

1. The local issue: Transportation

Wilkes County is a beautiful, rural area encompassing 754 square miles, 13th largest in the state. The population of 69,340 is widely scattered across the landscape; the main population center of Wilkesboro/North Wilkesboro contains only 7,798 residents (11%). Eighty-nine percent of the population must travel from outlying districts for work, job training, education, healthcare, community services, and commerce. The 2013 Wilkes County Human Service Transportation Coordination Plan Update cites census data indicating 7.3% of households with zero vehicles and finds “a need for improved service to remote areas” especially for underserved populations, “most notable of which were the low income who need transportation to employment, education, and to the human service agencies.” Data currently being compiled for the triennial Wilkes Community Health Assessment points to 44% of stakeholder participants identifying lack of transportation as a barrier. For all in the county, the availability of dependable, economical transportation represents the link that determines equitable access to employment, opportunities for education and skills training, and economic stability.

Numerous other studies on persistent impediments to employability and education/training concur with local findings that lack of transportation is a primary barrier. According to the Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center, of the “top five concerns which limit service provision or economic opportunities for people with disabilities . . . lack of affordable, reliable, safe transportation options” is the number one obstacle (86%). Also typical is a National Council of Legislatures report titled “Getting to Work: Effective State Solutions to Help People with Transportation Challenges Access Jobs,” which states:

For low-income people, lack of reliable transportation is often a significant obstacle to finding work. They may live far from available jobs, struggle to afford transportation costs, or have inadequate access to public transit, especially in rural and suburban areas. For families that balance work, job training and child care, it can be even tougher to get where they need to be.

The members of the High Country Workforce Partnership Group unanimously identified lack of adequate transportation as the issue whose solution would immediately and significantly improve the prospects for upward mobility for a large percentage of their customers and clients. Members of the

Group cite instances in which people are thwarted in their sincere attempts to find or keep a job; e.g., people losing jobs because their lone household vehicle was needed for family medical appointments or other priorities, or because the car pool vehicle broke down, or because they couldn't afford gas or a needed repair. Due to the limitations of the local public transportation services, workers and others, particularly those who live off the circumscribed fixed route, find that the system may not be reliable in delivering them to work on time or at a rate they can afford.

Two salient examples:

- A recently widowed woman needed to find a source of income. She and her son faced a six mile walk each way from their home to the Goodwill Career Connections; they could not afford the off-route cost of public transportation. They persevered through this hardship until she found work as a home care aide and her son completed his secondary education.
- A young woman who enrolled in WCC College/Career Readiness planned to use public transportation to get to class. Her apartment is located near the Hwy 421N box store shopping area, 2.2 miles from campus. However, the fixed route runs in the opposite direction, so the trip took her through both towns, miles out of her way, and lasted almost an hour. She now attends class at the WCC classroom in the Goodwill Career Connections nearby, even though it doesn't offer the specialty that interests her. To get to the Goodwill site, she crosses five lanes of heavy traffic on foot each way, a circumstance that her instructor relates with a shudder.

Every member of the Partnership can cite numerous similar examples. Availability of affordable, effective public transportation would have made the heroic acts of these remarkable individuals unnecessary, and would aid the many others whose additional barriers or circumstances prevent them from matching this level of persistence.

If granted, funds from the NCWorks Local Innovation Fund Capacity Building Grant would be used to contract with a professional consultant who is expert in the field of rural transportation to develop an innovative plan of action that will address the need for workforce transportation in light of the unique circumstances of Wilkes County. Such a solution might well be replicable in other rural North Carolina counties which face similar problems with workforce mobility.

2. Under-resourced population

The goal of this project will be to develop a plan to reduce the barrier of lack of transportation for the

people served by all members of the High Country Workforce Partnership Group, and, indeed, the Wilkes community at large. Clients being served by members of the Partnership Group include low-income unemployed or underemployed, those lacking a secondary or higher education credential, those lacking specific job skills in high demand in the county, disabled workers, veterans, disconnected youth, those in recovery from substance abuse, and ex-offenders. Members of the Partnership Group work daily with individuals in these populations and, as a result of this project, could enable them to access new transportation services as part of their plan for employment and advancement.

3. A Comprehensive Plan

The capacity building grant would be used to develop a plan based on recommendations from an expert in the field of rural transportation that would include engagement from a community-wide array of interested parties: employers - businesses, industry, and entrepreneurs; the economic development corporation; the community college; workers and the un/underemployed; disadvantaged individuals and their advocates; the local transportation authority; etc. This transparent process will ensure that the resultant plan will be known and embraced by the members of the workforce and local community who can most benefit.

It is expected that the consultant will:

- assess current assets and resources
- examine prior local research and planning
- explore best practices and innovative approaches in the field
- convene focus groups and conduct surveys of employers, community stakeholders, current/potential public transportation users, and the general public
- ensure consideration of equity and sustainability in planning and implementation
- prepare a report and set of recommendations

A portion of the funding will be applied to the services of a local part-time Project Coordinator who will maintain effective communication among the stakeholders and the consultant, assist in coordination of information gathering events and efforts, and aid the progress of the work and its

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effective outcome as needed.

In keeping with the emphasis on capacity building, a small part of the grant funding will be allocated to support a second objective, that of expanding training in an occupational area identified by the High Country Workforce Development Board as in demand and predicted to grow: advanced manufacturing. WCC currently has one instructor qualified to teach the Certified Production Technician program, a nationally recognized certificate applicable to a wide range of manufacturing interests. The Partnership Group has approved inclusion of funds to train two additional instructors in this proposal.

4. Partnerships and Collaborations:

The High-Country Workforce Partnership Group was established to promote communication and collaboration among community entities seeking to foster a viable, dynamic local workforce. The Workforce Partnership Group was established in January 2018 at the annual WCC College/Career Readiness Business Advisory Group meeting and includes WIOA Titles I-IV as well as other agencies that advocate services for specific disadvantaged client populations with multiple barriers to employment and education. The Partnership Group meets monthly.

Members include:

- Wilkes Community College (Workforce Development, College and Career Readiness, Career Services)
- Wilkes Economic Development Corporation
- NC Department of Commerce/NCWorks Career Center
- NC Department of Commerce/Division of Workforce Solutions
- Wilkes Vocational Rehabilitation/NC Regional VR Business Relations
- Wilkes County Department of Social Services
- Goodwill Industries (Goodwill Career Connections/ Goodwill Project Reentry)
- High Country Workforce Development Board
- North Wilkesboro Housing Authority

The Partners are committed to working closely with the consultant to facilitate and provide input and oversight throughout the grant project.

For the purposes of the NCWorks Innovation Fund project, collaboration will extend community-wide. Effort will be made to publicize and seek input from both employers and employees, along with other

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individuals impacted by the need for adequate transportation and any other organizations and agencies who may wish to have a voice.

Conclusion:

Wilkes County is currently undergoing a resurgence, with streetscape improvements and installation of permanent, attractive farmer's market/performance places in both major towns. Outdoor activities are abundant, supported by a number of high-quality venues including the acclaimed Dark Mountain and other mountain biking trails, W. Kerr Scott Reservoir, the Yadkin Valley Greenway, several disc golf courses, and the many pleasant, well-utilized public parks in town and along the reservoir. Merlefest, the annual Americana music festival, draws nearly 80,000 visitors each year; the Brushy Mountain Apple Festival and Carolina in the Fall music festival also bring enthusiastic crowds. Town and county governments, the economic development corporation, the community college, and others are intensively working to attract new business and industries and to expand existing ones in order to capitalize on the current spirit of optimism. In this context, provision of adequate public transportation as a vital element of infrastructure is timely and essential to support mobility of the workforce and enable all residents to benefit from and contribute to their community.

While the unemployment rate in Wilkes County was 4.3% in 2017 and has steadily improved, the poverty rate consistently exceeds the state level, with 78.7% of children qualifying for free/reduced lunch. This seeming paradox is emblematic of a lack of family-sustaining income among adults during their prime employment years, certainly impacted by their inability to get where they need to go for jobs and training. Mitigation of the transportation problem would go a long way toward enabling these families and their disadvantaged neighbors to make a living in this livable place.