," says Anna Oakes, director of news and media relations.

Phase two of renovations should be complete in the next two to three years. "The renovations include creating more classrooms and offices on the second floor, with some new classrooms to be ready by fall 2025," Oakes says. "A new computer lab, cybersecurity lab and sciences lab are scheduled to be completed in summer 2024. The target completion date for the full second-floor renovation, which will double the academic capacity of the building, is fall 2025."

The campus offers academic support services, financial aid, career development, a library and testing center, and other amenities. The university has participated in events with Catawba's Chamber, and worked with Hickory-area businesses including local vendors for event rentals, area restaurants and food trucks and is a sponsor of Hickory Crawdads baseball.

"There are many exciting things happening in the Hickory area," Oakes says, "and we are excited to be a collaborative partner in the Hickory community."

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is almost complete, with 10 miles of new trails including the Riverwalk, which opened in April, along Lake Hickory.”

## WELCOME MAT

Domestic and international visitors spent \$331.48 million in 2022, a 13.5% increase from 2021, according to VisitNC. “Visitor spending in 2022 was a record year, which confirms the importance of tourism and the value it adds to the community,” Hildebrand says. “Hickory, along with communities within the county, have flourished due to public and private investments that are not only beneficial to residents but also to visitors.”

One community is Newton, where a Streetscape Revitalization Project is underway to widen sidewalks, add landscaping and lighting, and include other ways to make downtown more enjoyable for shopping, restaurants and businesses.

Tourism in Catawba directly employs 2,400, with the industry generating a payroll of \$85.2 million.

The Hickory Metro Convention Center’s \$18 million renovation to be completed this summer adds meeting rooms, upgraded auto-visual capacity, outdoor terrace and a 35,000-square-foot exhibit hall with 30-foot ceilings. “The space will be able to house four basketball courts, eight volleyball courts or 12 pickleball courts and is ideal for cheerleading, gymnastics, wrestling and other indoor sports,” Hildebrand says.

Adds Millar: “If you haven’t visited us lately, I think you’d be very surprised. We welcome your exploration.” ■

— Kathy Blake is a writer from eastern North Carolina.

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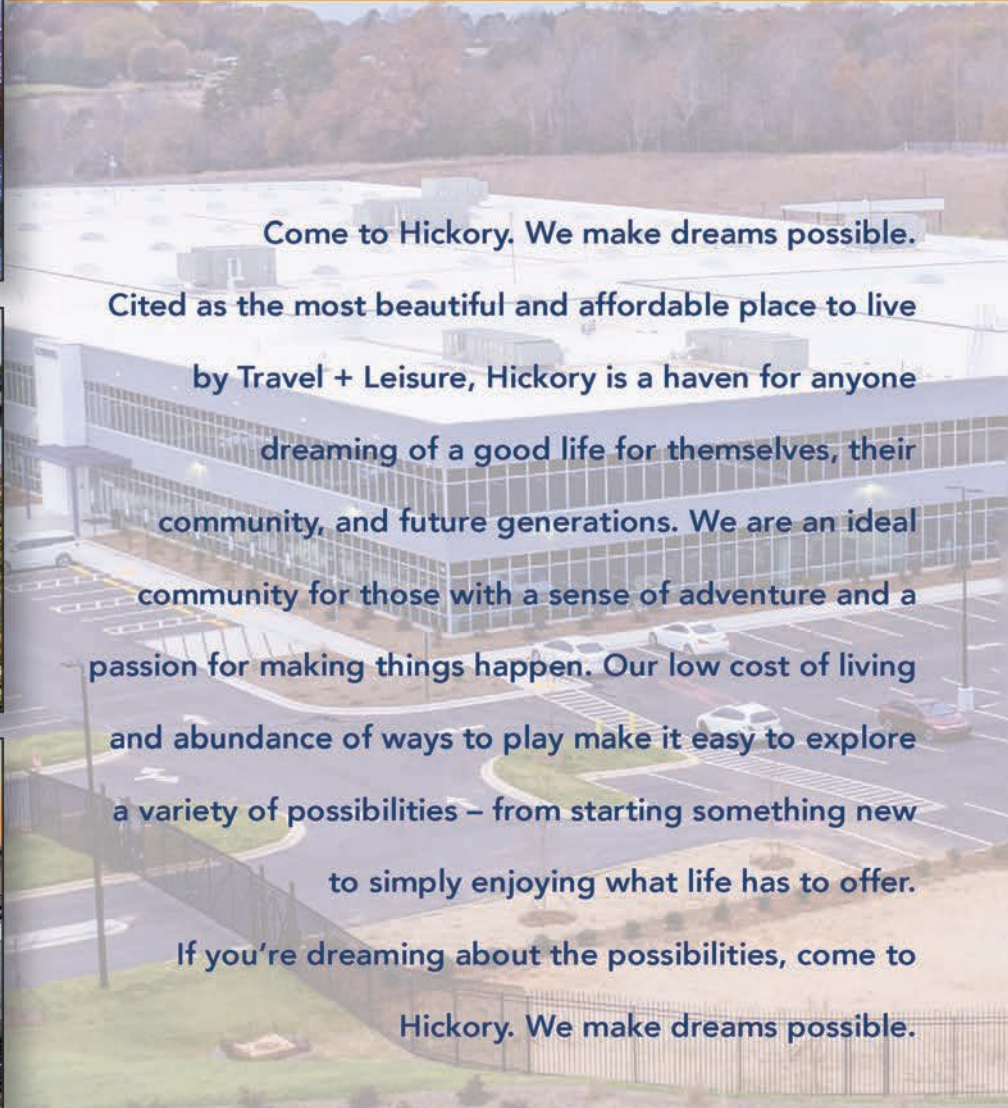
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