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**Catawba County's Strategic Plan:
Building a Foundation for Future Prosperity**
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In late 2016, the Catawba County Board of Commissioners began leading a coordinated strategic plan to drive Catawba County's economic competitiveness forward in collaboration with local municipalities and community partners.

Their vision was based on several factors, including the need to retain and recruit a strong and stable workforce; the desire to continue enhancing the County's appeal to working-age adults and families, who are the key economic driver of any community; and the ability to capitalize on Catawba County's ideal location.

Why now? Recent census data indicated the Hickory-Lenoir-Morganton MSA has experienced a decrease in its working age population, likely due to the MSA's high unemployment that accompanied the 2008 recession. Jobs have begun rebounding in the area, but due to the slowly recovering workforce a large number have remained unfilled. Unless something changes these trends, population projections from the North Carolina Office of Management and Budget indicate this talent shortage could increase over the next 15 years.

What the data doesn't show is the action already being taken in several different sectors to attract businesses, recruit employees and fill jobs; to increase community recognition and appeal; and to retrain the existing workforce with adaptive skill sets for today's global economy.

"Everything happening in the community right now is tying back to the recognition that we have got to grow our population and we have got to improve our workforce," said Catawba County Manager Mick Berry. "Everyone is really on the same page. Being in this community almost 27 years now, I've never seen so much unanimity in terms of 'Yep, we get it. This is our A-number-one issue and all of us have to do our part to accomplish that goal.'"

"All of this good work inspired the Board to bring new energy to our vision of a thriving future for Catawba County," said Randy Isenhower, Chair, Catawba County Board of Commissioners.

"We have traditionally focused on creating jobs and developing skilled workers, and we will continue to focus on these areas. However, we must also enhance the appeal of living in Catawba County for working-age adults and families."

Knowing this vision would require a comprehensive approach, the Commissioners scheduled work sessions to examine several critical growth sectors: economic development, water and sewer, education, broadband, healthy and safe community, arts and culture, housing, parks and environment, and branding and marketing. These sessions, which took place between October 2016 and March 2017, enabled the Board to identify potential growth opportunities, set strategic goals, and begin making tactical decisions to support their vision.

“When the Board committed to the strategic planning process, they made it clear that they were committing to taking action,” said County Manager Mick Berry. “They didn’t want to spend months putting a plan on paper that would sit in a binder on a shelf somewhere. They wanted to take decisive action as opportunities presented themselves.”

The Commissioners also recognized that success of the plan would depend on engaging key stakeholders right from the start. As the work sessions took shape, the Board reached out to local municipalities, business leaders, community partners, County staff, and citizens for input, ideas, and strategy recommendations to help determine the best steps forward.

“I’ve been comparing the process to building an airplane in flight,” Berry said. “We all know where we’re headed, and we’re making decisions together about the best way to get there as we go along.”

Some early successes in the Board’s planning process included the following:

Economic Development: After reviewing a local assessment of Catawba County’s current economic development inventory and comparing it to regional competition, the Commissioners took quick action. They moved to develop a second speculative shell building using proceeds from the first, which drew 46 jobs and a \$7,255,000 investment to Catawba County. They also took steps to advance Park 1764, a Class A business park designed to diversify the county’s economic development offerings in partnership with the City of Hickory.

Water & Sewer: Providing adequate infrastructure is vital to supporting growth, and the Board took steps early on to determine expansion needs. This included working with municipalities to develop a ranking process to prioritize system growth and undertaking a scoping study to identify key areas for future development.

“Much of what we’re doing now is very future focused,” Isenhower commented. “Especially in an area like utilities, we are literally laying groundwork to put the county in the best position for growth over the next few decades.”

Education: Knowing that education is a top priority for most families when choosing where to live, the Commissioners adopted a resolution to form a 12-member governing board for K-64 and pledged \$1.3 million in start-up funding per year over its first two years. K-64 is a game-changing education and economic development initiative designed to equip students of all ages with the skills needed for viable and sustainable careers, from their entry into school through retirement. The initiative formally kicked off in March with a signing ceremony featuring K-64’s seven founding organizations: Catawba Valley Community College, Catawba County Schools, Hickory Public Schools, Newton-Conover City Schools, Catawba County Government, Catawba County Chamber of Commerce, and Catawba County Economic Development Corporation.

“If ensuring Catawba County’s future prosperity means winning the talent war, we need to do everything we can to advance and attract great talent right here in Catawba County and prepare students of all ages to achieve their desired goals,” said Isenhower.

Parks & Environment: To enhance quality of life in a rapidly-growing part of the county, the Board approved development of Mountain Creek Park on 589 acres connected to Lake Norman in Sherrills Ford. The park’s design, which included significant public input, is currently projected to feature more than 40

miles of premier mountain bike trails, a natural playground, canoe and kayak access, hiking trails, and picnic and camping areas. The Board also approved the acquisition of an additional 209 acres to expand Riverbend Park in the northern part of the county.

“The goal is to make our parks system a world-class destination for residents and visitors from all around the region,” said Berry.

Community Marketing: In March 2017, the Board approved a formal process to develop a community branding and marketing strategy that will help tell Catawba County’s story in a consistent and compelling way. To do that, the County will collaborate with community partners on community messaging and regional marketing campaigns aimed at attracting new residents and employers to Catawba County.

Concurrent with taking initial action in these areas, the Commissioners are conducting further research into their remaining strategic priorities:

Housing: The Board is working to identify market-driven housing approaches that contribute to the overarching goal of growing the local working-age population. This involves researching strategies that have worked in other communities, as well as identifying a balanced approach to support both smart growth (around already developed areas and infrastructure) and fast growth (in the southeastern part of the county).

Healthy & Safe Community: The Commissioners are exploring how to make health and safety services, information and referrals more accessible across the county. They recently visited Raleigh to observe a paramedicine program, in which Emergency Medical Services personnel integrate provider services to help assure the right care at the right time and the right place. They also visited a shared service center model, which strives to make critical services more geographically accessible to residents.

Arts & Culture: Community input highlighted the need to infuse the concept of placemaking through County programs and services in order to move the County forward as a preferred place to live, work and visit. The County’s parks system is a big part of this concept, and the Board’s community marketing strategy will also address it by exploring ways to promote awareness of existing quality of life assets.

Broadband: Because internet connectivity is limited in some parts of the County, the Board is determining how to enhance broadband access. While providing internet connectivity directly to citizens falls outside the scope of County government, the Board is continuing to explore existing partnerships and programs that have the potential to contribute to local broadband expansion, support start-up businesses, and help close the “homework gap” for students who lack access.

So what does the future hold for Catawba County’s strategic plan?

“Now is when all of the hard work really starts,” said Berry. “We’ve formed the broad vision, we’ve seen how we can do this, and we believe we can do this. Now we’ve got to break it down into bite-sized chunks and just keep getting it done, one step at a time.”

“Our vision is ambitious,” said Isenhower. “We can get there by staying focused on our end goal and working together to lay a strong foundation for future prosperity.”