



RURAL FREIGHT TRANSPORT NEEDS STUDY RP 2019-17

Global Research Institute

Socioeconomic Context
and Development Needs
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Socioeconomic Context and Development Needs

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Introduction

This report describes the socioeconomic attributes of rural North Carolina and portrays the associated development needs. It focuses heavily on the northeastern and southwestern portions of the state since those are being used as case study examples. Geographically, it uses the eight statewide planning regions established by the N.C. General Assembly as the basis for identifying the counties that are included within each of these areas.¹ A map of these zones is shown in Figure 1 below.

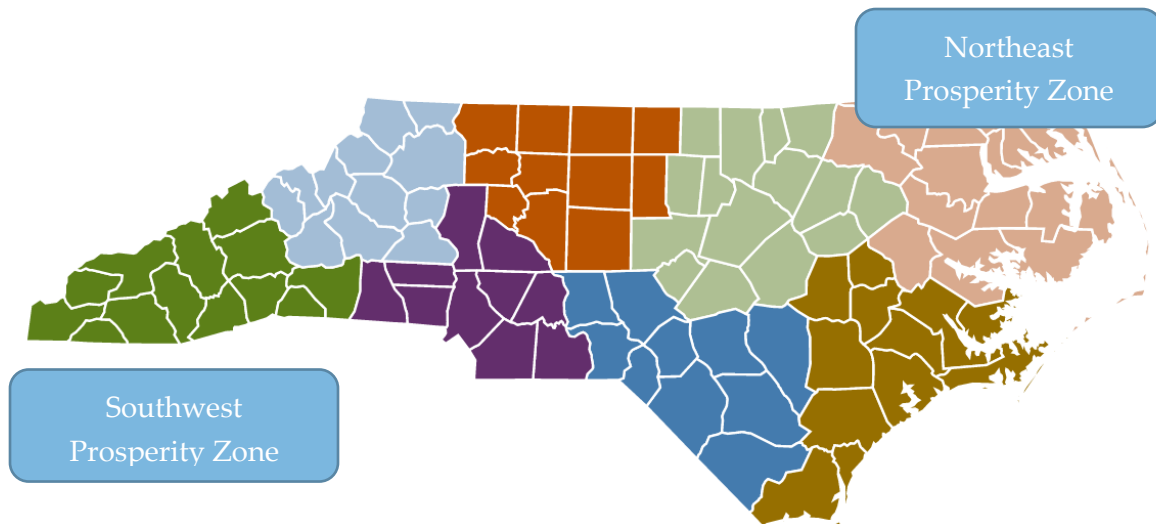


Figure 1: The Eight North Carolina Economic Prosperity Zones

Source: <https://www.nccommerce.com/about-us/nc-prosperity-zones>

Northeast Prosperity Zone

The Northeast Prosperity Zone is a largely rural and sparsely-populated, 17-county region, whereby counties are divided into two sub-zones – Elizabeth City (10 counties) and Greenville (7 counties):

- *Elizabeth City*: Camden, Chowan, Currituck, Dare, Gates, Hyde, Pasquotank, Perquimans, Tyrrell, and Washington counties
- *Greenville*: Beaufort, Bertie, Halifax, Hertford, Martin, Northampton, and Pitt counties

Areas that fall within the Northeast Prosperity Zone were settled very early by European migrants, both those coming directly from Europe and those coming from adjacent territory in what is now the Commonwealth of Virginia.² As of 2017, an estimated 541,000 people—or five of every 100 North Carolinians—lived here.³

Once one of the state's more prosperous areas, the Northeast Prosperity Zone today contributes more modestly to the overall economy. Noteworthy trends include the following:

- *Low regional share of state economic activity* - The value of goods and services produced by businesses based in the Northeast Prosperity Zone equaled \$19.3 billion in 2015, the last year with complete estimates. Put differently, the Northeast Prosperity Zone generated \$4 of every \$100 in statewide economic activity.⁴
- *Sixty-five percent of the region's business establishments do not hire employees* - The region contained some 12,000 private business establishments with employees in 2016, the last year with complete data; those firms accounted for 5 percent of the state's employer establishments. The Northeast Prosperity Zone also contained another 34,000 establishments with no employees.⁵
- *People-of-color-owned business share disproportionately low* - Of all business establishments, 25 percent were owned by persons of color in 2012, the last year with data; in contrast, persons of color contributed some 43 percent of the population.⁶
- *Nine percent unemployment rate* - On average, the Northeast Prosperity Zone was home to 5 percent of the state's civilian labor force from 2013-17; of those people, 9 percent, on average, were unemployed.⁷
- *Area labor earnings lower than the state average* - The typical working person (age 25+) residing in the area had, on average, annual labor earnings of \$31,500 from 2013-17, an amount 10 percent less than the statewide figure.⁸
- *Region economically depressed* - On average, 21 percent of the region's population lived in households with incomes below the federal poverty level, with another 22 percent living in households with incomes no greater than twice that level; in all, 43 percent of all residents were poor or near poor.⁹

When such trends are broken out by the area's two sub-prosperity zones, noticeable differences appear between the seven-county region centered on Greenville (Beaufort, Bertie, Halifax, Hertford, Martin, Northampton, and Pitt counties) and the 10-county region centered on Elizabeth City (Camden, Chowan, Currituck, Dare, Gates, Hyde, Pasquotank, Perquimans, Tyrell, and Washington). Pitt County is a regional locus of economic activity.

A Modest Contributor to Statewide Economic Output

The value of goods and services produced by businesses based in the Northeast Prosperity Zone equaled \$19.3 billion in 2015, the last year with complete estimates. Put differently, the Northeast Prosperity Zone generated just \$4 of every \$100 in statewide economic output.¹⁰

Noteworthy trends include the following:

- *Private sector economy* - The region's private-sector enterprises generated \$15.2 billion in economic activity in 2015, out of a regional total of \$19.3 billion; that translates to \$79 of every \$100 of economic output produced by private businesses.¹¹
- *The largest source of economic output was the private service providing sector* - such firms generated \$10.1 billion in economic output, or two-thirds of the private-sector total.¹²
- *Greenville sub-zone more prosperous than Elizabeth City sub-zone* - The total value of goods and services produced by businesses based in the Greenville Sub-Prosperity Zone equaled \$13.5 billion, an amount 2.3 times greater than the \$5.8 billion in economic output produced in the Elizabeth City Sub-Prosperity Zone, despite the inclusion of three additional counties in the Elizabeth City Sub-Prosperity Zone.¹³
- *Pitt County most prosperous county in the region* - The major geographical source of regional output is Pitt County, which is where \$41 of every \$100 originated. Pitt County's \$8 billion in economic output benefited from some \$2.2 billion in public-sector output, especially from activities tied to East Carolina University.¹⁴
- *Other prosperous counties in the region* - After Pitt County, the largest geographical sources of output were Dare (\$2.3 billion), Beaufort (\$1.6 billion), Halifax (\$1.4 billion), and Pasquotank (\$1.3 billion) counties; when combined with Pitt, these counties accounted for over three-fourths of regional output.¹⁵
- *Higher per-capita income in Greenville sub-zone* - In 2015, economic output per capita in the Northeast Prosperity Zone was an estimated \$35,839, versus a statewide figure of \$50,136. In the Greenville Sub-Prosperity Zone, the per capita figure was \$36,994, versus \$33,405 in the Elizabeth City Sub-Prosperity Zone.¹⁶

A Private Sector Economy Built on Small, Service-Providing Businesses

The region contained some 12,000 private business establishments with employees in 2016, the last year with complete data; put differently, the 17-county Northeast Prosperity contains 5 percent of the state's private employer establishments.¹⁷ The region also contained 34,000 establishments with no employees.¹⁸ Noteworthy trends include the following:

- *The entire region was home to 11,789 private business establishments with employees.* Of these establishments, 7,112, or 60 percent, were in the Greenville Sub-Prosperity Zone, while 4,677, or 40 percent, were in the Elizabeth City Sub-Prosperity Zone.¹⁹

- *The largest geographic concentration of employer establishments was in Pitt County, which contained 3,593 such establishments, or 30 percent. After Pitt County, the most employer establishments were in Dare (1,578), Beaufort (1,099), Halifax (951), and Pasquotank (915) counties; these five counties contained 69 percent of all employer establishments.*²⁰
- *Nearly nine of every ten private-sector employer establishments were in the broad service sector. The shares were similar across the two sub-prosperity zones.*²¹
- *The largest concentration of establishments was in the retail trade super-sector (2,267), followed by the health care and social assistance (1,341), other services (1,316), accommodation and food services (1,278), and construction (1,111) super-sectors.*²²
- *Reliance on agriculture, retail, foodservice* - Compared to the overall state, the Northeast Prosperity Zone had higher than expected concentrations of employer establishments (in descending order) in the broad agriculture; retail trade; transportation and warehousing; accommodation and food service; utilities; and health care and social assistance sectors.²³
- *Lack of certain industries* - Compared to the overall state, the Northeast Prosperity Zone had lower than expected concentrations of employer establishments (in ascending order) in the broad professional, scientific, and technical services; management of companies; manufacturing; wholesale trade; educational services; and administrative and waste management sectors.²⁴
- *Private employer establishments in the region had a total of 149,514 employees in 2016. Establishments in the Greenville Sub-Prosperity Zone employed 2.7 times as many people as did establishments in the Elizabeth City Sub-Prosperity Zone (108,891 as compared with 40,623).*²⁵
- *The largest geographic employment center was Pitt County, which contained 61,227 employees, or 41 percent of the regional total. After Pitt County, the largest centers were Dare (14,227), Beaufort (13,552), Halifax (12,633), and Pasquotank (11,235) counties; these five counties contained three-fourths of the region's jobs.*²⁶
- *Some 83 percent of regional employees worked in the broad service sector. In the Elizabeth City Sub-Prosperity Zone, 86 percent of employees worked in the service sector, as compared to 81 percent of all employees in Greenville Sub-Prosperity Zone.*²⁷
- *The largest concentration of employees was in the health care and social assistance super-sector (30,934), followed by the retail trade (25,577), accommodation and food services (21,358), and manufacturing (16,977) super-sectors.*²⁸
- *Most employment in agriculture, real estate, health care, retail, foodservice* - Compared to the overall state, the Northeast Prosperity Zone had higher than expected employment (in descending order) in the broad agriculture; real estate; health care and social assistance; retail trade; and accommodation and food service sectors.²⁹
- *Lack of jobs in certain industries* - Compared to the whole state, the Northeast Prosperity Zone had lower than expected employment (in ascending order) in the broad utilities; educational services; professional, scientific, and technical services; administrative and

waste management; arts, entertainment, and recreation; information; and management sectors.³⁰

- *Employee size similar to that of the state* - In the Northeast Prosperity Zone, 53 of every 100 employer establishments had no more than four employees in 2016, a share like the statewide one.³¹
- *Smaller numbers of employees* - Compared to the state, the region had greater shares of employer establishments with 5-9 employees (21 percent) and 10-19 employees (14 percent). Put differently, 87 of every 100 employer establishments had no more than 19 employees.³²
- *Few establishments employing 100 or more people* - Compared to the overall state, the Northeast Prosperity Zone had relatively few large employer establishments, meaning those with 100 or more employees. Only 1 percent of the region's establishments were so large in 2016, versus a statewide share of 2 percent.³³
- *Most large businesses located in the Greenville sub-zone* - Of the 171 establishments in the Northeast Prosperity Zone that had at least 100 employees in 2016, some 136 of them (80 percent) were in the Greenville Sub-Prosperity Zone.³⁴
- *Prevalence of businesses without employees* - The Northeast Prosperity Zone was home to 33,807 non-employer establishments in 2016, the last year with complete data. Some 57 percent of those establishments were in the Greenville Sub-Prosperity Zone, and 43 percent were in the Elizabeth City Sub-Prosperity Zone.³⁵
- *Non-employer establishments in the Northeast Prosperity Zone accounted for 5 percent of all such establishments in the state.* Such businesses typically are small, unincorporated ones operated by self-employed persons and typically have at least \$1,000 in annual sales.³⁶
- *Non-employer establishments generated \$146 million in annual receipts in 2016.*³⁷ While modest, the resulting income can be significant for the owners of such establishments.
- *Local, state and federal public employment* - In 2016, the Northeast Prosperity Zone was home to an estimated 343 government establishments that had 15,169 payroll positions. Local governments had the most payroll positions (9,604), followed by the state (4,548) and federal (1,017) governments.³⁸
- *Some 21 percent of all public-sector payroll positions in the region are in Pitt County.*³⁹

A High Proportion of Minority-Owned Businesses

Of all private business establishments in the Northeast Prosperity Zone, 25 percent were owned by persons of color in 2012, the last year with data; in contrast, persons of color account for some 43 percent of the population.⁴⁰ Noteworthy trends include the following:

- *Twenty-five percent of businesses minority-owned* - In 2012, persons of color owned a total of 10,597 business establishments (employer and non-employer), or one-quarter of private

business establishments in the Northeast Prosperity Zone. Statewide, persons of color owned 23 percent of all business establishments.⁴¹

- *The largest geographic concentration of minority-owned businesses was in Pitt County, which had 3,786 establishments, or 35 percent of the area total. Halifax County accounted for 14 percent of the total, followed by Pasquotank and Beaufort counties (both 9 percent).*⁴²
- *Three of every four minority-owned business establishments were owned by persons who identify as Black or African-American, versus a statewide figure of 62 percent.*⁴³
- *When compared to other establishments, those owned by persons of color were more apt to be non-employer establishments. Even among employer establishments, minority-owned establishments typically had fewer employees, smaller payrolls, and lower sales.*⁴⁴
- *Minority-owned businesses tend to be smaller than nonminority-owned ones - In Pitt County, for one, nonminority-owned establishments were 7 times more likely than minority-owned establishments to have employees, with annual sales that were 19 times greater. Among employer establishments, nonminority-owned ones had 12 times as many employees and paid 12 times as much in wages than did their minority-owned peers.*⁴⁵

A Labor Force Facing Many Challenges

The Northeast Prosperity Zone was home to, on average, 5 percent of the state's civilian labor force in 2013-17. Compared to the state, workers residing in the area were more apt to be unemployed.⁴⁶ Noteworthy trends include the following:

- *From 2013-17, on average, 253,316 people participated in the region's labor force. After subtracting the 1,578 people in the armed services, a total of 251,738 persons were in the civilian labor force. In short, 5 percent of the state's civilian labor force lived in the area.*⁴⁷
- *Working-age population - Across the region, an average of 58 percent of people of working age (ages 16+) participated in the labor force from 2013-17; in contrast, the statewide rate averaged 63 percent.*⁴⁸ Compared to the state, a smaller percentage of early-career workers (ages 25-34) participated in the labor force, on average, from 2013-17; across the Northeast Prosperity Zone, 80 percent of such workers were in the labor force versus 83 percent of such workers statewide.⁴⁹
- *On average, prime-age workers (ages 25-64) accounted for 77 percent of the civilian labor force from 2013-17, as compared to a statewide figure of 81 percent. Compared to the state, older workers (ages 65+) accounted for a somewhat higher share of the labor force.*⁵⁰
- *The civilian labor force in the Greenville Sub-Prosperity Zone had a younger age composition than did the civilian labor force in the Elizabeth City Sub-Prosperity Zone, on average, from 2013-17. Workers under the age of 25 accounted for 20 percent of Greenville's labor force, versus 11 percent of Elizabeth City's labor force.*⁵¹
- *On average, 9 percent of the region's civilian workforce was unemployed from 2013-17, compared to a statewide rate of 7 percent. The 22,803 unemployed persons in the*

Northeast Prosperity Zone accounted for six of every 100 unemployed North Carolinians, on average.⁵²

- *Despite having more economic activities and employers, the Greenville sub-zone showed a higher unemployment rate than did the Elizabeth City sub-zone* - The civilian unemployment rate averaged 10 percent in the Greenville Sub-Prosperity Zone from 2013-17, versus 7 percent in the Elizabeth City Sub-Prosperity Zone.⁵³
- *Thirteen out of 17 counties show high rates of unemployment* - In terms of individual counties in the Northeast Prosperity Zone, the average civilian unemployment rate ranged from 5 percent in Currituck County to 13 percent in Bertie County. In all, 13 counties had unemployment rates above the statewide rate, including every county in the Greenville Sub-Prosperity Zone.⁵⁴
- *In the region, average unemployment rates from 2013-17 were 2.5 times greater for African-American workers than non-Hispanic White workers* (15 percent versus 6 percent); the unemployment rate for Hispanic workers was twice that of non-Hispanic White workers (12 percent versus 6 percent).⁵⁵
- *Lower levels of education on average* - Among prime-age civilian workers (ages 25-64) residing in the Northeast Prosperity Zone, on average, just 26 percent possessed at least a bachelor's degree from 2013-2017, as compared to 35 percent of all such workers in North Carolina.⁵⁶
- *For employed civilians across the entire Northeast Prosperity Zone, one of every four, on average, worked in the broad educational services, health care, and social assistance sector from 2013-17.* That share was higher in the Greenville Sub-Prosperity Zone than in the Elizabeth City Sub-Prosperity Zone.⁵⁷

A Region Challenged by Low Earnings and Incomes

Compared to the overall state, workers residing in the Northeast Prosperity Zone earned less than did their peers from 2013-17.⁵⁸ Lower earnings translate into lower household incomes, which results in higher proportions of people living in poverty and near poverty.

Noteworthy trends include the following:

- *Low wages* - In 2017, the average weekly wage in the Northeast Prosperity Zone was \$737, an amount 22 percent lower than the statewide figure of \$941; average weekly wages in the region were lower than the corresponding statewide figures in every major industrial sector.⁵⁹
- *Goods-producing sectors pay more consistent wages* - The average weekly wage paid in 2017 to positions in the broad service sector totaled \$701 in the Northeast Prosperity Zone versus \$915 statewide; the gap was smaller in the broad goods-producing sector (\$932/week versus \$1,071/week).⁶⁰

- *Lower average earnings* - The typical working person (age 25+) residing in the area had, on average, annual labor earnings of \$31,500 from 2013-17, an amount 10 percent less than the statewide figure.⁶¹
- *Lower pay compared to state average* - The typical worker (age 25) residing in the area earned less, on average, than did the comparably educated worker in North Carolina.⁶²
- *The typical household in the Northeast Prosperity Zone had, on average, an annual income of \$42,500 from 2013-17.* Median household income was higher in the Elizabeth City Sub-Prosperity Zone than in the Greenville Sub-Prosperity Zone (\$50,100 versus \$39,100) due to some high incomes posted in the counties encompassing the Outer Banks.⁶³
- *Comparatively lower median household income* - Across the region, median household income from 2013-17 ranged from \$31,300 in Bertie County to \$68,300 in Camden County; in all, 10 counties in the region had median household incomes below the regional value of \$42,500.⁶⁴
- *Only four counties in the region had median household incomes that exceeded the statewide figure of \$50,300 over 2013-17:* Camden, Currituck, Dare, and Gates counties.⁶⁵
- *Lower household incomes than the state average* - Across the region, non-Hispanic White, African-American, and Hispanic households all had lower household incomes than did comparable households in North Carolina; within the region, household incomes were higher for all three groups in the Elizabeth City Sub-Prosperity Zone than in the Greenville Sub-Prosperity Zone.⁶⁶
- *Income by race* - Within the region, the typical non-Hispanic White household had a household income of \$53,600, as compared to \$31,200 for the typical Hispanic household and \$28,700 for the typical African-American household.⁶⁷
- *Lower incomes in African American households* - In 10 counties in the Northeast Prosperity Zone, the income of the typical African-American household was no greater than \$27,000 per year. In Washington County, for instance, half of all African-American households had no more than \$18,900 in annual income.⁶⁸
- *Poverty* - On average, 21 percent of the region's population lived in households with incomes below the federal poverty level, with another 22 percent living in households with incomes no greater than twice that threshold; in all, 43 percent of all residents were poor or near poor.⁶⁹
- *In the region, poverty rates were higher* for African- Americans (32 percent), Hispanics (32 percent), and non-Hispanic Whites (13 percent), than was typical in North Carolina.⁷⁰
- *Over 2013-17, at least one-third of all African-American residents in eight counties lived in households with incomes no greater than the federal poverty level:* Beaufort, Chowan, Halifax, Northampton, Perquimans, Pitt, Tyrrell, and Washington.⁷¹

- *Deep Poverty* - Across the region, an average of 9 percent of all residents—some 48,000 individuals in all— lived in households with incomes no greater than half the poverty level. The “deep poverty” rate ranged from 4 percent in Currituck County to 14 percent in Washington County; even in Pitt County, the rate was 13 percent.⁷²
- *Lack of health insurance coverage* - Across the region, an estimated 13 percent of all residents, on average, lacked health insurance coverage from 2013-17; the share of uninsured individuals ranged from 10 percent in Camden and Gates counties to 17 percent in Tyrell County.⁷³
- *Across the region, 36 percent of Hispanics lacked health insurance*, as did 14 percent of African-Americans, and 10 percent of non-Hispanic Whites.⁷⁴
- *When broken out by age, persons ages 25-34 were the most likely regional residents to lack insurance* (27 percent) followed by those ages 18-24 (20 percent) and ages 35-64 (16 percent).⁷⁵

Regional History

European Settlement

The earliest European settlement of the region under study spilled over from the Virginia Tidewater; indeed, the eastern portions of the region have been tributary to Hampton Roads ever since, and should probably be recognized as such in planning. The region around Albemarle Sound is largely low and swampy—most notably in the case of the Great Dismal Swamp between the Sound and Hampton Roads, but also Washington, Tyrell, Beaufort, and the mainland portions of Hyde and Dare. The swamps were full of cedar, juniper and cypress, forming the foundation for a longstanding lumbering and shingling industry (hampered before the late nineteenth century by poor transportation and low capitalization), but the uplands were sandy-soiled and populated with pine, especially longleaf pine in the western parts of the region. The region was located at the northeastern edge of the great longleaf pine belt running from Tidewater Virginia down the Atlantic Coast and across the Gulf Coast into East Texas. While parts of the region, especially the western counties, were amenable to plantation agriculture, and slavery became rooted there early on, the Albemarle never became a great staple-growing region; in the nineteenth century its major export crop was corn. Further obstructing its economic development was the system of shifting barrier islands known as the Outer Banks, which made passage in and out of the sounds difficult. Only shallow-draft vessels could reliably negotiate the inlets, and the hazardous shoals around Cape Hatteras, the fabled “Graveyard of the Atlantic,” made even approaches to the inlets difficult. As a result of all these factors, economic growth around the Sound remained stunted, and the population tended to consist of poor whites forced to the periphery of the Virginia tobacco complex. William Byrd famously described the area as “Lubberland,” and most travelers described it as poor and pathetic.

Naval Stores and Turpentine

One source of economic opportunity was naval stores, especially tar. In colonial times the Mother Country needed a reliable source for the Royal Navy, and subsidized its production. In the years prior to the Revolution, naval stores production spread into the Albemarle region from further south, tapping the longleaf forest, and spread from Hyde and Beaufort counties up the Neuse and Tar rivers. In antebellum times tar was supplemented by a boom in turpentine production, as turpentine became a popular illuminant in the pre-kerosene era. The high profitability of turpentine attracted large-scale plantation production; planters accumulated thousands of acres of cheap pine land and put gangs of slaves to work in

the turpentine “orchards.” At first the raw sap was exported for distillation, but increasingly turpentine was distilled in local distilleries; by 1860 turpentine distilling was the second-leading manufacturing industry in North Carolina (after flour and meal), enhancing the value-to-weight ratio of raw turpentine and allowing the extension of turpentine production into the interior.

There were severe limits to this economic opportunity, though. Piney-woods regions were thinly populated because of poor soil, and forest-products production was land extensive. Transportation continued to be a problem. Producers around the Albemarle carried tar overland to Norfolk in the eighteenth century, but the trade died out by the end of the century. Further south and west, Pamlico Sound continued to contend with the obstacles to navigation presented by the Outer Banks, and the Neuse and Tar rivers were too shallow for viable steamboat traffic.

The Prosperous Turpentine Industry and The Need for Transportation

Economic underdevelopment and obstacles to maritime navigation had always stunted the growth of towns; Edenton, the major town of the Albemarle in colonial times, was economically tributary to Norfolk. Repeated efforts were made to interest the federal government in opening ocean-going access through the Outer Banks, but engineers found it technically unfeasible to cope with the shifting shoals and constantly opening-and-closing inlets.

In the nineteenth century, the transportation problem was partially alleviated by the construction of canals. First, the Great Dismal Swamp Canal, constructed at the beginning of the nineteenth century, connected the Elizabeth River opposite Norfolk to the Pasquotank River and fed the rise of Elizabeth City as the principal town of the Albemarle, displacing the older Edenton. But the hand-dug Dismal Swamp Canal proved an inadequate commercial artery, and in the 1850s was challenged by the machine-dug Albemarle and Chesapeake Canal; actually two canals, it connected the Elizabeth River to a tributary of Currituck Sound and then cut across the Currituck Peninsula to the North River. Originally a toll canal, in the twentieth century it became free and, with channels cut further south to Beaufort, was incorporated into the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway, a protected inland passage. While an important commercial artery, the inland route has been limited by its inaccessibility for larger vessels, and has chiefly served for recreation and as a feeder to the nearest deepwater port, Hampton Roads.

Further crippling the commercial prospects of the region, the very prosperity of the turpentine districts drew the interest of powerful competitors for the region’s trade. As the nineteenth century progressed, this problem shaped the transportation system in a manner deleterious to the region. The first railroad to penetrate the region was the Petersburg Railroad in Northampton County, followed by the Seaboard and Roanoke, running from Weldon in Halifax County to Portsmouth, Virginia, opposite Norfolk at Hampton Roads. They, along with the Wilmington and Weldon, completed in 1840, diverted the commerce of the Roanoke River, the principal river of the region, northward to Virginia and southward to Wilmington, along with the trade of the interior. Only Halifax and Northampton benefitted from these railroads and their connections to Raleigh (via the Raleigh and Gaston) and the Virginia cities. Likewise, the other railroads converging on Hampton Roads and the line of the North Carolina Railroad from Raleigh to Morehead City gave the region a wide berth; the swamps and estuaries posed major obstacles to routing and construction, and the volume of commerce was inadequate to provide incentives for overcoming them.

The railroads also contributed to some fundamental economic shifts in the 1840s and 1850s. The longleaf forest proved environmentally fragile, thanks especially to wasteful methods of exploitation, and was suffering serious damage in the region by the 1840s. Many of the larger producers began abandoning their orchards, acquiring new lands further south, and moving their skilled and experienced slave work forces there. The land they let behind still had the poor soil that was the signature of the piney woods, but the railroads were bringing in imported fertilizers from Baltimore and the Virginia ports, and were making it possible for interior counties such as Halifax, Northampton, Bertie, Martin, and Pitt to shift to

cotton production. The coastal counties, however, participated relatively little in staple crop production.

The Civil War and the Northeast

The Civil War was truly a civil war in the Northeast. The Union took a strategic interest in the region in the interest of the naval blockade, and in 1862 occupied the Outer Banks and the territory around the sounds. Its position was bolstered by the presence of numerous local Unionists motivated by resentment of the planter elite. One major Confederate military offensive in 1864 resulted in the destruction of Plymouth in Washington County.

Post-Civil-War Growth in Transportation and the Economy

After the war, the late nineteenth century saw somewhat increased economic integration with the outside world. The interior counties, especially, saw intensified railroad development, notably connecting the burgeoning market town of Greenville to the Wilmington and Weldon network. Lines, notably the Norfolk Southern Railway (not to be confused with the present system of the same name) extended to Elizabeth City, Edenton, and other points in the northern Albemarle from Norfolk and Suffolk, Virginia, and to Plymouth, Washington, and Belhaven in the south; the Norfolk Southern bridged Albemarle Sound in 1910. Timber production expanded; the eastern swamps had long had a trade in cedar shingles, but lumbermen from the outside, including Union soldiers stationed there during the war, brought in much-needed large scale capital investment, including narrow-gauge railroads. The expansion of bright-leaf tobacco production with the rise of the North Carolina cigarette industry brought a major new crop to interior counties such as Pitt, although it remained unimportant around the sounds.

Changes in Agriculture and other Extractive Natural Resource-Intensive Industries

One likely factor retarding economic development was the influence of plantation modes of production. Despite the economic underdevelopment of the region, slavery had been important there before the war, and except for the coastal counties of Dare, Tyrell, and Currituck, all the counties of the region were at least 40 percent black in 1910, with black-belt counties showing sizeable black majorities. As one would expect in heavily black counties dominated by staple agriculture, tenancy and sharecropping dominated land tenure after Emancipation. As historian Jay Mandle has pointed out, plantation-dominated regions, reliant mainly on exported staple crops and on poor, often forced labor, tend to stifle more diverse economic activity.

The twentieth century, however, brought major changes to agriculture. Tobacco was stabilized for much of the mid-to-late twentieth century by the system of acreage allotments established during the New Deal. Cotton, however, declined after World War II, to be replaced by other crops such as soybeans and, in counties on the western end of Albemarle Sound adjacent to Virginia, peanuts. The collapse of tenancy that began in the 1930s and continued through the 1960s, along with farm consolidation and mechanization, produced a crisis both for employment and for the traditional service economies of the region's towns. Considerable out-migration resulted, notably to the burgeoning military-industrial complex of Hampton Roads. Other workers flocked to employment in numerous small-scale firms popping up in small towns around the region, taking advantage of a large pool of low-skill, low-wage workers who were happy to find employment that reinforced, rather than disrupted, traditional family and community ties. The expanding network of farm-to-market roads facilitated commuting by workers from their homes to the new factories, a phenomenon the historian C. Vann Woodward once termed "rurbanization."

Another important industry took advantage of the remaining stands of pine trees. As early as 1909 the Roanoke Rapids Paper Company in Halifax County pioneered making kraft paper from southern pine

using the sulfate method. It was joined in 1937 by a pulp mill in Plymouth, NC which ultimately became a Weyerhaeuser paper mill. These mills, along with the Camp Paper Company mill in nearby Franklin, Virginia (subsequently Union/Camp), not only provided direct employment but also afforded a market for small-scale timber cutters in their hinterlands. Unfortunately, this industry, like many others, has been in decline in recent years.

The Rise of Tourism and Other Modern Developments

The major transportation development of the twentieth century was, of course, the development of modern highways, starting with North Carolina's celebrated Good Roads movement of the 1920s. By 1931, the western portions of the region were well networked with hard-surfaced highways, while one important route, US 17, crossed the northern Albemarle counties from Hampton Roads to Williamston and south to New Bern; a state-sponsored bond issue in 1925 financed a critical toll bridge across the Chowan River. Another bridge, a three-mile-long span across Albemarle Sound connecting Edenton and Plymouth, was built in 1938 with state funds. Another road of future importance, subsequently named US 64, stretched east from Raleigh and, with a southern spur, connected the courthouse towns of Columbia and Swan Quarter with the state capital. But neither road made it farther east; the coast remained nearly inaccessible from the populous interior, except from Virginia to the north.

The lack of good highway connections long retarded the development of the Outer Banks. The Banks were long isolated by their turbulent waters, shifting navigation channels, and lack of resources; the only significant export industry was commercial fishing. By the 1920s, the automobile age was getting ushered in, but opening up the Banks to vehicular transportation posed problems similar to those facing railroad builders: vast swamps, numerous water barriers, and shifting channels. The state was reluctant to invest there, but local promoters were able to build a toll bridge connecting Roanoke Island to the beaches in the later 1920s. Other, mainly locally-built, roads and toll bridges, along with privately-run ferries, tied the Banks to the mainland by the early 1930s; later in the 1930s the state took these over and made the bridges free. From the late 1940s forward, the state also entered the ferry business, taking over private ferries across Oregon Inlet and Croatan Sound, adding one across the Alligator River to complete US 64 into Manteo, and purchasing the private Hatteras-Okracoke ferry in 1957. Other state-run ferries crossed Currituck Sound, the Pamlico River at Bayview, and Pamlico Sound from Swan Quarter and Cedar Island to Okracoke.

Significantly, the earliest hard-surfaced roads to reach the Banks came down through Currituck County and rendered the beaches accessible mainly from Hampton Roads. Between the 1930s and early 1950s, federal relief spending from the New Deal, along with private donations from philanthropists such as the Mellons, permitted the establishment of the Cape Hatteras National Seashore in 1952, while other attractions such as the Wright Brothers Memorial at Kitty Hawk, the restoration of Fort Raleigh on Roanoke Island, and the inauguration of Paul Green's classic outdoor drama "The Lost Colony" began to draw tourists. In the post-World War II era, with the creation of a mass middle class with the time and disposable income for vacationing, along with expanding opportunities for retirement, the Outer Banks have become a major economic engine for the eastern portion of the region, one on which places such as Elizabeth City, Edenton, and Plymouth are attempting to cash in with historical tourist attractions. The Banks are limited in capacity and environmentally fragile and unstable, however, and should not be relied upon as sources for future growth.

As the Banks became a favorite recreational destination for people in the populous, prosperous Piedmont Crescent, the state developed increasing interest in improving access from the west. US Route 64 was extended east to Roanoke Island, although ferries were still required across the Alligator River and Croatan Sound until the late 1950s. More recently, the route has been improved to near-limited-access quality as far east as Columbia. Plans are now in the works to develop an interstate highway connection, designated future I-87, between Raleigh and Hampton Roads, roughly following US 64 from Raleigh to Williamston and US 17 from there to Hampton Roads. Otherwise, the only interstate highway in the

region, I-95, barely grazes the western edge of the region, following the nineteenth-century railroad corridor through Halifax and Northampton counties.

Oddly, despite the proximity of military installations just to the north in Hampton Roads and just to the south at Camp LeJeune, and the vast stretches of low-value land that the army has found attractive in other parts of the southern Pine Belt, the region has little military activity. The major exception is the presence of the Coast Guard, which from the 1870s established a number of lifesaving stations to cope with the numerous vessels falling victim to the dangerous waters of the Outer Banks. Most of these are now gone, but since 1940 the Coast Guard has maintained one of its largest bases at Elizabeth City.

One final recent development of note is the emergence of Greenville, in Pitt County, as a major economic growth pole. Up to the post-World War II era, Greenville was a small marketing center for a black-belt tobacco and cotton-producing region, otherwise chiefly notable as the home of a small state-supported teacher's college. Powerful politicians from Eastern North Carolina were eager to build up the school, and it became East Carolina University in 1967, with a medical school added in the 1970s, and a dental school in 2006. Now part of the University of North Carolina system (as is the smaller, historically black Elizabeth City State University), it is one of the four largest universities in the state. At the same time, Greenville became a magnet for high-quality industrial firms, particularly pharmaceuticals, and remains so to this day.

Unfortunately for the region, Greenville is located in its far southwestern corner, and so has only limited value as a growth center. It boasts the only airport in the region with commercial passenger service, but that service is a minimal regional jet connection to Charlotte. For the foreseeable future, the principal growth pole available for the more northeasterly portions of the region is, as it has been from colonial times, the massive Hampton Roads complex, with its deep-water ports, military installations, and industrial facilities. Integration into Hampton Roads, however, is constrained by the belt of swamps separating it from the Albemarle; no benefits are likely any time soon from suburbanization or the spread of advanced economic activity southward. Completion of the proposed I-87 connection may help remedy the situation, but that seems far into the future and in any case is not likely to greatly alter business's preference for Virginia locations.

Socio-Political Analysis

From the turn into the 20th century to 1964, the 17 counties in the Northeastern Zone were almost always solidly Democratic in federal and state elections. Now a clear and close partisan divide exists in the Zone. In recent elections, five counties with African-American voting majorities (Bertie, Halifax, Hertford, Northampton, and Washington with 49.9%) remain solidly Democratic. Pitt (usually) –which contains the metropolitan center of Greenville -- and Pasquotank (often barely) –which has the micropolitan and college-town of Elizabeth City -- have been joining them in the Democratic column. Seven counties are now solidly in the Republican column – Beaufort, Camden, Chowan, Currituck, Dare, Perquimans, and Tyrrell). Three counties – Gates, Hyde, and Martin swing back and forth. Yet all three supported President Donald Trump in 2016.

In 2016, Secretary Clinton received a few hundred more votes than Trump, and Democrat Roy Cooper received a few thousand more votes than in Governor McCrory in the Northeastern Zone. If Greenville/Pitt continues to emerge as a metropolitan center, Democrats might benefit from a growing voting base beyond their blackbelt-county support. And as suggested somewhat by the case of Dare County, Democratic prospects in coastal, tourist areas might be improving especially due to environmental issues.

Overall, the population in most counties in the Zone has been getting whiter, more Republican, and showing little sign of liberal metropolitan or urban influence. During the first half of the 20th century, electoral politics in the Northeastern Zone counties was simple: all 17 counties were almost always solid Democratic territory.

In the confusing context of the 1896 election, 11 of its 17 Northeastern counties had either broken away from the Democratic column or continued a pro-Republican trend in supporting McKinley over Bryan. But in the sweeping Democratic comeback election of 1900, only four counties – Camden, Chowan, Pasquotank, and Perquimans -- stuck with the Republican Roosevelt over Bryan. Then after black freedmen were disenfranchised in North Carolina at the turn of the century, all 17 counties voted for Bryan in 1904 and 1908.

Between 1904-1964, only four counties ever strayed from the Democratic presidential candidate and three did it only once. Four counties – Dare, Hyde, Tyrrell, and Washington – broke from the Democratic column when New York's Catholic Governor Al Smith won the party's nomination. In 1956 Dare again switched to support Dwight Eisenhower's re-election. But all Northeastern counties voted for Senator John Kennedy in 1960 as well as President Lyndon Baines Johnson in 1964.

The three-way 1968 presidential melee inaugurated an era of partisan change with a big bang. Democratic presidential candidate Hubert Humphrey won only 5 of 17 Northeastern counties – Bertie, Hertford, Northampton, Tyrrell, and Washington. But Richard Nixon won only Dare County. Running on the American Party ticket, Alabama Governor George Wallace won the other 11 counties.

The 1972 election -- in which Democrat candidate George McGovern won only 29% of the vote statewide – witnessed a further seismic break from the Democrats in the Northeastern counties: all Wallace's 1968 counties and all but one (Northampton 51.4% for McGovern) of Humphrey's four 1968 counties supported Nixon's re-election. (Orange County was the only other county in the state to go for McGovern.)

The post-Watergate candidacy of former Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter in 1976 brought all 17 Northeastern counties back to the Democratic line. But in subsequent presidential elections, Northeastern counties slowly started drifting away and mainly staying away from the Democratic column.

The first to leave the Democratic column were Beaufort and Dare in 1980 for Ronald Reagan. Chowan, Currituck, Martin, and Pasquotank joined them for Reagan in 1984. In 1996, Pitt County chose Bob Dole-Jack Kemp over Democratic native sons Clinton and Gore's bid for a second term. Camden, Hyde, and Perquimans joined the Republican trend in 2000 with support for George W. Bush over Gore. Tyrrell in 2008 came over to the Republican column. Martin came over to the Republican side in 1984, 2004, and again in 2016. Gates joined the Republican side in 2016.

While a few of these twelve counties have gravitated back to the Democratic fold in later presidential elections, four Northeastern counties in addition to Northampton have stayed in the Democratic column since 1974. As a result, a clear and evenly balanced partisan divide has developed in the Northeastern Zone. An examination of the 2016 presidential and gubernatorial races exemplifies this divide.

Seven Northeastern Zone counties went Democratic in both the presidential and gubernatorial races in 2016. Nine were in the Republican column for both races. Only one county – Martin -- split between support for Trump in the presidential race and Cooper in the gubernatorial race. (The divide among counties in the less competitive US Senate race between GOP incumbent Richard Burr and Democratic challenger Deborah Ross was the same as in the presidential race.) Overall, Clinton outpaced Trump by less than four hundred votes, and Cooper won by fewer than 5,000 votes in the Northeastern Zone due to their margins of support in bigger- vote counties such as Pitt and Halifax.

After the Nixon-McGovern blowout of 1972, four Northeastern counties rejoined Northampton and have stuck with Democratic candidates in every presidential election through 2016. These four counties are Bertie, Halifax, Hertford, and Washington. Both Obama in 2012 and Clinton in 2016 won all of them but Washington with more than 60% of the vote. (Clinton's majorities were still a couple points lower than Obama's 2012 majorities in all these counties).

Although falling below 60%, recent Democratic presidential victories in Washington have still been comfortable. Obama won with 59% in 2012 (and 58.7% in 2008) and Clinton in 2016 received 56.9%. In the 2016 gubernatorial race, Democratic candidate Cooper also won these five counties by very similar margins as Clinton. He won Bertie, Halifax, Hertford, and Northampton by 60% or more and Washington with a comfortable 55.5% percent.

Not coincidentally, registered African-American voters represent more than 50% of total county voters in the four counties where Clinton's and Cooper's majorities exceeded 60%. In descending order, these counties are Hertford (63.13%), Bertie (59.63%), Northampton (58.03%), and Halifax (53.60%). African-Americans compose 49.9% of all registered voters in Washington [NC State Election Board 2019 data]. These five Democratic counties are all non-coastal counties clustered in the central part of the Northeastern Zone. Completing this Democratic group in 2016 were Pitt and Pasquotank.

Pitt is by far the most populous county in the Northeastern Zone. It is a non-coastal county located at the southern-most point in the Northeastern Zone. Pitt is the sole county in the Greenville Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). It has 114,718 registered voters (as of 2019) and a total population of 179,042. African-Americans represent 35.16% of the county's total registered voters. Only two other counties in the Northeastern Zone have more than 30,000 registered voters – Halifax (35,216) and Beaufort (31,366). After breaking for Reagan in 1980 and jumping back for Clinton in 1992, Pitt stayed with Republican candidates through the 53.3%'s re-election majority that President Bush received in 2004. Pitt then reversed course and voted for the Democratic presidential candidates in the last three elections. President Obama gained majorities of 54.1% in 2008 and 53.1% in 2012. Clinton gained a smaller 51.9% majority. In the 2016 gubernatorial race, Cooper won a slightly bigger 52.4% majority.

Greenville, with a population of 92,156, is by far the largest city in Pitt county and the Northeastern Zone as well as 10th largest in the state (ahead of Asheville at 12th). Greenville is home to East Carolina University. Its undergraduate enrollment is 23,265.

Pasquotank is an upper northern county near the Virginia border. With a population of 17,716 (52% African-American), Elizabeth City is the biggest city and the county seat in Pasquotank. It is home to the predominantly African-American Elizabeth City State University in the UNC system. Undergraduate enrollment is estimated to be 1,371. After breaking for Reagan in his 1984 re-election bid and staying in

the Republican column for Vice-President Bush's 1988 candidacy, Pasquotank has voted for Democratic presidential candidates in the last seven presidential elections. But the Democratic hold on Pasquotank was shaky in 2016. Obama had received 57.5% in 2012 and 56.5% in 2008. But Clinton won there with only a 49.5% plurality. In the gubernatorial race, Cooper received a bare 51.1% majority in the county.

Martin is a non-coastal county directly above Pitt in the Northeastern Zone. After first jumping out of the Democratic column in 1984 and doing it again for President Bush in 2004, Martin returned to the Democratic fold for President Obama. Obama gained a 52.1% majority in 2008 and 51.90% in 2012. But in 2016 Trump won a 49.3% plurality. However, Roy Cooper gained a bare 51.1% majority against Gov. McCrory. African-Americans represent 42.84% of the county's registered voters.

Beaufort, Dare, and Hyde form a closely clustered trio of counties on the state's eastern coast. Tyrrell is nearby on the Albermarle Sound. Camden, Chowan, Currituck, and Perquimans (along with the still Democratic Pasquotank) are closely clustered in the state's upper northeastern corner on or near the Virginia border.

Six (6) counties have consistently voted for Republican presidential candidates in the last four presidential elections (2004-2016). These counties are Beaufort, Camden, Chowan, Currituck, Dare, Perquimans and Tyrrell. Hyde gave Obama a bare majority (50.3%) in 2008 but re-joined this Republican bloc in 2012 and 2016. Tyrrell joined the GOP bloc starting in the 2008 election.

The Republican margin in all eight (8) of these counties has been incrementally increasing each presidential cycle from 2008 to 2016. The six solid Republican counties since 2004 provided comfortable victories of at least 55% of the vote for McCain in 2008. Their majorities for Trump in 2016 exceeded 60% of the vote. The 2016 vote for Trump in both Hyde and Tyrrell reached 56%. Moreover, in the 2016 gubernatorial race, Cooper lost all eight of these counties by the same kind of wide margins as Clinton did in the presidential race. Even though Cooper won statewide, these eight Northeastern counties thus did not reflect any kind of split-level Democratic affinity.

Not coincidentally, registered African-Americans in these eight solidly Republican counties now represent far smaller percentages of the total vote than in the six solidly Democratic counties. Tyrrell at 31.16%, Chowan at 30%, Beaufort at 24.05%, Perquimans at 22.77% are above the statewide African-American percentage (21%). Dare at 21% is right at the state average. Camden's percentage at 12.93% is well below the state average. The other two have African-American percentages in the low single digits: Currituck is at 5.32% and Dare is all the way down at 1.89%.

The ninth Republican county is Gates. Up until 2016, Gates had been in the Democratic presidential column in every election since 1974. Obama won there by 52.2% in 2008 and 51.7% in 2012. But Gates gave Trump a 53.3% majority over Clinton. And Governor McCrory actually received a slightly larger 54.3% majority over Cooper.

Gates's 33.10% African-American registered vote percentage is higher than the eight other Republican counties in 2016. Gates is clustered with Camden, Chowan, Currituck, and Perquimans in the Zone's upper corner on the Virginia border.

Another way to categorize the Northeastern Zone counties can be based on the last three presidential elections and the 2016 gubernatorial election. The region can be characterized as seven solidly Republican counties, seven solidly Democratic counties, and three swing counties. The seven Democratic counties are Bertie, Halifax, Hertford, Northampton, Pasquotank, Pitt, and Washington. The seven Republican counties are Beaufort, Camden, Chowan, Currituck, Dare, Perquimans, and Tyrrell. The three swing counties are Gates, Hyde, and Martin – although all three went for Trump in the 2016 election. In addition, Clinton’s as well as Gov. Cooper’s 2016 margins of victory were very narrow in Pasquotank.

In 2016 Clinton barely outpolled Trump overall in the Northeastern Zone counties by less than 400 votes (123,929 to 123,534). Cooper gained a somewhat larger victory of over 5,000 votes (125,023 to 119,840). The victories of both Democratic candidates can be attributed to the numerical margins that they were able to run up in the two biggest voting counties – Pitt and Halifax. Clinton won the most populous county of Pitt by 6,133 (41,824 to 35,691). Clinton’s numerical margin of 6,717 (15,748 to 6,717) in Halifax was slightly larger.

Cooper received slightly more votes than Clinton in Pitt and Halifax. But his larger numerical margin was mainly due to a drop-off in McCrory’s vote in both counties. Cooper gained his biggest numerical margin of 9,211 (41,916 to 32,705) in Pitt. He ran up a slightly lower margin of 7,191 (16,021 to 8,830) in Halifax. This pattern of drop-off in the McCrory vote was not systematically repeated among all the other Democratic or Republican counties in the Northeastern Zone.

For example, in the third biggest vote county of Beaufort, McCrory received slightly more votes than Trump (14,610 versus 14,543). Still Trump won by the slightly larger numerical margin of 5,779 votes than McCrory’s 5,755 margin because Clinton’s vote was smaller than Cooper’s total (8,855 versus 8,764). McCrory also received slightly more votes than Trump in the Democratic counties of Bertie and Washington and in the Republican counties of Chowan and Tyrrell.

As already mentioned, Cooper also won Martin County while Clinton lost it. But the numerical differences were very small. Cooper won the county by 222 votes (6,015 to 5,783) and Clinton lost it by 51 votes (5,897 to 5,846).

Trying to make any solid interpretation of the 2018 congressional election results in the Northeastern Zone is next to impossible. In addition to 2018’s status as a Blue Moon election cycle with no US Senate or Governor race, 3rd District Republican Congressman Walter Jones Jr. ran unopposed. Thus the Republican won all the votes cast even in such a Democratic county as Pasquotank. The 3rd District covers 8 coastal or water-access counties in the most eastern part of the Northeastern Zone. These counties are Beaufort, Hyde, Dare, Tyrrell, Currituck, Pasquotank, and Perquimans. A little over half of voters in Pitt County are also in the 3rd district.

Congressman Walter Jones died from an undisclosed illness on February 10, 2019. Under state law, Governor Roy Cooper had to call for special election to fill the vacant seat in the 3rd District. But the Governor has yet to announce a date. [Pippin, “Uncertainty Remains Over Special Election to Fill Jones Seat,” *Jacksonville Daily News*, 2/17/2019] Jones was starting his 13th term in Congress in 2019. He was a former Democratic state House member and the son of long-time Democratic Congressman Walter Jones Sr. in the old 1st Congressional District. Before becoming a Republican, Walter Jones Jr. lost his bid to take over from his deceased father in a 1992 special-election Democratic primary. In beating Jones,

Eve Clayton became the first African-American to represent North Carolina in Congress since George Henry White was elected for his second and final term in 1898. Clayton was the first African-American female congressional representative in the state's history. She served five terms in the US House.

In the 1994 "Gingrich Revolution" midterm election, Jones moved over to run in the 3rd Congressional District as a Republican and unseated strong Democratic incumbent Martin Lancaster. Over the years, Jones easily beat back Democratic challenges. And later in his term, after he became a critic of the US's war in Iraq, Jones overcame GOP primary challenges.

Now, after the Republican legislature's gerrymandering earlier in the decade, the population of the 3rd congressional district is 74% white and slightly below the statewide African-American average at 20.55%. A party bloodbath could perhaps take place in a GOP special primary election in 2019 to replace Jones. But barring such an occurrence, the Republican primary winner should be heavily favored. Democrat G. K Butterfield now represents the 1st Congressional District. He was first elected in 2004. From 2015-2017, Butterfield served as head of the Congressional Black Caucus.

In recent years, the Republican legislature has heavily gerrymandered the 1st congressional district to pack in as many Democratic voters as possible. The district now stretches all the way into Durham at the center of the state. In 2018 Butterfield won the district with an overall 69.85% majority against GOP challenge Roger Allison.

Butterfield won by at least 59% of the vote in 6 of the 7 Northeastern counties in the district. These are Bertie (64.14%), Halifax (62.17%), Hertford (70.58%), and Northampton (63.05%), Washington (59.24%), and a heavily Democratic part of Pitt (69.03%) The majorities were much closer in his two other Northeastern Zone counties – Gates (51.18%) and Martin (52.41%).

A rough indicator of the Democrats' remaining but slight electoral advantage is that its 2018 state House and Senate candidates received more votes in all the Northeastern Zone counties on a total combined or aggregate basis. Democratic State House candidates received 8,865 more votes (97,085 to 88,220) and Democratic State Senate candidates received 5,534 more votes (97,737 to 92,203). Three (3) African-American Democratic Senators represent parts of the Northeastern Zone. But the main district has a Republican Senator. In the House, 5 Republicans and 4 Democrats (3 African-Americans) represent parts of the Zone.

In the State Senate, one Republican (Bob Steinburg) now represents most of the Northeastern Zone counties. The 3 African-American Democrats represent a total of five other counties. (The North Carolina Senate now has a total of 10 African-American – all Democratic --Senators.)

The State Senate: District 1 is the main state Senate seat in the Northeastern Zone. Geographically, it is the largest Senate district in the state. The district covers Camden, Chowan, Currituck, Dare, Gates, Hertford, Hyde, Pasquotank, Perquimans Tyrrell, and Washington. In 2018 GOP House member Bob Steinburg (age 70) moved to the Senate by beating Democratic Washington County Commissioner D. Cole Phelps (age 29) in an open seat battle by 53.21% (39,815) to 46.79% (35,017) [On the two candidates, see Kozak, "In the NC 1 Senate Race, A Study in Contrasts," *Outer Banks Sentinel*, 10/16/18].

The most populous county and Democratic stronghold of Pitt is the sole Northeastern Zone county in State Senate District 5. Small Greene County is also in State Senate 5. In 2018 African-American Democrat Don Davis won Pitt with 55.50% (32,890) in Pitt and 55.34% (36,321) overall in the district. Davis had lost a bid for the state Senate seat in 2010. From 2013 until his election in 2018, Davis had been the mayor of Snow Hill in Greene.

Four other Northeastern Zone counties – Beaufort, Bertie, Martin, Northampton – are in State Senate District 3. In 2018 African-American Democratic incumbent Erica D. Smith (first elected in 2014) won 53.86% (33,942) of the vote against Republican Chuck Earley. Senator Smith rolled up impressive margins in the Northeastern Democratic counties of Northampton (62.74%)-- her home county-- and Bertie (62.88%) as well as the non-Northeastern Zone counties of Vance (61.07%) and Warren (66.25%) State Senator Smith more narrowly won Martin with 51.48% of the vote. She lost in Beaufort by 60.76-39.24%.

In late January 2019, State Senator Smith announced her candidacy for the Democratic nomination to challenge GOP US Senator Thom Tillis in 2020 [Grubb, “Teacher Becomes 3rd Democrat to Seek Thom Tillis’ US Senate Seat in 2020,” *Raleigh News & Observer*, 1/27/19].

The remaining Northeastern Zone county of Halifax is in State Senate District 4. In 2018 African-American Toby Fitch made a successful comeback to political life and beat Republican Richard Scott with 57.77% (36,471) of the overall vote. Fitch won Halifax with 60.04% (10,338) of the vote. After his election to the state House in 1984, Fitch had risen to become the House Majority Whip under African-American House Speaker Dan Blue in the early 1990s. Fitch retired in 2000. He lives outside the Northeastern Zone in the city of Wilson.

The State House: An oddly-numbered collection of 9 state House districts covers some part of the Northeastern Zone. In keeping with the Zone’s overall close partisan divide, 5 of these House members are Republican and 4 House members are Democrats (3 African-Americans).

Three House members represent parts of Pitt County. In 2018 the combined House vote totals in Pitt for the three Democratic and Republican candidates differed by eight votes. The Democratic vote of 29,227 edged out the Republican vote of 29,219. But two Republicans and only one Democrat now represent parts of Pitt in the House.

In House District 8 fresh(wo)man African-American Democrat Kandie Smith, who is a former Greenville mayor, represents most of her home city. In 2018 her Pitt vote margin was just big enough (64.65%/a 7,055 margin) to outpace the victory margins in other parts of Pitt by Republican incumbent Greg Murphy (first elected in 2014) in state House District 9 (59.96%/6,724 margin) and Republican Chris Humphrey (a former losing House candidate) in House District 12 (56.73%/813 margin). Murphy in House 9 represents eastern Pitt; Humphrey in House 12 represents a small slice of Pitt and Lenoir County (where he lives in the town of Kinston).

In 2018 three other Democratic incumbents won by wide margins. Incumbent African-American Howard Hunter (first elected in 2014) from Hertford County won with 59.92% of the vote in District 5 (Gates, Hertford, and Pasquotank). Melvin Wray (first elected in 2004) from Northampton County won with 69.33% of the vote in District 27 (Halifax and Northampton). The only Northeastern Zone county in

House District 23 is Martin County; African Democrat (male) Shelly Willingham (first elected in 2014) from Rocky Mount received a 51.1% majority in Martin but a 60.85% majority overall in the district. Two other Republicans also won by wide margins. Political newcomer Keith Kidwell held a Republican seat with a 59.37% (11,134 votes) majority in his home county of Beaufort and won overall with 60.59% (17,247) in District 23 (which also includes the western half of Craven County). Former Chowan County Commissioner Edward Goodwin won more narrowly with a 53.1% majority in District 1 (Bertie, Camden, Chowan, Perquimans, Tyrrell, and Washington).

The closest House race involving Northeastern Counties was Republican Bobby Hanig's 55.03-44.97% victory in District 6 over his Democratic female opponent Tess Judge from Dare County. Hanig successfully moved from his former post as chairman of the Currituck County Commissioners by rolling up a 68.23% majority in his home county and a 59.49% majority in the non-Northeastern county of Pamlico. But Democrat Tess Judge won in her home but otherwise Republican-leaning Dare County with a 53.41% majority. She also gained a 52.3% majority in otherwise Republican-leaning Hyde. [On the candidates, see Jurkowitz, "Hanig and Judge Compete for N.C. House Seat," *Outer Banks Sentinel*, 10/12/18.]

At the County Commissioner level, Republicans have all the seats in Camden (5-0) and Currituck (6-0) plus strong majorities in Beaufort (5-2) and Dare (5-2). Democrats have all commission seats in Bertie (4-0), Halifax (5-0), Hertford (5-0), Northampton (5-0), and Washington (5-0) and a solid majority in Pitt (6-3), and a one-seat majority in Pasquotank (4-3).

Four counties that have been swinging to support of GOP candidates at the federal and state level still do not have Republican County Commission majorities. These counties are Chowan (3-3-1), Gates (0-5), Martin (1-4), and Tyrrell (2-3).

But changes toward the Republicans were still evident in 2018. For example, Democrats had a 5-2 majority in Chowan before the 2018 election. But they lost two incumbents (including the Commission Chair) by wide margins to a Republican and a conservative Unaffiliated candidate. Thus Chowan in effect has a 4-3 Republican-laden conservative majority. Moreover, in Martin County's only County Commissioner race, the Republican candidate took a formerly Democratic seat with a narrow 50.26% majority.

It should also be noted that the otherwise most populous Democratic stronghold of Greenville in Pitt County has had a Republican mayor since 2017. A young (now 36), former college baseball player at East Carolina University named P.J. Connelly won a comfortable 56% majority in a four-way race. Although the mayor's race in Greenville is officially nonpartisan, Connelly has been outspoken about being a Republican and successfully worked to attract the 2020 Republican state Convention to Greenville [See *Greenville Daily Reflector*, "State GOP Convention is Coning in 2020," 1/23/18].

One notable 2018 victory for Democrats at the County Commissioner level was in Dare County. In addition to Dare Democrat Tess Judge taking the county in her losing 6th District House race, a Democrat (Edwin Bateman) took over a previously Republican at-large (countywide) open seat with a slight majority [8,438 to 7,794] over GOP candidate Anne Petera. [On the candidates, see Wagner, "Bateman and Petera Vie for At-Large Seat," *Outer Banks Sentinel*, 10/12/18.]

Not surprisingly, due to the solid Democratic legacy in the Northeastern Zone, most counties still show Democratic (2019) registration numbers significantly ahead of Republican numbers and thus understate current Republican political strength in many Northeastern counties. Only in 3 counties do Republicans have a registration advantage over Democrats: Camden (2,371 to 1,903), Currituck (7,151 to 3,512), Dare (8,811 to 7,877).

Of more note perhaps is the rise of voters in the Northeastern Zone choosing to register as Unaffiliated. In fourteen counties, Unaffiliated voters are now the second largest category. Only in the solidly Republican county of Beaufort are Unaffiliated voters in third place (12,130D-10,445R-8,696U). Unaffiliated voters are the largest category in Camden (2,949U-2,371R-1,903D), Currituck (7,180U-7,151R-3,572D), and Dare 10,837U to 8,811R- 7,877D). Observers have viewed the strong Unaffiliated trend in such counties as the strong preference of out-of-state white retirees who have moved there over recent years. [See, e.g., Wynne, “Currituck County,” *PoliticsNC*, 7/16/13] Hyde however is the only county of this trio with any recent evidence of a non-Republican independent streak.

This movement toward at least formal political independence in the 17 counties of the Northeastern Zone however is not as pronounced as in the 13 counties of the Western Zone. There Unaffiliated voters are the biggest category in four counties (including the second biggest county Henderson) and are close to overtaking Democratic registration in the population center of Buncombe. In contrast, Democrats have strong registration advantages in Pitt and other strong voting bases as Halifax and Hertford.

As already emphasized, a strong correlation in the Northeastern Zone exists between the African-American percentage share of registered voters and the partisan voting patterns of counties. The five counties with African-American majorities – or close to such a majority -- among registered voters are solidly Democratic. These are Bertie (59.63%), Halifax (53.60%), Hertford (63.13%), Northampton (58.03%), and Washington (49.88%). The eight counties with an African-American share at 31% or less are on the whole solidly Republican. These are Beaufort (24.05%), Camden (12.93%), Chowan (30.18%), Currituck (5.32%), Dare (1.89%), and Hyde (28%)

The four counties with current African-American registration shares above 31% and below 45% are Gates (33.1%), Pitt (35.16%), Pasquotank (36.20%), and Martin (42.84%). The fact that Martin could give Donald Trump even a 49.3% overall plurality in 2016 stands out as the most extreme example of Republican partisan support among white voters. In something of a contrast, the small land-locked county of Gates on the Virginia border with an African-American share of 33.1% (in 2019) still managed to give President Obama slight majorities in 2008 and 2012. However, since Gates’ African-American population percentage has been shrinking due to an influx of retirees and white residents from the Virginia Beach area, the African-American registration percentage was probably somewhat higher in 2012 and 2008. [See Wynne, “Gates County,” *PoliticsNC*, 3/13/13]. In any event, Gates delivered majorities to Trump and McCrory in 2016.

For example, the conservative commentator John Wynne commented in 2013 that Pasquotank was the political “exception” to the Republican trend along the Northeastern border due to Elizabeth City State. Because of Elizabeth State’s influence as an economic engine and symbol, the type of white voters attracted to or staying in the county were “not as conservative” and “monolithically Republican.” On the other hand, more white retirees and transplants from the Virginia Beach area continue to put pressure on the Democratic advantage in Pasquotank [Wynne, *supra*]. The influence of Elizabeth City State could also be waning as it continues to struggle with enrollment and financial difficulties.

Pitt appears to be a brighter competitive spot for Democrats. In contrast to Elizabeth City State, East Carolina and especially its medical complex in Greenville continue to demonstrate significant growth. [On the battle in the UNC system over a medical school at East Carolina, see Link, “The East Carolina Challenge,” Chapter 8 in *William Friday: Power, Purpose, and American Higher Education* (1995) 221-46.] Pitt’s 30.9% college attainment percentage (people 25 and over with college degrees) is slightly above the state average and will probably continue to rise over time. Some political observers attribute the Democratic turnaround in Pitt and the way that Democrats are hanging on in Pasquotank at least in part to the influence of the UNC system universities in Greenville and Elizabeth City.

Pitt in effect seems to be somewhat fitfully developing a version of the city-based “Atlanta Coalition” featuring upscale whites and mainly downscale African-American voters now delivering Democratic majorities in Mecklenburg, Wake, Guilford, Forsyth, and Durham. As Wynne put it in 2013, “Pitt County is becoming less ‘eastern’ and more of a modern metropolitan county – but it’s not there yet.” [“Pitt County,” *PoliticsNC*, 2/6/13] Pitt’s future is by no means as assuredly liberal or Democratic as Buncombe’s future in the Western Zone appears to be. It is nearly impossible to imagine Asheville, Charlotte, Raleigh, Greensboro, or Winston-Salem with such an aggressively Republican mayor as Greenville’s P.J. Connelly.

Still some political observers suggest that the growth of Hispanics and other minorities could soon combine with the significant minority populations in places like Pitt to form non-white voting majorities [On this possibility in Pitt, see, e.g., Wynne, *supra*]. While the Hispanic/Latino population in Pitt is now above 6%, voter registration barely reaches above 2%. But in Pitt those people not identifying as white represent 55.5% of the population and nearly 45% of registered voters. Still the consistent loyalty of other non-white voters usually does not match African-American support for the Democratic Party.

Another modest trend in favor of Democrats is the relatively less conservative voting patterns of white voters in tourist-based coastal areas. In a 2015 *Political Geography* article, political scientist Dante Scala and two other scholars pointed out that white voter support for President Obama’s 2008 and 2012 candidacies was stronger in North Carolina’s as well as other “recreational” counties which attract tourists and resident in-migrants than in other rural areas. [See Scala et al, “Red Rural, Blue Rural: Presidential Voting Patterns in a Changing Rural America,” *Political Geography* (Sept. 2015) 108-118, 113]

The Northeastern Zone county of Dare is an example of this less conservative pattern. For example, given that Dare’s registered African-American vote percentage was in the low single digits, Hillary Clinton’s garnering 36% there in 2016 can seem rather extraordinary. Dare was Clinton’s best North Carolina county with a population more than 80% white. And in 2018, Democratic candidates managed to win an at-large County Commission seat (Bateman) and gain a county-side majority in a (losing) State House race (Judge) in Dare.

In the spring of 2012, moreover, Dare was one of only 8 North Carolina counties to vote against the state constitutional Amendment 1 ban on same-sex marriage. In contrast, the heavily African-American Democratic stronghold of Hertford County registered 70% support for the ban even though it was President Obama’s second-best North Carolina county in 2012.) [See Janz, “Dare County,” *PoliticsNC*, 7/23/18, see also Wynne, “Hyde County,” *PoliticsNC*, 2/20/13 (noting the cluster of “some very liberal whites and a sizable gay community” in Hyde)]

The best example of the county's liberal streak comes on environmental issues. Both Republican and Democratic candidates in Dare for example readily express their opposition to offshore drilling [See the *Outer Banks Sentinel* profiles of the 2018 Dare County Commissioner and State House District 6 races cited *supra*].

Moreover, in 2018, the Republican state legislature's repeal of a local ban plastic bags became a political flashpoint. Republican State Representative Beverly Boswell from Dare supported the party line and voted for the repeal. Local political observers pointed out that Currituck County Commissioner Bobby Hanig in the GOP primary was able to upset Boswell in her home county by 426 votes and Hanig won district-wide by 411 votes. [Jurkowitz, "Five Takeaways from May 8," *Outer Banks Sentinel*, 5/11/18]

Nevertheless, as the long and complicated history of the decades-old Bonner Bridge controversy underlines, the intertwining of transportation and environmental concerns can be especially tortuous in Dare. The 2.3-mile bridge replacement connection over the Oregon Inlet long championed by former Senate Democratic leader Mark Basnight is now finally opening. Many political leaders from the county are working for the bridge to be renamed for Basnight. Yet for many years, environmentalists and some transportation experts opposed this short bridge option in favor of a 17-mile option [See, e.g., Keller, "The Basnight Bridge?" *Outer Banks Sentinel*, 1/15/19; Bunyea, "Bridge Replacement Still Controversial," *Outer Banks Sentinel*, 12/7/05].

And far more powerfully than any spots of emerging Democratic strength, the legacy of the past and new trends in the Northeastern Zone may be combining to lock in and enhance Republican prospects. In his 1949 classic work *Southern Politics*, V.O. Key explained that the "character of the politics" in especially rural areas throughout the region varied "roughly with the Negro proportion of the population" [Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, 5]. Now, decades after the African-American re-enfranchisement guaranteed under the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Key's formula still seems to fit the politics of many counties in the Northeastern Zone in a revised but still systematic way:

- Those counties with an African-American voting majority or close to it vote solidly Democratic – for example, Bertie, Halifax, Hertford, Northampton, and Washington.
- But in most counties with even sizable African-American minorities above the state average, white majorities are overwhelmingly backing Republicans in federal and state elections – for example, Beaufort, Chowan, Gates, Martin, and Tyrrell.

A recent highly-noted work by a team of Harvard and Stanford political scientists has even argued that the politics of white voters in such places as the Northeastern Zone have "deep roots" in slavery's legacy. In 1860 the Northeastern Zone contained some of the most "blackbelt" counties in North Carolina and the South with majority-slave populations. Pitt actually had the lowest slave percentage (22%). Camden (29%) was the only other county below thirty percent. While the Harvard-Stanford team did not specifically analyze the Northeastern Zone, they contrasted the conservative white politics in other such historically blackbelt regions with the liberal politics of Asheville where slavery did not dominate economic and political life. (15% slave population in 1860). [Acharya, et. al., *Deep Roots: How Slavery Still Shapes Southern Politics* (2018) 3-5, 98-99, 203, 215-16]

Certainly not all the politics of the Northeastern Zone can be reduced to the matter of race. A “chain reaction” of other issues regarding federal government power has helped to generate the rise of Republicanism in many of its counties. It should also be noted that Dare as well as three other Northeastern counties (Hyde, Tyrrell, and Currituck) did not have a proven record of voting discrimination in the second half of the 20th century requiring Justice Department pre-clearance coverage of their election practices under the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

New demographic forces are also helping to shape today’s politics in the Northeastern Zone. Most Northeastern counties are becoming whiter with the influx of retirees and transplants from the burgeoning Virginia Beach area across the state border. The exceptions are basically majority-black counties. And while other counties are growing or holding near steady in population, majority-black counties are mainly losing population (whites as well as blacks) – and thus voting strength. From 2010-2016, the percentage population decreases from municipalities in Bertie, Northampton, and Washington were the largest in North Carolina [See Stanford, “Examining Decline in North Carolina’s Municipalities,” *Carolina Demography*, 7/5/17]. Thus, if the partisan political divide among Northeastern counties simply stays stable, Republican voters will soon outnumber Democrats in the region.

At the same time, despite the influx of new and more affluent white voters, the region is showing little sign of emerging urban or metropolitan centers which have been associated with Democratic influence in the North Carolina Piedmont. The only North Carolina-based Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) in the region is Greenville/Pitt. Underlining their lack of connection to the rest of North Carolina, Currituck and Gates are now in the Virginia Beach/Norfolk/Newport News MSA – and more Northeastern counties may be joining them in future years. Six counties (Bertie, Chowan, Hertford, Hyde, Martin, and Washington) are still so rural that they are not even connected to a small-town “micropolitan” job hub. Such counties as Camden and Currituck do not have any incorporated municipalities.

Thus, the Northeastern Zone may be fated to stay even more invisible than the Western Zone in North Carolina’s increasingly metropolitan political life.

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT)

Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats are always an important aspect of any region’s prospects for economic prosperity.

In the Northeastern Prosperity zone, generally, the following SWOT observations pertain:

Strengths

- Outer Banks/natural resource amenities
- Proximity to Virginia Beach (large metro area)
- Two UNC campuses: East Carolina (eastern flagship campus) and Elizabeth City State University
- Pitt County – in the Greenville MSA – is a core metro county that has experienced relatively strong growth since 1990. Pitt grew faster than the state rate in the 1990s (24% vs. 21% statewide) and 2000s (26% vs. 19%), though it has grown slightly slower than the state rate since 2010 (6.5% vs. 7.7%)
- Presence of ECU gives region a high share of 15-24 year-olds: just over 16% of this sub-PZ’s population is 15-24, above the state average of 13%.

Weaknesses

- It has the smallest population of any region – very low density – and is barely growing. As a region, it is holding at steady population, but this trend masks the significant population decline in many counties.
- Lowest educated, relatively older population
- Potential weakness (?) – high concentration of black residents but overall less diverse than the state (smaller share of Asian and Hispanic residents)
- Youth drain – net out-migration of younger adults very common in many counties and has been ongoing for decades. Has double impact of 1) reducing working-age population immediately and 2) reducing future population growth by reducing size of childbearing population
- Population aging due, in large part, to youth out-migration combined with population aging overall. Older population means that many counties now facing natural decrease, with more deaths than births. This is compounding the net out-migration of young adults and creating a vicious cycle of population loss.
- Nearly all counties except for Pitt County are showing signs of difficulty. The six other counties in the Greenville sub-PZ grew slower than the state rate from 1990-2010 and all have lost population since 2010.
- Greenville sub-PZ includes some of the counties with the largest population losses since 2010, including: Northampton (-10.1%), Bertie (-9.7%), Martin (-7%), and Halifax (-6.1%). Lack of jobs in these regions likely a major factor – more than half of workers from these counties work outside of their county of residence:
- Halifax and Martin have had net out-migration every decade since 1990s. (Halifax one of the most classic examples of “youth drain”, with large, negative out flows of individuals ages 15-24.)
- All counties except Pitt County have classic profiles of youth drain. Overall, there was net loss of individuals in their late 20s and in their 30s and children 5-9 between 2000-10.
- All counties except Pitt County have had both net out-migration and natural decrease since 2010. This underscores the dual challenge of population aging and lack of economic opportunities.
- Lower educational attainment and has not significantly closed gaps with state. In 2017, adults 25+ in this region were more likely to have less than a high school degree than the state average (16% vs. 13%) and were less likely to have an associate degree or higher (33% vs. 39%).

Opportunities

- Inner Banks development
- Development of Greenville into stronger metropolitan hub. Currently, region is very dispersed in terms of commuting patterns with no clear hub. Neighbors to Pitt commute to Pitt but Dare and Pasquotank are also regional pulls. Outside of region, Rocky Mount, Raleigh, and Virginia Beach metro areas are major destinations.
- An airport in Greenville or stronger train connections
- Develop Greenville into stronger metropolitan hub. Currently, region is very dispersed in terms of commuting patterns with no clear hub. Neighbors to Pitt commute to Pitt but Dare and Pasquotank are also regional pulls. Outside of region, Rocky Mount, Raleigh, and Virginia Beach metro areas are major destinations.
- Identify ways to better integrate Halifax, Northampton, Hertford, and Bertie. Currently, this cluster of counties is not significantly contributing to either the Pitt area workforce or to the workforce in Pasquotank (Elizabeth City), the other primary regional pull.

Threats

- Hospital closures. Aging individuals with the capacity to leave may choose to relocate due to lack of medical facilities. Lack of high-quality medical care may pose a barrier to development as a retiree destination. Of course, Baby Boomers stop aging into retirement age in 2030 – investing too heavily in attracting retirees and not developing broader opportunities would soon be a losing proposition.
- Lack of internet connectivity/coverage and other resources (e.g., diverse grocery stores, restaurants) that might bring individuals who are able to telework and interested in a coastal, more rural way of life. Lack of internet connectivity also creates barriers to introduction of innovations such as telehealth.
- Declining population and declining child population = increased risk of school closures, consolidation. Could place increased burdens on schools that are already struggling with relatively lower performance due to high levels of poverty – which means working-age individuals with children may be less likely to relocate to these communities.
- Sea level rise, climate change, and related risks pose challenge to coastal communities.
- Lower home values mean lower property tax base to generate revenue.

Elizabeth City Sub-Prosperity Zone

In the context of Elizabeth City, the following additional observations pertain:

Strengths

- Home to Elizabeth City State University
- Outer Banks: Dare, Currituck, and Hyde have some of the largest impacts of tourism. Measured as tax savings per resident due to tourism expenditures (2017 from VisitNC):
 - Dare was #1 - \$2,870
 - Currituck was #3 - \$906
 - Hyde was #4 - \$681
- Dare and Pasquotank both have a strong draw for commuters in the region (see Figure 1 below)
- Virginia Beach is a major destination for workers living in the Elizabeth City sub-PZ
- Higher concentration of adults at older ages indicates appeal to retirees. In 2017:
 - 28% aged 55-74 versus 22% statewide
 - 8% age 75+ vs. 6% statewide

Weaknesses

- Growth almost entirely fueled by Currituck and Dare counties, with some growth in Camden. Elizabeth City Sub-PZ had net gain of 1,326 residents since 2010:
 - 2,784 in Currituck
 - 2,179 in Dare
 - 601 in Camden
- Population losses in all other counties except for Perquimans (+21), with heaviest losses in Washington (-1,202), Pasquotank (-918), and Chowan (-688)
- While 7 of the counties are technically within the Virginia Beach CSA, this proximity to a larger metro region has not prevented them from experiencing population losses.
- The rural counties are facing the greatest challenges. Chowan, Hyde, and Washington are completely rural and have faced the most significant population losses since 1990 – and are projected to face the most significant losses going forward.

- The Elizabeth City sub-PZ has the smallest county in the state (Tyrrell) and some of the other smallest counties (e.g., Hyde, which is projected to have below 5,000 residents by 2038). In fact, only 3 of the region's 10 counties had over 25,000 residents in 2017—and they were not far about 25K: Currituck (26.3K), Dare (36.1K), and Pasquotank (39.7K). These small counties will have more limited data available. For example, areas with less than 5,000 residents are not provided in the ACS comparison profile tables due to instability in the estimates, which means that there is no ability to evaluate statistically significant changes year over year and that more data may be suppressed. Furthermore, **none** of the counties in this region are large enough to be included in the ACS 1-year estimates, meaning that all data on local social and economic conditions is limited to 5-year averages. Moreover, this means that there may be more limited ability to evaluate sub-regions within the counties.

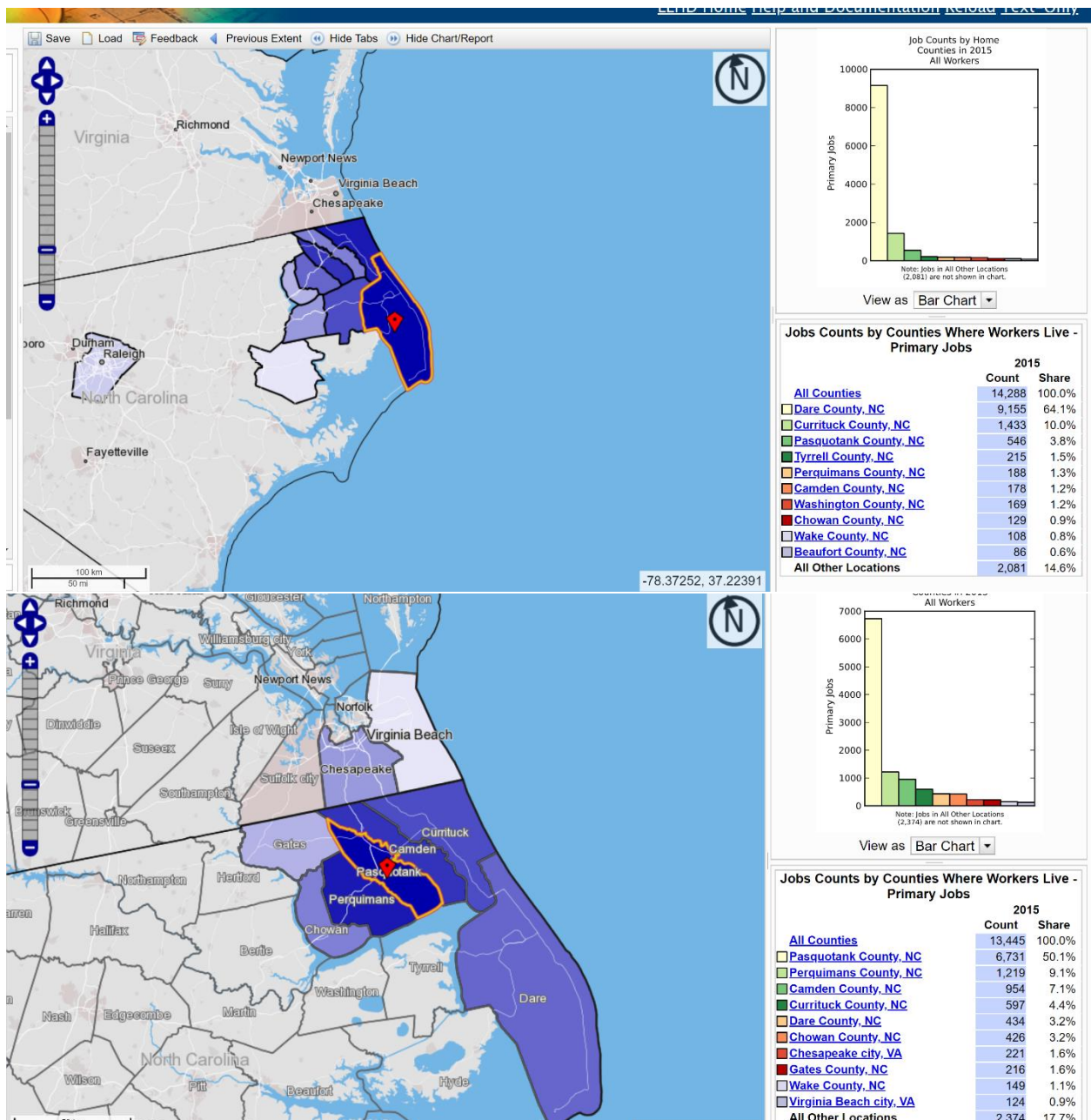


Figure 1: Commuter patterns in northeastern North Carolina

Opportunities

- Improve opportunities for young/early career adults. Between 2000-2010, region had net in-migration for under 20 and 25-74 but had **net out-migration** for ages 20-24.
- Improve overall educational attainment. Since 1990, region has pulled into alignment with state in terms of adults 25+ with less than a HS diploma (13% in both Elizabeth City PZ and NC overall), but most of the gains have come from increases in adults with a HS diploma or GED or some college/no degree, not because a greater share of adults has an associate degree or higher. In 2017, 30% of Elizabeth City adults 25+ had completed an associate degree or higher, nine percentage points below the statewide rate of 39%.

Threats

- Sea level rise, climate instability, and related risks could increase costs of living/quality of life and have a significant impact on continued growth and stability in Dare and Currituck. These impacts may be even more harmful to the counties on the Albemarle Sound that have not benefited from recent growth to the same extent as Dare and Currituck.
- Making plans for economic development based on current population projections may be unrealistic. While the Elizabeth City sub-PZ had strong net in-migration in the 1990s (+14K) and 2000s (+18K), net migration into the region has dropped substantially. Between 2010 and 2017, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that the Elizabeth City sub-PZ has gained just 817 net in-migrants. In contrast, the current projections from the Office of State Budget and Management predict that the region will gain 6,359 net migrants between 2010 and 2020. Net migration for 2020-2030 and 2030-2038 is projected to be even higher, which appears unlikely to occur unless significant changes happen in this region.
- Due to population aging, region is projected to have natural decrease (more deaths than births), with net migration being the only potential source of population growth. Population loss from natural decrease may be even more significant than currently projected if the projected levels of net migration are not met.

Employment, Demographic and Commutation Patterns

The figures below provide information about employment, demographic, and commutation patterns for counties in the Northeast Prosperity Zone.

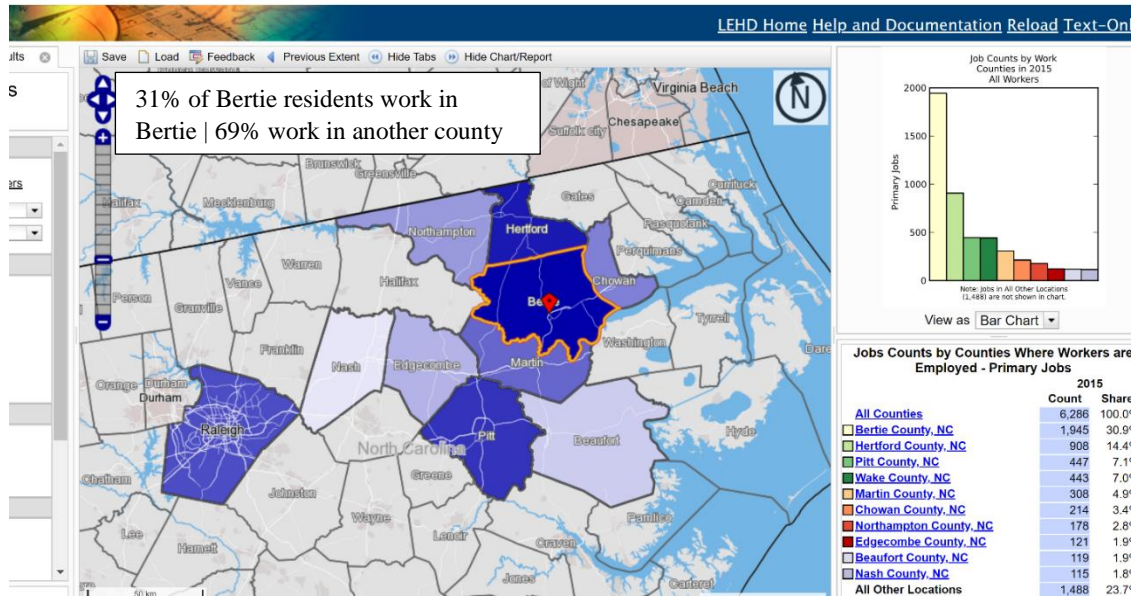


Figure 2: Commuter patterns for Bertie County

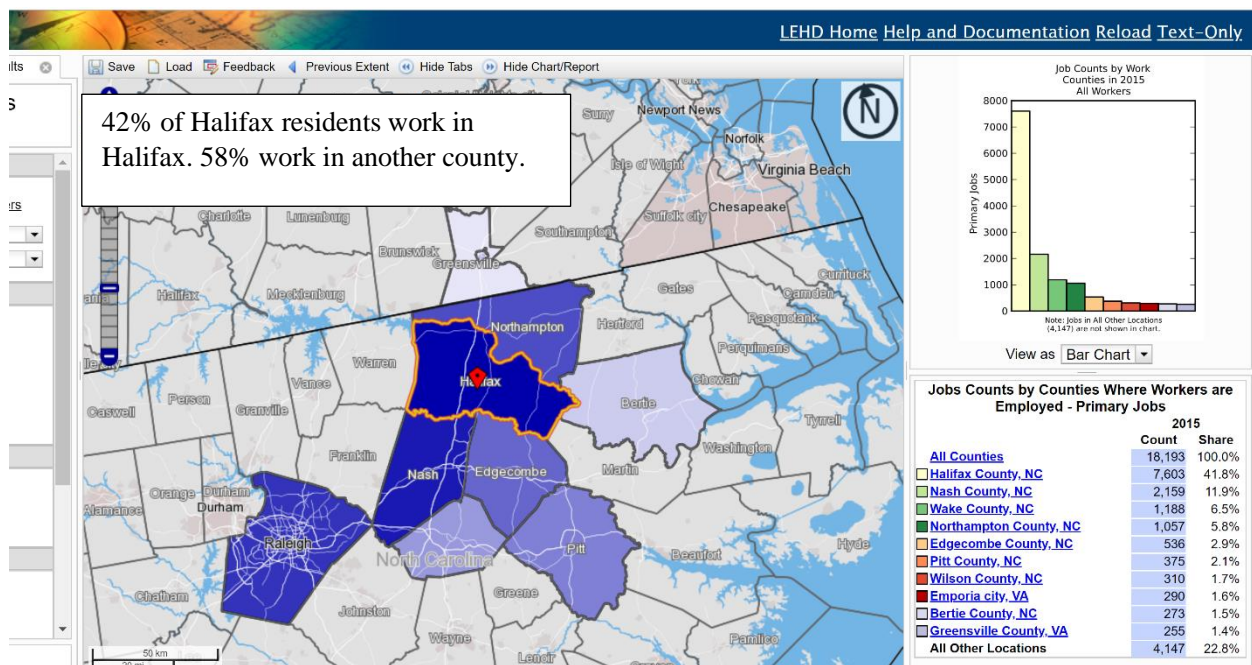


Figure 3 Commuter patterns for Halifax County

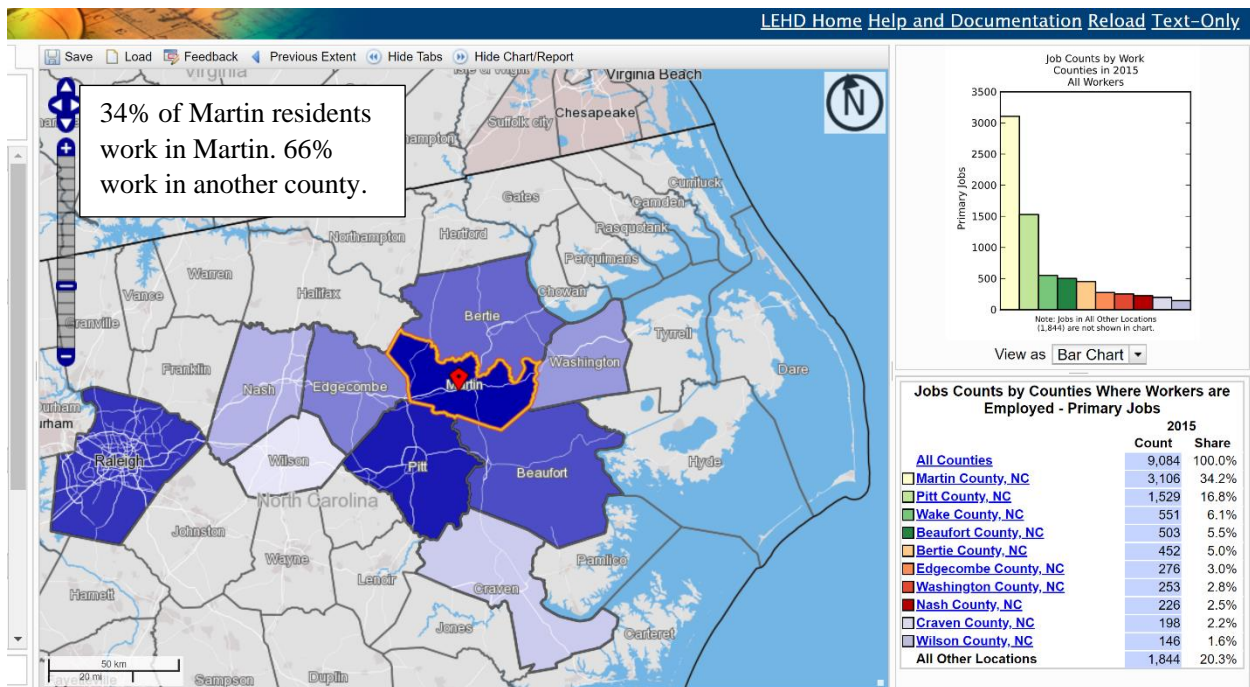


Figure 4: Commuter patterns for Martin County

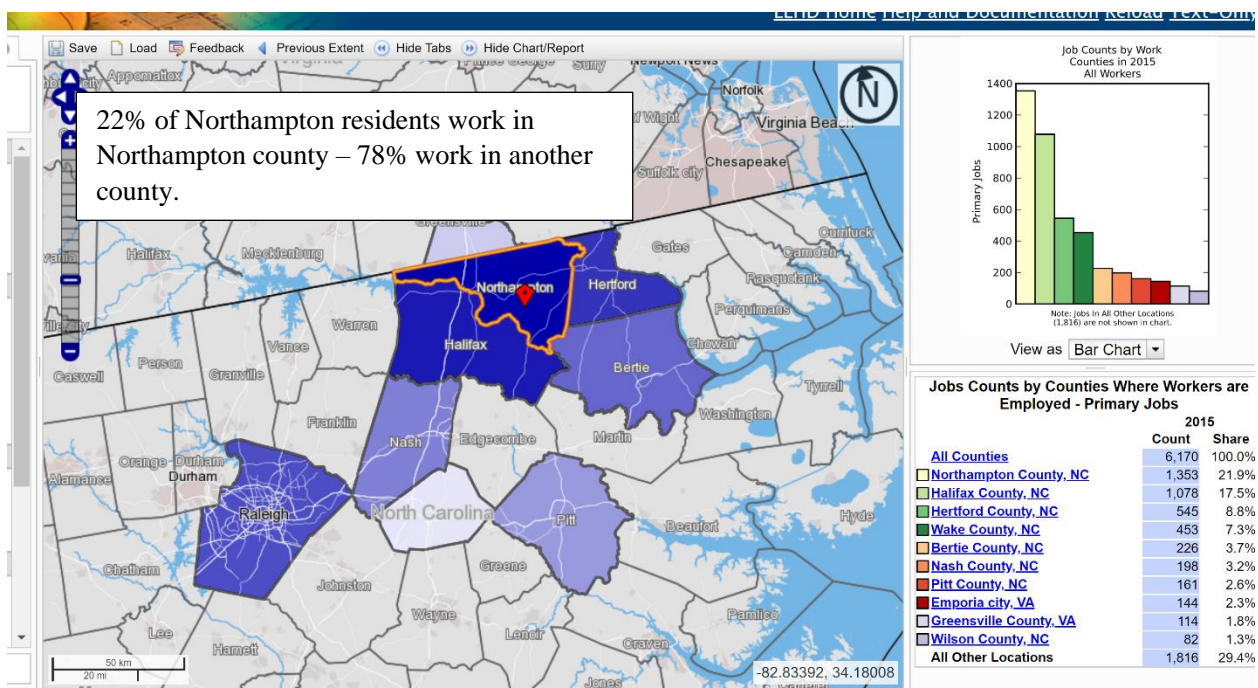


Figure 5: Commuter patterns for Northampton County

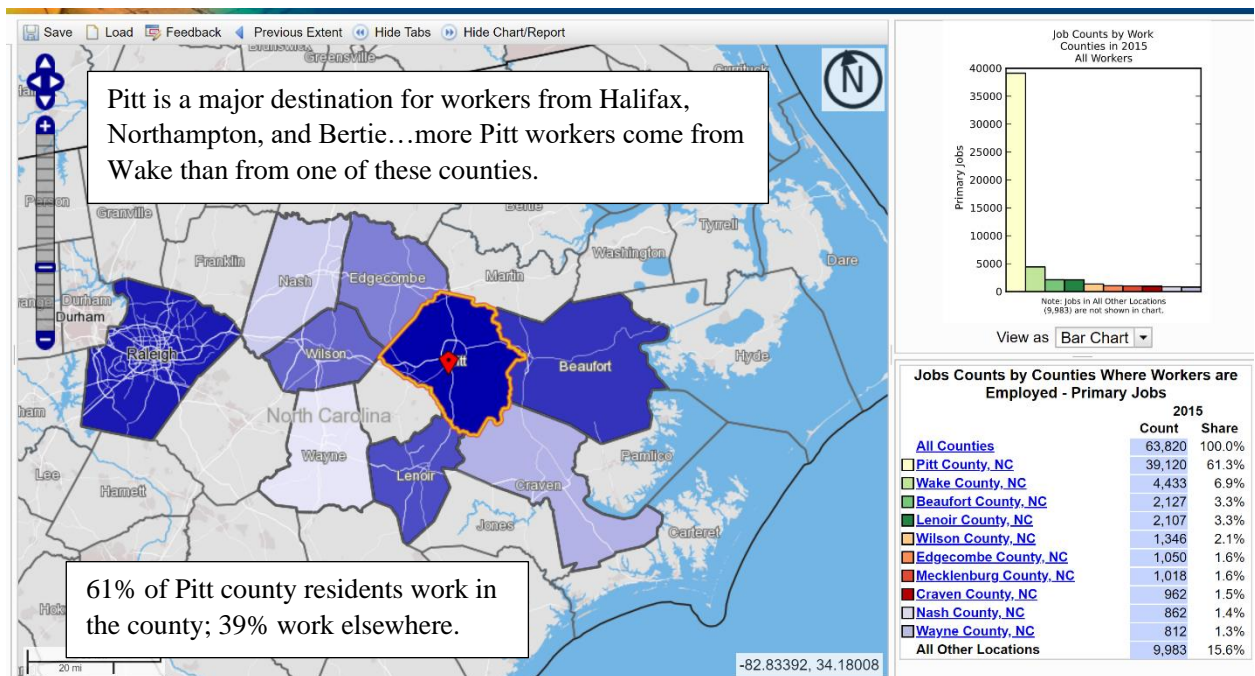


Figure 6: Commuter patterns for Pitt County

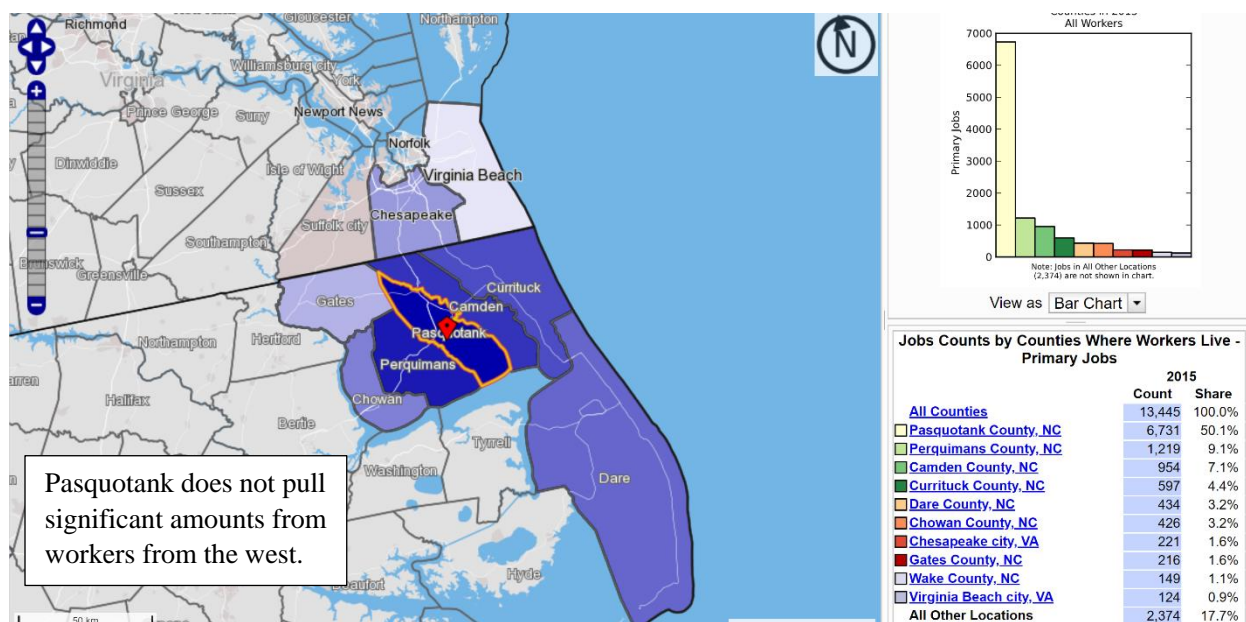


Figure 7: Commuter patterns for Pasquotank County

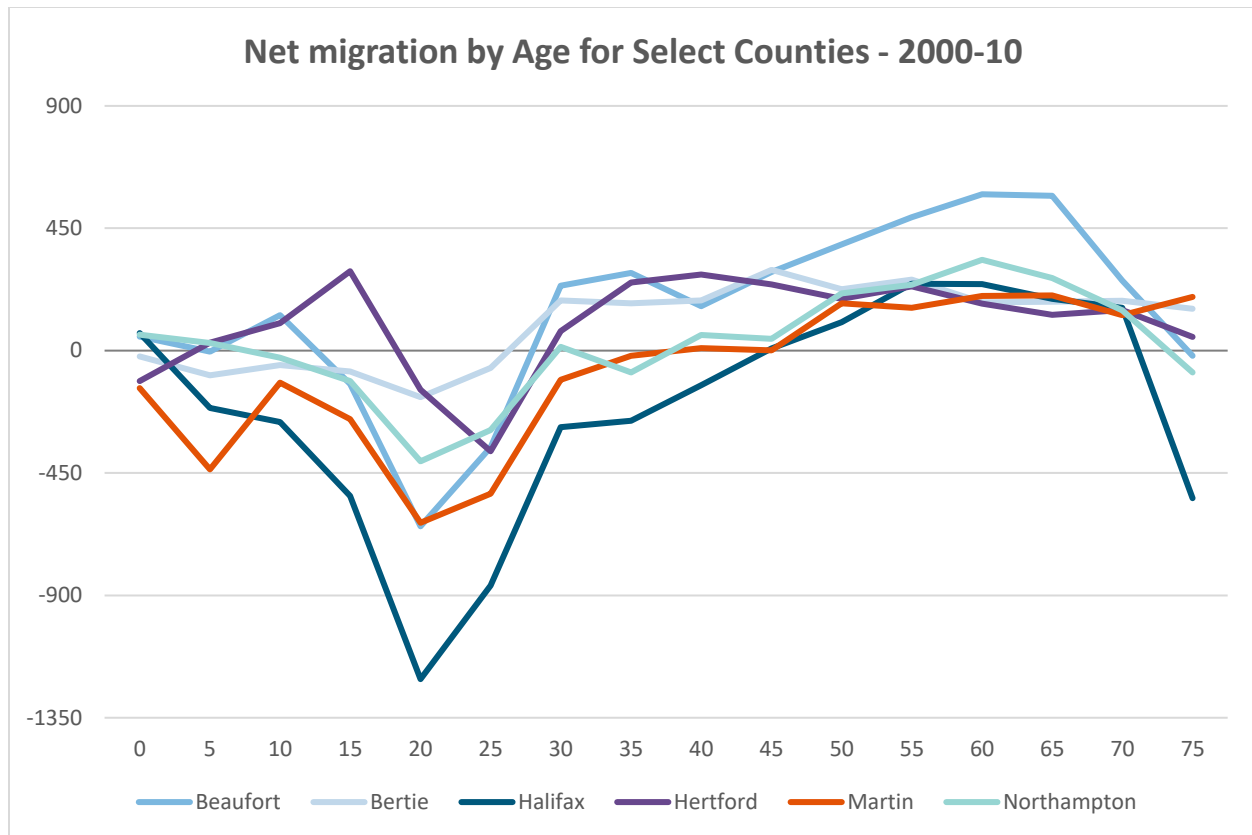


Figure 8: Net migration by age for selected counties – 2000-2010

Western Prosperity Zone

The Western Prosperity Zone is one of eight statewide planning regions established by the N.C. General Assembly.¹ People of European descent migrated into this 13-county region—a region sandwiched between Tennessee, Georgia, and South Carolina—throughout the 19th century, in the process coming in contact with Native American peoples, notably the Cherokee.² In 2017, an estimated 727,000 people—or seven of every 100 North Carolinians—called the region home.³

Two sub-prosperity zones are within the region:

- Asheville: Buncombe, Henderson, Madison, Polk, Rutherford, Transylvania
- Waynesville-Franklin: Cherokee, Clary, Graham, Haywood, Jackson, Macon, Swain

The region has historically had an economy dominated by small farmers and merchants, the Western Prosperity Zone today is characterized by such economic trends as the following:

- The value of goods and services produced by businesses based in the Western Prosperity Zone

equaled \$23 billion in 2015, the last year with complete estimates. Put differently, the Western Prosperity Zone generated \$5 of every \$100 in statewide economic activity.⁴

- The region contained some 18,000 private business establishments with employees in 2016, the last year with complete data; those firms accounted for 8 percent of the state's employer establishments. The region also contained another 64,000 establishments with no employees.⁵
- Of all business establishments, 8 percent were owned by persons of color in 2012, the last year with data; in contrast, persons of color contributed some 15 percent of the population.⁶
- The Western Prosperity Zone was home to, on average, 7 percent of the state's civilian labor force from 2013-17; of those people, 5 percent, on average, were unemployed.⁷
- The typical working person (age 25+) residing in the area had, on average, annual labor earnings of \$30,700 from 2013-17, an amount 12 percent less than the statewide figure.⁸
- On average, 15 percent of the region's population lived in households with incomes below the federal poverty level, with another 22 percent living in households with incomes no greater than twice that level; in all, 37 percent of all residents were poor or near poor.⁹

When such trends are broken out by the area's two sub-prosperity zones, noticeable differences appear between the six-county region centered on Asheville (Buncombe, Henderson, Madison, Polk, Rutherford, and Transylvania) and the seven-county region centered on Waynesville-Franklin (Cherokee, Clary, Graham, Haywood, Jackson, Macon, and Swain). Buncombe County is the dominant driver of regional economic activity.

A Region Dominated by One Large Source of Economic Output

The value of goods and services produced by businesses based in the Western Prosperity Zone equaled \$23.2 billion in 2015, the last year with complete estimates. Put differently, the Western

Prosperity Zone generated \$5 of every \$100 in statewide economic output.¹⁰ Noteworthy trends include the following:

- The region's private-sector enterprises generated \$19.9 billion in economic activity in 2015, out of a regional total of \$23.2 billion; that translates to \$86 of every \$100.¹¹
- The largest source of economic output was the private service providing sector; such firms generated \$14.8 billion in economic output, or three-fourths of the private-sector total.¹²
- The total value of goods and services produced by businesses based in the Asheville Sub-Prosperity Zone equaled \$18.1 billion, an amount 3.5 times greater than the \$5.1 billion in economic output produced in the Waynesville-Franklin Sub-Prosperity Zone.¹³
- The major geographical source of regional output is Buncombe County, which is where \$48 of every \$100 originated. The county's \$11.2 billion in economic output was tied to diverse private and public activities centered in Asheville, the state's 10th most populous city.¹⁴
- After Buncombe County, the largest geographical sources of output were Henderson (\$3.9 billion), Rutherford (\$1.5 billion), Haywood (\$1.3 billion), and Jackson (\$1.3 billion) counties; when combined with Buncombe, these counties accounted for 83 percent of area output.¹⁵
- In 2015, economic output per capita in the Western Prosperity Zone was an estimated \$32,500 versus a statewide figure of \$50,100. In the Asheville Sub-Prosperity Zone, the per capita figure was \$35,500, versus \$25,500 in the Waynesville-Franklin Sub-Prosperity Zone.¹⁶

A Geographically Concentrated Private Sector

The region contained some 18,400 private business establishments with employees in 2016, the last year with complete data; put differently, the 13-county Western Prosperity Zone contained 8 percent of the state's private employer establishments.¹⁷ The region also contained 64,100 establishments with no employees.¹⁸ Noteworthy trends include the following:

- The entire region was home to 18,400 private business establishments with employees. Of these establishments, 13,700, or 75 percent, were in the Asheville Sub-Prosperity Zone, while 4,700, or 25 percent, were in the Waynesville-Franklin Sub-Prosperity Zone.¹⁹
- The largest geographic concentration of employer establishments was in Buncombe County, which contained 8,200 such establishments, or 45 percent. After Buncombe County, the most employer establishments were in Henderson (2,600), Haywood (1,400), Rutherford (1,200), and Macon (1,100) counties; these five counties contained 79 percent of all employer establishments.²⁰

- Some 84 percent of private-sector employer establishments were in the broad service sector.²¹
- The largest concentration of establishments was in the retail trade super-sector (3,000), followed by the construction (2,200), other services (2,000), health care and social assistance (1,900), and accommodation and food services (1,900) super-sectors.²²
- Compared to the whole state, the Western Prosperity Zone had higher than expected concentrations of employer establishments (in descending order) in the broad construction; arts, entertainment, and recreation; utilities; educational services; accommodation and food services; real estate and rental and leasing; and retail trade sectors.²³
- Compared to the whole state, the Western Prosperity Zone had lower than expected concentrations of employer establishments (in ascending order) in the broad professional, scientific, and technical services; management of companies; transportation and warehousing; wholesale trade; finance; and information sectors.²⁴
- Private employer establishments in the region had a total of 231,000 employees in 2016. Establishments in the Asheville Sub-Prosperity Zone employed 3.6 times as many people as did establishments in the Waynesville-Franklin Sub-Prosperity Zone (180,000 versus 51,000).²⁵
- The largest geographic employment center was Buncombe County, which contained 117,000 employees, or 51 percent of the regional total. After Buncombe County, the largest centers were Henderson (33,000), Rutherford (16,000), Haywood (15,000), and Jackson (13,000) counties; these five counties contained 84 percent of the region's jobs.²⁶
- Some 83 percent of regional employees worked in the broad service sector.²⁷
- The largest concentration of employees was in the health care and social assistance super-sector (47,000), followed by the retail trade (39,000), accommodation and food services (37,000), and manufacturing (27,000) super-sectors.²⁸
- Compared to the whole state, the Western Prosperity Zone had higher than expected employment (in descending order) in the broad accommodation and food service; health care and social assistance; retail trade; other services; arts, entertainment, and recreation; and construction sectors.²⁹
- Compared to the whole state, the Western Prosperity Zone had lower than expected employment (in ascending order) in the broad management of companies; administrative and waste management; finance and insurance; utilities; professional, scientific, and technical services; transportation and warehousing; wholesale trade; agriculture; and information sectors.³⁰
- In the Western Prosperity Zone, 58 of every 100 employer establishments had no more than four employees in 2016, a share greater than the statewide one.³¹
- In the Western Prosperity Zone, 88 of every 100 employer establishments had no more than 19 employees.³²

- The Western Prosperity Zone had about the same share of large employer establishments, meaning those with 100 or more employees, as did the state. Approximately 2 percent of the region's establishments were so large in 2016, the same as the statewide figure.³³
- Of the 327 establishments in the Western Prosperity Zone that had at least 100 employees in 2016, some 168 of them (51 percent) were in Buncombe County.³⁴
- The Western Prosperity Zone had 64,100 non-employer establishments in 2016, the last year with complete data. Some 74 percent of those establishments were in the Asheville Sub-Prosperity Zone, and 26 percent were in the Waynesville-Franklin Sub-Prosperity Zone.³⁵
- Non-employer establishments in the Western Prosperity Zone accounted for 9 percent of all such establishments in the state. Such businesses typically are small, unincorporated ones operated by self-employed persons and that have (usually) at least \$1,000 in annual sales.³⁶
- Non-employer establishments generated \$2.6 billion in annual receipts in 2016.³⁷ Of that, \$1.2 billion was generated by establishments located in Buncombe County.
- In 2016, the Western Prosperity Zone was home to an estimated 266 government establishments that had 17,100 payroll positions. Local governments had the most payroll positions (12,500), followed by the state (3,700) and federal (938) governments.³⁸
- Some 35 percent of all public-sector payroll jobs in the region are in Buncombe County.³⁹

A Relatively Small Proportion of Minority-Owned Businesses

Of all private business establishments in the Western Prosperity Zone, 8 percent were owned by persons of color in 2012, the last year with data; for context, persons of color account for some 15 percent of the population.⁴⁰ Noteworthy trends include the following:

- Persons of color owned in 2012 a total of 5,300 business establishments (employer and non-employer), or 8 percent of all establishments in the Western Prosperity Zone. Statewide, persons of color owned 23 percent of all business establishments.⁴¹
- The largest geographic concentration of minority-owned businesses was in Buncombe County, which had 2,100 establishments, or 40 percent of the area total. Henderson County had 18 percent of the total, followed by Swain and Rutherford counties (both 9 percent).⁴²
- When compared to other establishments, those owned by persons of color were more apt to be non-employer establishments. Even among employer establishments, minority-owned establishments typically had fewer employees, smaller payrolls, and lower sales.⁴³
- In Buncombe County, for one, nonminority-owned establishments were 16 times more likely than minority-owned establishments to have employees, with annual sales that were 27 times greater. Among employer establishments, nonminority-owned ones had

21 times as many employees and paid 34 times as much in wages than did their minority-owned peers.⁴⁴

A Region Home to an Older Labor Force

The Western Prosperity Zone was home to, on average, 7 percent of the state's civilian labor force in 2013-17. Compared to the whole state, the region's labor force is older.⁴⁵ Noteworthy trends include the following:

- From 2013-17, on average, 328,800 people participated in the region's labor force. After subtracting the 400 people in the armed services, a total of 328,400 persons were in the civilian labor force. In short, 7 percent of the state's civilian labor force lived in the area.⁴⁶
- Across the region, an average of 56 percent of people of working age (ages 16+) participated in the labor force from 2013-17; in contrast, the statewide rate averaged 63 percent.⁴⁷
- Compared to the state, about the same percentage of early-career workers (ages 25-34) participated in the labor force, on average, from 2013-17; across the Western Prosperity Zone, 82 percent of such workers were in the labor force, as were 83 percent of such workers statewide.⁴⁸
- On average, prime-age workers (ages 25-64) accounted for 80 percent of the civilian labor force from 2013-17, as compared to a statewide figure of 81 percent. Compared to the state, older workers (ages 65+) accounted for a higher share of the civilian labor force.⁴⁹
- On average of 5 percent of the region's civilian workforce was unemployed from 2013-17, compared to a statewide rate of 7 percent. The 17,600 unemployed persons in the region accounted for five of every 100 unemployed North Carolinians, on average.⁵⁰
- The civilian unemployment rate averaged 5 percent in the Asheville Sub-Prosperity Zone from 2013-17, versus 6 percent in the Waynesville-Franklin Sub-Prosperity Zone.⁵¹
- In terms of individual counties in the Western Prosperity Zone, the average civilian unemployment rate ranged from 4 percent in Henderson County to 9 percent in Rutherford County.⁵²
- In the region, average unemployment rates from 2013-17 were 1.9 times greater for African-American workers than non-Hispanic White workers (10 percent versus 5 percent); the unemployment rate for Native American workers was 1.8 times greater than that of non-Hispanic White workers (9 percent versus 5 percent).⁵³
- Among prime-age civilian workers (ages 25-64) residing in the Prosperity Zone, on average, 34 percent possessed at least a bachelor's degree from 2013-2017, as did 35 percent of all such workers in North Carolina.⁵⁴
- For employed civilians across the entire Western Prosperity Zone, one of every five, on average, worked in professional occupations from 2013-17. That share was higher in the

Asheville Sub-Prosperity Zone than in the Waynesville-Franklin Sub-Prosperity Zone (26 percent versus 18 percent.)⁵⁵

A Region Challenged by Low Earnings and Incomes

Compared to the whole state, workers residing in the Western Prosperity Zone earned less than did their peers from 2013-17.⁵⁶ Lower earnings translate into lower household incomes, which results in higher proportions of people living in poverty and near poverty. Noteworthy trends include the following:

- In 2017, the average weekly wage in the Western Prosperity Zone was \$744, an amount 21 percent lower than the statewide figure of \$941; average weekly wages in the region were lower than the corresponding statewide figures in every major industrial sector except for leisure and hospitality services.⁵⁷
- The average weekly wage paid in 2017 to positions in the broad service sector totaled \$715 in the Western Prosperity Zone versus \$915 statewide; the gap was smaller in the broad goods producing sector (\$905/week versus \$1,071/week).⁵⁸
- The typical working person (age 25+) residing in the area had, on average, annual labor earnings of \$30,700 from 2013-17, an amount 12 percent less than the statewide figure.⁵⁹
- In general, the typical worker (ages 25) residing in the area earned less, on average, than did the comparably educated worker in North Carolina.⁶⁰
- The typical household in the Western Prosperity Zone had, on average, an annual income of
- \$45,300 from 2013-17. Median household income was higher in the Asheville Sub-Prosperity Zone than in the Waynesville Sub-Prosperity Zone (\$46,800 versus \$41,400) due to some high incomes logged in the counties in the metropolitan Asheville area.⁶¹
- Across the region, median household income from 2013-17 ranged from \$35,300 in Swain County to \$50,500 in Henderson County; in all, eight counties in the region had median household incomes below the regional value of \$45,300.⁶²
- Across the region, the typical non-Hispanic White, African-American, and Hispanic households all had lower household incomes than did comparable households in North Carolina; within the region, household incomes generally were higher in the Asheville Sub-
- Prosperity Zone than in the Waynesville-Franklin Sub-Prosperity Zone.⁶³
- Within the region, the typical non-Hispanic White household had a household income of \$47,100, as compared to \$30,800 for the typical African-American household and \$28,700 for the typical Hispanic household.⁶⁴
- On average, 15 percent of the region's population lived in households with incomes below the federal poverty level, with another 22 percent living in households with incomes no greater than twice that threshold; in all, 37 percent of all residents were poor

or near poor.⁶⁵ In the region, poverty rates were higher for non-Hispanic White (13 percent), African-American (27 percent), and Hispanic (32 percent) persons than was typical in North Carolina. And, one-fifth of Native American persons lived in poverty.⁶⁶

- Across the region, an average of 6 percent of all residents—some 41,000 individuals in all—lived in households with incomes no greater than half the poverty level. The “deep poverty” rate ranged from 4 percent in Henderson County to 11 percent in Swain County.⁶⁷
- Across the region, an estimated 13 percent of all residents, on average, lacked health insurance coverage from 2013-17; the share of uninsured individuals ranged from 11 percent in Madison County to 21 percent in Swain County.⁶⁸
- When broken out by age, persons ages 25-34 were the most likely regional residents to lack insurance (27 percent) followed by those ages 18-24 (25 percent) and ages 35-64 (17 percent).⁶⁹

Regional History

In October 1880, the Western North Carolina Railroad (WNCRR) completed the extension of its line into Asheville, North Carolina.¹ The era of transportation development that followed integrated the southwestern corner of the state (the Western Prosperity Zone counties of Buncombe, Henderson, Madison, Polk, Rutherford, Transylvania, Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Jackson, Macon, and Swain) more thoroughly with the state and national economy. However, the era of economic development that followed has remained stubbornly uneven. Asheville has historically been the main driver of the region’s economy, and the city continues to have significant appeal as a tourist destination. The Asheville sub-prosperity zone likewise has enjoyed a greater level of economic growth and stability than the rest of the region. Counties in the Waynesville-Franklin sub-prosperity zone, meanwhile, have historically struggled to find a stable, sustainable economic base. Relying in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century on low-paying extractive industries, namely logging, the western zone attracted some industrial employers by the mid-twentieth century. However, except Buncombe, counties in the western zone have consistently struggled with low-paying jobs and, as a result, outmigration. This uneven historical development, dating to Asheville’s emergence as a vibrant New South town in the late nineteenth century and continuing through the eras of highway expansion and industrial development that followed in the twentieth century, has produced a region with wide disparities in the economy and quality of life of its rural areas and its central metropolitan area.

When the WNCRR reached Asheville, the line split into two branches. A northern branch penetrated the Blue Ridge Mountains and met the East Tennessee and Western North Carolina Railroad (ET&WNC) at the community of Paint Rock, near the state line. Construction on this northern branch was completed by 1885, connecting the state’s principal rail line, the North Carolina Railroad (NCRR), to valuable markets in the upper Mississippi and Ohio Valley. The WNCRR’s southern branch extended 120 miles from Asheville to Ducktown, a copper mining community in the southeastern corner of Tennessee. When the southern branch was completed in 1891, the WNCRR passed through the towns of Waynesville, Bryson

¹ Ronald D. Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930* (Knoxville, 1982), 99.

City, Bushnell, and Murphy, and it gave the NCRR an entry point to markets in the Tennessee Valley and lower Mississippi.²

The extension of the WNCRR made the southwestern region an attractive site for capital investments, opening the region to lumber and mining interests. It also brought tourists attracted to the burgeoning resort town of Asheville and the supposed health benefits of the mountain air. Tourism in Asheville received an additional boost in 1886, with the completion of the Asheville-Spartanburg Railroad. This line allowed for rail access from the South Carolina low country to Western North Carolina, and Asheville soon became a popular destination for Palmetto State elites seeking a more temperate climate during the summer months.³

As railroad lines expanded in the late nineteenth century, so too did the Good Roads Movement. A loose coalition of farmers, middle-class reformers, urban bicyclists, and economic boosters, the Good Roads Movement pressured local, state, and federal governments for increased investments in the construction and maintenance of highways. By the early twentieth century, rural communities in southwestern North Carolina would emerge as strong advocates for good roads. Farmers in particular came to value good roads for the improved access to markets and the alternative they provided to the high freight rates of railroads. Initially, however, North Carolina's urban areas were the first to take up the good roads mantle.⁴

Mecklenburg County in 1885 levied the state's first tax to pay for road building, and for several years afterwards, one historian has written, this "remained an isolated action."⁵ Rural areas of the southwest, like other parts of the state, resisted the higher taxes associated with road building and instead relied on the less productive "statute labor system." This system required all able-bodied men to devote at least one day a year to road maintenance in their community. Though it kept tax burdens to a minimum, statute labor proved inefficient and rife with corruption. Men selected for road work lacked training in modern road building techniques, and others used connections with local politicians to exempt them from the duty.⁶ As economist Cecil Brown summarized in his early history of North Carolina's highway system, the "accomplishments of this ancient labor tax method of road maintenance were distressingly meager."⁷

In the southwestern counties, Asheville became the first to embrace the gospel of good roads. Led by a business community eager to expand its tourism economy, Asheville became in 1899 the site of North Carolina's first locally organized Good Roads Association. Two years later, the arrival of the Good Roads Train—a promotional tool to showcase the benefits of improved roads, funded by the Southern Railroad, the National Good Roads Association, and the federal Office of Road Inquiry—led to the formation of the Appalachian Good Roads Association.

² Stephen Wallace Taylor, *The New South's New Frontier: A Social History of Economic Development in Southwestern North Carolina* (Gainesville, 2001), 16-22.

³ Richard D. Starnes, *Creating the Land of the Sky: Tourism and Society in Western North Carolina* (Tuscaloosa, AL, 2005), 9.

⁴ Taylor, *New South's New Frontier*, 22.

⁵ Harry McKown, Jr., "Roads and Reform: The Good Roads Movement in North Carolina," M.A. Thesis, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill (1972), 8.

⁶ Howard Lawrence Preston, *Dirt Roads to Dixie: Accessibility and Modernization in the South, 1885-1935* (Knoxville, 1991), 20-22.

⁷ Cecil Kenneth Brown, *The State Highway System of North Carolina: Its Evolution and Present Status* (Chapel Hill, 1931), 9.

Advocates stressed the possibilities good roads provided for tourism development in mountain communities. While Asheville's status as a railroad hub allowed the town to grow, the North Carolina Good Roads Association lamented that "a large area of our mountain region is practically inaccessible to the tourist and pleasure seeker, and during certain months of the year is inaccessible to the people living in the mountains."⁸

By the 1910s, southwestern counties beyond Buncombe began advocating for good roads. This support stemmed, in part, from a fear that planned long-distance routes would bypass more isolated communities. With automobile ownership on the rise, good roads advocates developed plans for "special highways," long-distance thoroughfares that would be popular with pleasure-seeking motorists. Special highways in or passing through the western region included the Central Highway—an east-to-west route from Morehead City to Asheville to Tennessee, covered today by highways 70 and 321—and the Crest of Blue Ridge Highway, a route covered today by sections of the Blue Ridge Parkway. Special highways depended on private financing, a mostly ineffective method because it failed to generate much support from communities not directly touched by the routes.⁹ Southwestern counties in the 1910s were receptive to road building plans, but wanted to ensure that improvements would, as one state representative from Macon County put it, "take care of the little counties."¹⁰

Southwestern counties had a variety of motivations for joining in the Good Roads Movement, but the possibilities roads held for economic development were the most compelling. As the *Jackson County Journal* put it, "As roads are built you will see this county go forward by leaps and bounds." Opportunities in mining, timber, and the exploitation of other natural resources demanded road improvements, the *Journal* noted, concluding, "The time has come when we must have better roads or we will be practically left off the map."¹¹

Statewide good roads activism culminated in 1921, when the General Assembly passed a robust highway bill. The bill called for the use of federal funds, automobile license fees, a new one-cent-per-gallon gasoline tax, and a \$50 million bond issue to fund a statewide highway system. Importantly for smaller counties like those in the southwest, the General Assembly rejected a proposal by some good roads advocates—and endorsed by Governor Cameron Morrison—to create a trunk line highway system. Under such a system, a single trunk line would have run from Wilmington to Charlotte to Asheville but bypassed most of the southwestern region. Instead, the 1921 bill—signed reluctantly by Morrison—called for an expansion system of primary highways connecting all 100 county seats and other principal towns.¹² General Assemblies in the 1920s continued to authorize spending measures for the primary system, and by 1931 the state had completed the system, issuing a total of \$155 million in road bonds and receiving an additional \$16 million in federal aid in the process.¹³

⁸ McKown, "Roads and Reform," 21-31, North Carolina Good Roads Association circular letter quoted at 31.

⁹ McKown, "Roads and Reform," 34-39.

¹⁰ Taylor, *New South's New Frontier*, 24.

¹¹ *Jackson County Journal* quoted in Taylor, *New South's New Frontier*, 25-26.

¹² McKown, "Roads and Reform," 96-100.

¹³ Betters, Paul V., ed., *State Centralization in North Carolina* (Washington D.C.: Institute for Government Research of the Brookings Institution, 1932), 63.

The Good Roads Movement in North Carolina succeeded in building thousands of miles of roads. In the process, the movement showed that isolated counties in the southwest were willing to embrace some tax increases and an expanded role for the state government, provided that the connections to greater economic opportunities were clear and persuasive. North Carolinians showed particularly pride in their expanding highway system, and state politicians proclaimed themselves—with some justification - “The Good Roads State.” Economist Cecil Brown endorsed the boast, arguing in his 1931 study that previously isolated and impoverished counties had been “redeemed from their long bondage to mud.”¹⁴

The expansion of railroads and good roads in the southwest stimulated the region’s economic development, but Asheville was in the best position to take advantage of this wave of transportation improvements. In fact, before the Good Roads Movement Asheville had already emerged as a prominent New South tourist destination. Health tourism became a major industry following the Civil War, as people suffering from respiratory illnesses like tuberculosis found relief in the mountain air, and the area’s abundant mineral springs were thought to be a cure for a variety of maladies. By the late 1880s, however, resort owners in Asheville began targeting recreationalists and turning away guests with contagious diseases to avoid being associated exclusively with the sick. Elites from outside of the state began purchasing seasonal homes in the mountains, a trend that accelerated after the opening of the Biltmore mansion in 1895 confirmed Asheville as an attractive playground for the wealthy.¹⁵

Increased automobile ownership and improved roads changed the nature of tourism in the southwestern counties, bringing in more middle-class visitors and allowing communities outside of Asheville a better chance to take advantage of out-of-state dollars. The Macon County *Franklin Press*, for example, insisted that with the development of “good hotels and boarding houses, and means of transportation,” the county could “attract thousands of summer visitors.” Haywood and Jackson counties joined Asheville in building new hotels during the 1890s, and an expanded hotel at Hot Springs in Madison County increased the lure of the resort’s mineral pools. Out-of-state developers owned most of the region’s large hotels and resorts. The Hot Springs resort, for example, was purchased in 1884 by a group from New York. The Highlands resort in Macon County was owned by a partnership from Kansas, and outside interests owned major resorts in Jackson and Transylvania counties as well.¹⁶

Adding to the significance of the tourism industry, many wealthy tourists to Asheville and the surrounding area invested capital in other industries. While enjoying the mountain vistas and cultural amenities in Asheville, many businessmen noticed the region’s abundant forests and mineral deposits. Hotel owners and local boosters began putting out promotional literature that, ironically, advertised both the region’s exploitable natural resources and its beautiful scenery. Executives of northern lumber companies, often after having exhausted the forests in their home states, began buying up land in western North Carolina after noticing the rich hardwoods available while on vacation in Asheville and the surrounding area.¹⁷

Logging in western North Carolina prior to the 1890s was typically done on a small scale. Mountain farmers engaged in selective cutting as a supplement to their agricultural income, and the amount of timber cut did not significantly alter the natural environment. That began to change with the expansion of

¹⁴ Brown, *State Highway System*, 247.

¹⁵ Starnes, *Creating the Land of the Sky*, 9-34.

¹⁶ Starnes, *Creating the Land of the Sky*, 40-56, *Franklin Press* quote at 48.

¹⁷ Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, 101-102; Starnes, *Creating the Land of the Sky*, 31.

the WNCRR and its branch lines, which, historian Ronald Eller notes, “opened up the timberlands of western North Carolina and North Georgia to exploitation.”¹⁸ With timber resources in the Northeast and Great Lakes region diminished by the late 1880s, northern capitalists turned to the rich forests of the southern Appalachians. Northern lumber companies—and the Glasgow-based Scottish Carolina Timber and Land Company—bought up hundreds of thousands of acres of land, and between 1890 and 1920 engaged in “one of the most frenzied timber booms in American history.”¹⁹

The most economically significant logging venture during this time was the arrival of the Ohio-based Champion Fibre Company in Haywood County. Champion purchased more than 300,000 acres of land along the Pigeon River, later expanding into Swain County with the purchase of an additional 100,000 acres. Champion established a wood pulp mill and a company town, Canton, in Haywood County to supply its paper mills in Ohio. By the 1910s, Champion employed 7,000 people at its North Carolina operations, Canton had grown to a town of 6,000, and by the 1930s the Canton mill was the largest wood pulp mill in the country.²⁰

The rapid growth of the logging industry and subsequent deforestation created tensions with leaders of the region’s other chief industry, tourism. Logging and other extractive industries adversely affected the natural scenery and attractions that made the mountains of the southwestern counties tourist destinations in the first place. As early as the late 1890s, then, tourism boosters began advocating for making a significant section of the southwestern North Carolina mountains a national park. These efforts finally came to fruition when Congress created the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in 1926. State representatives from Buncombe County and Asheville boosters then pressed the General Assembly to create the North Carolina Park Commission, which purchased the land for the park. These actions came despite aggressive lobbying by the Champion Fibre Company and other timber interests. Making a public case through local newspapers, company president Reuben Robertson argued that the “program for the future progress of Western North Carolina cannot be complete or well-balanced if it considers only the tourist business.” Conservationist Horace Kephart countered that timber supplies were already nearing exhaustion in the region and that tourism, in fact, was “the great commercial asset of this country. It last forever and forever grows in value.” While Champion continued to be a major employer in the region, the company lost large tracts of land to eminent domain and the logging industry overall declined with the limited availability of land. By the 1930s, in short, the tourism industry had secured its position as the driving force behind the southwestern region’s economy and politics.²¹

At the dawn of the post-World War II era, North Carolina had considerable reason to boast of its road-building progress. Highway travel improved greatly throughout the first half of the twentieth century, and tourist routes like the Blue Ridge Parkway brought tourist dollars to some mountain towns, even if Asheville claimed the lion’s share. But the quality of roads, and their effectiveness in maintaining a climate for economic growth, varied greatly between urban and rural counties. This disparity was clear in the southwestern counties. While the state’s primary highways continued to be well-maintained, the system of secondary roads—the routes emanating off of the primary system, often called “farm-to-market” roads—remained unpaved and, especially in winter months, inaccessible well into the 1940s. According to the State Highway Commission’s Engineer of Statistics and Planning, by 1947 the state was

¹⁸ Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, 100.

¹⁹ Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, 86-87, 100-106, quote at 87.

²⁰ Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, 108-111.

²¹ Starnes, *Creating the Land of the Sky*, 57-63, Robertson and Kephart quotes, p. 61.

responsible for 49,752 miles of secondary roads, “roughly equivalent to a distance twice around the world,” but only 2,856 of those miles were hard-surfaced. By contrast, of the state’s 10,342 miles of primary highways, 9,076 were paved.²²

A few examples illustrate the barriers unpaved roads created for social and economic development in the southwest. Residents of southwestern North Carolina expounded on the difficulties of maintaining industrial employment in communities with subpar roads. A Rutherford County man named Ben Davis, for example, worked along with his wife at a local textile mill. The shoddy condition of roads in Rutherford often kept the Davises’ “little Ford” stuck “in a mud hole up over the finders [sic],” forcing them to stay home. “If the condition of the road don’t get better,” Ben Davis predicted, “we will have to hitch up our horses [and] wagon to get to work and back.”²³ Leaders in Saluda, a small community straddling Polk and Henderson counties, told a similar story. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Saluda was a small but thriving town that, thanks to its location on a railroad line, supported a post office, general store, and a canning factory. With the coming of highways and automobile transportation, the community was unable to maintain decent local roads. Without convenient highway access, the cannery closed, sending Saluda on an economic decline, unable to attract new development. According to resident E.K. Moore, by the late 1940s Saluda had become “a blind alley...relegated to the limbo of forgotten things.” Moore related his community’s transportation-imposed struggles to Governor Scott, to dramatize the importance of improving rural roads. As Moore summarized, quite astutely, “where transportation is poor, industry and enterprise die.”²⁴ Just north of the western prosperity zone, in the similarly underdeveloped county of Mitchell, officials noted the connections between poor roads and agricultural struggles. The local agent for the state Agricultural Cooperative Extension reported that more than 2,000 farmers relied on only 32 miles of hard-surfaced road, a number “about as small as you will find in any county in the state.” The agent urged Governor R. Gregg Cherry to use “any influence you might have in helping us to get more and better roads.”²⁵

The continued shortcomings of rural roads in the southwestern counties, and in rural North Carolina more generally, provided a political opening for Governor W. Kerr Scott. During his campaign for the governorship in 1948, Scott placed roads at the center of his agenda for rural North Carolina. His roads-based populism helped put him in the Governor’s mansion, and assured the success of a major secondary-road-building initiative in his first year in office. That initiative—a public referendum on a \$200 million bond issue—was successful because Scott and his supporters recognized that good roads were crucial to the economic future of rural areas. Specifically, they were crucial to building and maintaining a viable rural industrial economy. Scott focused his administration around a fifteen-point agenda that he labeled his “Go Forward Program.” Underpinning the program was his belief that the state lacked adequate public services for the postwar era. Frugal spending throughout the 1940s, Scott explained in his inaugural address, had closed the state’s budget deficit and placed it in “sound fiscal position.” But in “amassing a hoard of tax dollars,” he continued, “we accumulated a vast backlog of urgent public service needs. We

²² James S. Burch to A.M. Arnett, May 22, 1947, North Carolina Department of Archives and History [hereafter cited as NCDAH], State Highway Commission Papers, Division of Administration Central File, Box 8, J.S. Burch folder.

²³ Ben Davis to W. Kerr Scott, December 29, 1948, NCDAH, Governor W. Kerr Scott Papers, Subject File 1949, Box 14.

²⁴ E.K. Moore to W. Kerr Scott, December 9, 1948, NCDAH, W. Kerr Scott Papers, Subject File 1949, Box 14.

²⁵ L.J.P. Stone to Gregg Cherry, December 20, 1944, NCDAH, R. Gregg Cherry Papers, Box 15, Highways, Public Works, and Prisons folder.

must conclude that we do not have a real surplus, but actually a deficit in public services.” Wiping out those public service deficits, especially in rural areas, was the central goal of the Go Forward program.²⁶

Good secondary roads, though, were the centerpiece of the Go Forward program. When Scott took office in January 1949, North Carolina contained more than 62,000 miles of public roads, but less than 16,000 miles—nearly all of them on the primary highway system—were hard-surfaced. To correct this imbalance, Scott called for a special election referendum on a \$200 million bond issue and a one-cent per gallon increase in the gasoline tax, with the money earmarked for improving secondary roads. His stated goal was to pave at least 12,000 miles of road during his four-year term in office (the State Constitution at the time barred governors from seeking re-election).²⁷

Rural road improvements took on special urgency in the post-World War II years because American manufacturers were increasingly drawn to rural locations for the establishment of new factories. According to one study, only one-third of all plants built between 1940 and 1947 were in cities of more than 100,000 in population, compared to one-half of all plants established prior to 1940. Towns of less than 10,000 absorbed 30 percent of all new factories established over the same time period, up from 20 percent prior to 1940. “The process of ruralization is proceeding apace,” *Management Review* observed in 1948, and this was especially true in the South.²⁸ This trend became even more pronounced in the 1950s. By the end of the decade, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that “Federal statisticians now estimate that nearly half of the nation’s factories are outside metropolitan areas.” Industry experts did not foresee an end to rural industrialization. A spokesman for Fantus Factory Locating Service, one of the nation’s leading corporate relocation firms, predicted that “*In the next decade, it will be the rare exception when a manufacturer decides to build a factory in a big city area.*”²⁹

As one of the nation’s least-urbanized states, North Carolina was well-positioned to take advantage of the growing desire of manufacturers to set up their operations in less crowded locations. Aside from Charlotte, no North Carolina city exceeded 100,000 in population, and according to the 1950 Census, roughly two-thirds of the state’s population lived in rural areas. In selling his road building plan, then, Governor Scott frequently remarked on the ongoing trend of rural industrialization. He argued that if North Carolina could make its rural population accessible to new employers it had “a great future as an industrial state,” and could better manage the shift away from an agricultural economy. In an article for the *Charlotte Observer*, he warned that farm mechanization, combined with the dearth of factories outside of the Piedmont Crescent, would further entrench rural unemployment. “The mud tax is doing more than any other single factor to block agricultural and industrial expansion,” he wrote. Only swift action on the secondary road system, he maintained, would make the countryside a viable place to do business.³⁰

²⁶ W. Kerr Scott, “Inaugural Address,” January 6, 1949, in David Leroy Corbitt, ed., *Public Addresses, Letters, and Papers of William Kerr Scott, Governor of North Carolina, 1949-1953* (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1957).

²⁷ Scott, “Secondary Road Bond Issue,” Special Message to the General Assembly, January 17, 1949 and “School and Road Bond Election,” Public Address over Radio Station WPTF Raleigh, May 10, 1949, *Public Addresses*.

²⁸ “Current Trends in Industrial Decentralization,” *Management Review*, November 1948; “When Industry Moves to the Country,” *Management Review*, November 1948.

²⁹ Alfred L. Malabre Jr., “Factories in Flight,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 7, 1962.

³⁰ W. Kerr Scott, February 7, 1949, press release for the *Charlotte Observer Annual Farm and Poultry Digest*, NCDH, State Highway Commission Papers, Department of Public Relations Main Offices, Box 2, Press Releases and News Items folder.

In his inaugural address, Scott again noted the connections between rural transportation and the ruralization of industry. By improving rural roads, he argued, “we increase our attraction for new industry to locate here. In getting workers to the factory, we have a service of importance almost equal to that of getting the child to school, and getting the farmer’s product to market in good condition.”³¹ A few weeks later, when outlining the specifics of the \$200 million bond issue, Scott emphasized that North Carolina could be an attractive site for new industries, as its “many small towns—no large cities—and its thickly populated country sides, is among the ideal areas for decentralized industry.” “Dependable secondary roads leading to the homes of this good labor supply,” he added, “should attract more industry to the state.”³²

Voters in the southwestern counties were clearly persuaded by Scott’s message. Whether drawn to the promise of bringing new factory jobs to their town, or simply wanting to travel to church and town without stirring up clouds of dirt and dust, southwestern North Carolinians voted overwhelmingly in favor of Scott’s bond issue. In the thirteen counties that make up the western prosperity zone, 68 percent of voters embraced the bond issue. Of the counties that voted in favor of the road plan, six did so with more than 90 percent of the vote. Statewide, the bond issue passed by a comfortable thirteen-point margin. Despite the victory, voting was sharply polarized along geographic lines. Rural counties in the east and west—areas that had largely missed out on the first wave of industrialization, and where roads were especially primitive—were the most enthusiastic backers of the bond issue. Urban counties in the Piedmont rejected the measure. As one historian put it, “the more isolated the county, the larger the affirmative vote.”³³ For example, in four of the most urbanized Piedmont counties (Durham, Forsyth, Guilford, and Mecklenburg) more than 75 percent of voters rejected the ballot measure. And in the west, Buncombe County voters rejected the measure.³⁴

With the road bond in effect, the mileage of dependable secondary roads and the accessibility of rural people increased rapidly in the early 1950s. By 1953 the number of paved rural highway miles had increased to 18,182, up from 2,856 in 1947. By 1956 more than 97 percent of rural North Carolinians lived within one mile of a paved highway.³⁵ “Muddy carts are rarely seen in this state,” former Highway Commission Chairman Alexander Graham said in a 1956 address. “Tire chains are no longer sold as a regular item by filling stations.”³⁶ Paved roads made immense improvements to rural life. As residents of Hendersonville later wrote, “It is a joy not to have our furniture covered in dust from the road, and certainly it is a pleasure to drive over the paved road instead of a rough gravel one.”³⁷

Secondary road progress made a noticeable impact on the state’s industrial recruiting efforts. Boasting of their accomplishments in a 1951 article in the *Engineering News-Record*, the state Highway Commission claimed that freshly paved rural roads were already proving to be a “most profitable investment,” as new industries could now tap the “great reservoirs of labor” in the countryside.³⁸ Those sentiments were

³¹ Scott, “Inaugural Address,” *Public Addresses*.

³² Scott, “Secondary Road Bond Issue,” *Public Addresses*.

³³ Coon, “Kerr Scott,” 63.

³⁴ “How State Voted,” *News and Observer*, June 5, 1949, p. 6.

³⁵ James S. Burch, “Rural North Carolina Served Well by Paved Roads,” November 1956, NCSA, State Highway Commission Papers, Department of Public Relations, Box 2.

³⁶ A.H. Graham, “Road Progress,” *We the People*, November 1956, 34.

³⁷ Letter to Dan Moore, August 21, 1965, NCDH, Governor Dan K. Moore Papers, General Correspondence 1965, Box 44.

³⁸ “Letter from North Carolina,” *Engineering News-Record*, May 11, 1950.

echoed in a 1950 speech by Highway Chairman Henry Jordan. Addressing a local Lion's Club, Jordan argued that a "balanced road program," one with comparable quality between its primary and secondary routes, was key to creating a balanced economy for the state's future. "The Yankees are invading North Carolina as they never did during the 19th Century—but instead of rifles and cannons they are bringing new manufacturing plants," he noted. With many of those manufacturing plants actively seeking rural areas, improved rural transportation was one of the state's most pressing economic imperatives.³⁹

With a stronger network of rural roads in place, state leaders and local boosters spent significant energy in the second half of the twentieth century recruiting new manufacturing industries to underdeveloped and isolated rural areas like the southwestern counties. The expansion of Interstate highways, however, arguably lagged the state's local secondary road system. After passage of the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1944, state Departments of Transportation began submitting proposals for interstate routes for their state. North Carolina, according to one historian of the state Department of Transportation, initially "made modest and unimaginative recommendations for statewide routes...state leaders were so focused on [rural secondary] roads that they failed to grasp the future significance of interstate thoroughfares." Still southwestern North Carolina was better serviced by the Interstate system than the northeastern corner. Interstate 40 connected to Asheville before continuing across the Tennessee line. And Interstate 26 extended northward to Asheville as well. By 2003, an extension to I-26 was added through Madison County, north of Asheville, connecting western North Carolina to the southern Ohio Valley and the South Carolina low country. Points west of Asheville, however, were largely left out of the Interstate system, preventing communities there from developing more direct, convenient linkages with Knoxville, Greenville-Spartanburg, or Atlanta.⁴⁰

While manufacturing industries sought out rural and southern locations in the second half of the twentieth century, southwestern North Carolina struggled to take advantage of these trends. By 1960, the thirteen counties of the Western Prosperity Zone claimed a total of 77 manufacturing establishments. Of those, however, more than half (43) were in either Buncombe or Rutherford counties. The counties of Cherokee, Graham, Jackson, Macon, Madison, Polk, and Swain were each listed as having fewer than five manufacturing establishments, while Clay County listed zero.⁴¹ Rural counties that offered significant manufacturing job opportunities, such as Caldwell and Burke, were typically those in the foothills, which had relied on access to the North Carolina Railroad in the late nineteenth century to develop a strong base in the furniture industry.⁴² Farther into the mountains, factories became scarcer, as the struggles of Clay County attested. Although the county was, in one reporter's words, "a delightful amphitheater surrounded by the gigantic peaks of the Smokies," it lacked the tourist resorts and attractions of nearby Asheville.⁴³ A local attorney complained that if state officials surveyed the area, they "would find an entire county with no industrial payroll except one sawmill."⁴⁴ The lack of economic opportunity led to population losses so

³⁹ Henry W. Jordan, "A Balanced Road Program for North Carolina," January 23, 1950, State Highway Commission Papers, Department of Public Relations Correspondence, Box 1.

⁴⁰ Walter R. Turner, *Paving Tobacco Road: A Century of Progress by the North Carolina Department of Transportation* (Raleigh, 2003), 60.

⁴¹ "Geographic Classification of Manufacturing Establishments in North Carolina by County," *We the People of North Carolina*, November 1960.

⁴² Allen W. Trelease, *The North Carolina Railroad, 1849-1871, and the Modernization of North Carolina* (Chapel Hill), 344.

⁴³ Gordon Greenwood, "Reflections," undated news clipping, NCDAH, Governor Terry Sanford Papers, General Correspondence 1961, Box 31.

⁴⁴ Roy Taylor to Luther Hodges, November 30, 1959, NCDAH, Sanford Papers, Box 31.

rapid that local leaders envisioned a bleak future. In one year, an entire graduating class of high school students left the area to find employment, according to a school principal. "Our great need here is for an industry to help keep our young people at home," he stated. "The older people have the land, and there is no other employment offered in our county. As we keep exporting the best people year after year."⁴⁵

The underdevelopment and outmigration of southwestern counties continued into the late twentieth century, even as in the state's metropolitan areas, North Carolina was becoming a beacon on Sunbelt prosperity. In a 1976 *Business Week* survey, North Carolina tied with Texas and California as the state companies would be "most likely to consider" when selecting a new plant site. When the magazine conducted the same survey four years later, North Carolina retained its top spot (tied again with Texas), and contemporaneous surveys by *Forbes* also placed the state within the top three.⁴⁶ In 1977, North Carolina set a record for industrial growth, garnering \$1.45 billion in investments in new and expanded factories. From 1977 to 1979, the state had created 90,000 new jobs, more than the previous four years combined.⁴⁷ In 1979 alone, North Carolina added more than 37,000 new jobs, the most of any southern state.⁴⁸

In addition to the quantity of new jobs, Governor Jim Hunt also pointed with pride to the "quality and diversity" of North Carolina's industrial development.⁴⁹ The opening of new chemical plants, for example, contributed to a more diversified industrial mix. By the late 1970s, approximately 38,000 North Carolinians worked in the chemical industry, a 35 percent increase from the beginning of the decade. The value of shipments in chemical products totaled more than \$3 billion per year, making it the fourth most valuable industry in the state.⁵⁰ In addition, while previous eras of industrialization leaned heavily on textiles and apparel, under Hunt the top categories for new industrial investments included petroleum refining, machinery, automobile and truck parts, and electronics and electrical equipment. The arrival of these new industries lessened somewhat the importance of textiles to the state's economy. At the beginning of the 1970s, textiles workers accounted for 40 percent of North Carolina's industrial labor force; by the end of the decade, they accounted for only 30 percent.⁵¹

While North Carolina's industrial economy became more diverse under Hunt, the results were most noticeable in metropolitan areas. Wake County, for example, gained a total of \$225 million in industrial investments between 1977 and 1981. Those investments created an estimated 6,529 jobs, the vast majority of which were in non-traditional industries. In fact, fewer than 200 of Wake County's new manufacturing jobs were in textiles, apparel, or furniture. Some of the area's most prominent new employers were in higher-paying fields like pharmaceuticals. In 1977, Bristol-Myers, one of the nation's leading pharmaceutical companies, sited a \$23 million factory in Morrisville, a community adjacent to the Research Triangle Park, and in 1980, Ajinomoto, one of Japan's top pharmaceutical companies, located a

⁴⁵ Principal quoted in Greenwood, "Reflections."

⁴⁶ "Plant Site Selection: A Survey of *Business Week*'s Executive Subscribers in Industry," Hunt Papers, Box 656.

⁴⁷ "Statement by Governor Jim Hunt," January 10, 1980, Hunt Papers Box 509.

⁴⁸ The 1979 numbers came from a report by the Southern Industrial Development Council. It is important to note that while North Carolina led the region in new job announcements, the council did not count Texas as a part of the South for the purposes of their study. Press Release. "Hunt Says State Leads Region in New Jobs," May 1, 1980, Hunt Papers Box 509.

⁴⁹ "Statement by Governor Jim Hunt," January 10, 1980, Hunt Papers Box 509.

⁵⁰ "The Chemical Industry in North Carolina," undated, Hunt Papers Box 509.

⁵¹ "Statement by Governor Jim Hunt," January 10, 1980, Hunt Papers Box 509.

\$40 million amino acid processing plant in Raleigh's eastern suburbs.⁵² The electronics industry also became an important source of new jobs in the greater Raleigh area, employing more than 15,000 people in at least 25 assembly plants by the late 1970s.⁵³

Unfortunately, these types of high-wage industries made a limited impact beyond North Carolina's major metropolitan areas. Most of the state's rural communities remained dependent on the low-wage industries that North Carolina had attracted for decades. Statewide, more than half of North Carolina's manufacturing jobs were in textiles, furniture, or apparel, where workers earned an average of \$3.28, \$3.36, and \$2.74 per hour, respectively. By way of comparison, factory workers in Ohio made an average of \$7.23 per hour.⁵⁴ Moreover, as historian Timothy Minchin has pointed out, these industries were also highly "import-sensitive," leaving workers vulnerable to plant closings and outsourcing.⁵⁵

By the late 1970s, western North Carolina had begun to attract more industrial employment, so much so that according to one study commissioned by Governor Hunt, the western counties were, on a per capita basis, the most industrialized region within the state. Approximately 40 percent of the region's workforce was engaged in manufacturing, compared to 32 percent and 24 percent for the Piedmont and the East, respectively. The problem for workers, however, was that 69 percent of the West's manufacturing jobs were in low-wage industries (defined as paying an average annual wage of less than \$8,000), such as textiles and apparel. In the East, 55 percent of manufacturing jobs were in low-wage industries.⁵⁶

Why did incoming high-wage employers tend to bypass North Carolina's rural counties and small towns? Residents and local officials had an opportunity to share their perspective on this question at a series of conferences held in late 1977 on the theme of achieving "Balanced Growth." The inability of rural areas to attract better, higher-wage jobs was, in the nearly unanimous opinion of conference attendees, primarily a result of poor infrastructure. Communities by this point, however, had identified more infrastructure needs than simply better roads and highways. While transportation infrastructure remained important, rural communities also found that their water and sewage facilities were inadequate and hindered their ability to sell themselves to new industries. When the governor's office condensed the findings of all Balanced Growth conferences in the West, they found that "the lack of water and sewer facilities" was identified as the "primary impediment to industrial expansion."⁵⁷ A similar report on conferences in the East concluded that "Sewage facilities must be upgraded and enlarged."⁵⁸

In addition to water and sewage infrastructure, eastern and western communities also lacked the vocational training and skilled workforce needed to woo employers in high-paying industries. A report

⁵² "Wake County/Morrisville Summary Sheet," October 21, 1981, Hunt Papers Box 656.

⁵³ Bob Cooper, "New Plant Will Hire 1,000," *Raleigh Times*, September 17, 1979.

⁵⁴ "A Balanced Growth Policy for North Carolina: A Proposal for Public Discussion," NCDAR, Hunt Papers Box 135; Department of Natural and Economic Resources, *Directory of North Carolina Manufacturing Firms, 1976-1977*.

⁵⁵ Timothy Minchin, "Shutdowns in the Sunbelt: The Decline of the Textile and Apparel Industry and Deindustrialization in the South," in Robert Zieger, ed., *Life and Labor in the New New South* (Gainesville, 2012), 263.

⁵⁶ "Table III: Manufacturing Employment by Wage Characteristics," Hunt Papers Box 135. Note: this study grouped northwestern and southwestern counties into a single region.

⁵⁷ "The West: Observations from the Western Counties' Conferences on Balanced Growth and Economic Development," Hunt Papers Box 135.

⁵⁸ "The East: Observations from the Eastern Counties' Conferences on Balanced Growth and Economic Development," Hunt Papers Box 135.

summarizing the Balanced Growth conferences in the East noted that “Easterners feel that several industries have been lost due to a lack of appropriately trained labor,” and called for more vocational training “to develop skills of laborers who can then hopefully stay home to work.”⁵⁹ Final reports on conferences in the West also called for more community and vocational colleges, along with more training at the high school level, in order to help the region achieve “a more diversified industry mix.”⁶⁰

Most southwestern counties by the late twentieth century also struggled to attract new firms in high-tech industries, which tended to gravitate toward metropolitan areas. In one study, for example, University of North Carolina geographer Emil Malizia found that executives in high-tech industries made relocation and expansion decisions according to different criteria than their counterparts in labor-intensive industries. In Malizia’s survey, high-tech employers rated a rural location as a negative characteristic when selecting a new site for their company. They also placed much more importance on the quality of a community’s infrastructure, school system, and overall quality of life, compared to employers in labor-intensive or low-tech industries.⁶¹ Not surprisingly, then, jobs in new microelectronics and other high-tech industries concentrated in three major metropolitan areas: the Research Triangle, the Piedmont Triad (Greensboro, Winston-Salem, and High Point), and Charlotte-Mecklenburg. As the research director of the state Employment Security Commission acknowledged, by 1982, those three areas accounted for more than three-quarters of the microelectronics jobs in the state.⁶²

Besides high-tech employers, manufacturers across a range of industries began to prefer metropolitan or suburban locations by the early 1980s. A survey conducted by *Business Week* in 1980 showed that manufacturers placed increasing importance on a community’s quality of life. The magazine presented executives with a list of factors that companies typically considered when making a new site selection, and asked them to identify which ones they deemed important. Two-thirds of respondents identified “pleasant living conditions for employees” as an important consideration, up from 48 percent for the same survey in 1976. Similarly, 53 percent rated “adequate educational facilities” as an important factor, compared to only 35 percent in 1976. These shifting priorities translated to a growing preference for suburban areas. Fifty-seven percent of respondents said that finding a plant site in a suburban location was important to their company, while only 32 percent said the same for rural areas.⁶³

Socio-Political Analysis

Buncombe and Jackson are the only counties in the Southwestern Zone that are not solidly Republican in federal and state elections. Due mainly to its strength in and around the city of Asheville, Buncombe is the one reliable base of Democratic support in the region. While providing a comfortable margin of victory to Donald Trump in 2016, Jackson voted for Barack Obama in 2008 and has constituted contested “purple” territory in a number of other elections. Outside of three Democratic state representatives and one State Senator from Asheville/Buncombe, Jackson has the sole member of the North Carolina General Assembly (Representative Joe Sam Queen) from the Western Zone. Due especially to skillful

⁵⁹ “The East: Observations.”

⁶⁰ “The West: Observations.”

⁶¹ Emil E. Malizia, “The Locational Attractiveness of the Southeast to High-Technology Manufacturers,” in Dale Whittington, ed., *High Hopes for High Tech: Microelectronics Policy in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, 1985), 183-185.

⁶² Gregory B. Sampson, “Employment and Earnings in the Semiconductor Electronics Industry: Implications for North Carolina,” in Whittington, ed., *High Hopes for High Tech*, 287.

⁶³ “Plant Site Selection: A Survey of *Business Week*’s Executive Subscribers in Industry,” Hunt Papers Box 656.

gerrymandering of the Democratic base in Asheville, Republicans hold both congressional seats (District 10 and District 11) in the Western Zone.

Today's Republican ascendancy is not directly due to the tradition of Mountain Republicanism often emphasized in historical and political accounts of Western North Carolina. In the first half of the twentieth century Republicans could be competitive, especially in presidential elections before 1932. But the counties of the Western zone were mainly Democratic and solidly for Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his four elections (and Harry Truman in 1948). In the 1960s, such Republican figures as Charles Taylor (who ultimately held the 11th Congressional District from 1990-2006) started to pioneer a far more uncompromising anti-governmental stance. Former 11th District Congressman Mark Meadows was head of the Republican Freedom Caucus in the US House of Representatives and one of President Trump's closest allies in Congress before becoming his Chief of Staff in March 2020.

Both the Asheville style of Democratic liberalism and the new kind of Republican conservatism typified by Congressman Meadows represent quite stark ideological persuasions. At the same time, the share of registered "Unaffiliated" voters in the Western Zone significantly exceeds the state average: the number of Unaffiliated voters now almost surpasses the number of Democrats in Buncombe and outpaces both parties in four other counties (Henderson, Jackson, Polk, and Transylvania). Ironically, in the highly polarized atmosphere of the Western Zone counties, one common element in the development of today's liberal and conservative persuasions has been opposition to major infrastructure projects. (See pages 5-7 and 15).

Historical Context

As the Civil War approached, the white citizenry of Appalachian North Carolina was not enthusiastic about secession from the Union. Neither was Governor Zebulon Vance, who was an Asheville native. Governor Vance and the Western counties did not get on board with the Southern cause until the North-South artillery skirmish at Fort Sumner seemed to confirm that the conflict was indeed inevitable. A common historical perception is that this reluctance of Western counties to abandon the Union set the stage for a substantial and even dominant "Mountain Republican legacy." [See Alexander Lamis, *The Two-Party South* (1990) 131,371]

But the post-Civil War strength of North Carolina Mountain Republicanism was quite a relative matter. It mainly stood out in contrast to the usual non-competitive hegemony enjoyed by Democrats in the rest of the state and elsewhere in the state. As V.O. Key put it in 1949, the fact that North Carolina Democrats felt compelled to campaign in the western part of the state was "an indignity to which no other Southern Democrats have to submit with the same regularity." [Key, *Southern Politics* (1949) 285] A number of Western counties could swing out of the Democratic column in special presidential election or a string of them. But a majority of the twelve Western counties often fell in with the rest of the South in supporting the Democratic Party ticket during the first half of the twentieth century. Western Republicans only sporadically won congressional and state legislative seats.

North Carolina's electoral politics in the 1890s was strikingly fluid and unstable. In a successful revolt with no parallel anywhere else in the post-Reconstruction solid South, a shaky coalition between the Republican Party with support from African-American freedmen and a Populist Party of mainly disaffected Democrats took control of the General Assembly in 1894 and won the governorship in 1896.

The Democrats staged a literally violent comeback in the 1898 and 1900 electoral cycles. Then they brutally disenfranchised African-American voters throughout the state.

Amid this shifting political ground, the 1896 presidential candidacy of populist Nebraska firebrand William Jennings Bryan confused the political situation further by heading the national Democratic ticket. The Nebraskan had a summer home near Asheville and campaigned vigorously throughout the western part of the state. [See D.G. Martin, "Blame it on William Jennings Bryan," *Chapelboro.com* (9/10/12); citing Anthony, "'Next to Nebraska': North Carolina and William Jennings Bryan's 1896 Campaign" (unpublished Sept. 14, 2012 talk at UNC-CH)]. But the central Democratic stronghold of Buncombe plus a majority of the other 12 counties voted against his first candidacy in 1896. Bryan only won statewide by 2.4% over Republican William McKinley. [See also Faulkner, "North Carolina Democrats and Silver Fusion Politics, 1892-1896," *North Carolina Historical Review* (July 1982) 230-51; McKinney, *Southern Mountain Republicans 1865-1900* (1978).]

Democratic return to statewide control actually did not boost Bryan's margin in 1900 or his subsequent two candidacies. And the Republican vote in the Western Zone counties was again a large part of the story why Bryan only won the state by (even) small(er) margins against McKinley in 1900 as well as Theodore Roosevelt in 1904 and William Howard Taft 1908 (1900/2.1%; 1904/1.5%; 1908/1.7%) While almost every county voted for Bryan once during one of his four candidacies, only two (Haywood and Rutherford) supported all four of them.

All western counties were back in the Democratic column for the candidacy of native Southerner Woodrow Wilson (with Wilmington, North Carolina roots) in 1912. But six smaller counties (Cherokee, Graham, Henderson, Madison, Swain, and Transylvania) bolted to the Republican column against Wilson in 1916 and stayed with GOP candidates through 1928. That year a seismic political disturbance appeared to occur when all the other western counties as well as North Carolina overall voted for the Iowa-transplanted Californian and Quaker Republican Herbert Hoover over the Catholic Democrat and New York Governor Al Smith. "The dread handwriting is on the wall," declared the young Charlotte-based journalist W.J. Cash in 1929. "North Carolina is going Republican." [Cash, "Jehovah of the Tar Heels," *American Mercury* (July 1929) 317]

However, all but one of the Western counties were solidly with FDR in the ensuing Great Depression election of 1932. Cherokee was the only Western county that started with FDR but broke with him in any of his four presidential races. In FDR's 1944 bid for a fourth term, Republican candidate Thomas Dewey eked out a 2,625-2,582 vote margin in this small county on the border with Tennessee. Cherokee moved back to the Democratic column four years later in support of Harry Truman's comeback victory over Dewey.

Politics in the Southwest Since World War II

Yet western support for Republican presidential candidates kept popping up and expanding in the second half of the 20th century. Some political scientists have referred to a process of "split-level realignment" during its last decades in which Republicans started to win presidential and then other federal election results but not so much state and local offices in formerly solid Democratic regions. [See the discussion and sources in Rae, *Southern Democrats* (1994) 51-52, 126, 155, 168] In retrospect, however, it seems clear that the twists and turns toward Republican presidential candidates in North Carolina's Western

counties as in other Southern places were the harbingers of a more comprehensive partisan -- albeit not totally solid -- realignment.

The most striking western outlier throughout the twentieth century was Madison County. This small and of course overwhelmingly white county on the Northern Blue Ridge border with Tennessee pulled away from Wilson in 1916, voted for FDR's opponent in all four of his races, and stayed in the Republican column through Eisenhower's bid for re-election in 1956. Then, as more Western counties and others across the South started moving toward Republican candidates over the next four decades, Madison actually shifted back to the Democrats.

In 1960 Madison was one of only two western counties (along with Swain) which supported the candidacy of Catholic Bostonian Senator John Kennedy. It did provide Richard Nixon a 49.2% plurality in the three-way 1968 race and a 61.2% majority against George McGovern in 1972 (compared to a 71% majority statewide). But it jumped back into the Democratic column for Georgia's Jimmy Carter in 1976 as well as 1980 and the Arkansas-Tennessee ticket of Bill Clinton and Al Gore in 1992 as well as 1996.

Madison's Democratic streak may well be attributable to the reputed vote-gathering prowess and legacy of the Ponder brothers' machine politics. E.Y. Ponder was elected sheriff by 31 votes in 1950 and did not lose until a former deputy beat him in a 1986 election conducted under FBI monitoring. His cantankerous younger brother Zeno was Madison County's political kingpin. "I believe in a two-party system," Zeno once remarked. "A great big Democratic Party and a little bitty Republican Party."

The State Elections Board overturned the results of Zeno Ponder's 's only foray as a political candidate because he received more votes for State Senate in 1964 than the county's total of registered voters. But he remained politically active behind the scenes until right before his death in the "Gingrich Revolution" year of 1994. State House Speaker Liston Ramsey -- who was first elected in 1960 and served as Madison's County representative until 1991 -- was Zeno's high school and college classmate (at Mars Hill College, then a junior college, in Madison) [See Christensen, "The Ponders' Political Machine," *Raleigh News & Observer* (March 1, 2014); Finger, "Interview with Zeno Ponder," Southern Oral History Program Collection (March 22, 1974)].

Madison was not always in the decided minority among the Western counties in its support for Democratic presidential candidates during the latter half of the twentieth century. All other Western counties but Henderson supported the successful bids of Texas' Lyndon Baines Johnson in 1964 and Georgia's Jimmy Carter in 1976.

Nevertheless, a seven-county majority -- led by Buncombe together with Cherokee, Graham, Henderson, Macon, Polk, Rutherford, and Transylvania -- moved into the Republican column with Ronald Reagan's unseating of Carter in 1980 and stayed there throughout the rest of the twentieth century. All Western Zone counties supported Reagan's re-election in 1984. Only Swain and Haywood switched to favor Massachusetts Democrat Michael Dukakis in 1988. [On Haywood's historically strong union base among its paper workers, See Vaillancourt, "A Seat at the Table: Organized Labor's Remains Strong in Haywood County," *Smoky Mountain News*, 8/29/18.] Along with Madison, Jackson was the only other Western county to join the Swain-Haywood duo in supporting the Arkansas-Tennessee ticket of Bill Clinton and Al Gore in 1992 and 1996.

Then in the first decade of the 21st century, all Western counties united behind the presidential bids of George W. Bush in 2000 and 2004. The Democratic candidacies of Al Gore in 2000 and John Kerry in 2004 reached near competitive levels only in Buncombe, Jackson, Swain, and Madison. The historic successful candidacy of Barack Obama pushed Buncombe and Jackson back into the Democratic column in 2008. But, as detailed later in this memo, the Obama era otherwise became the time when the Republican realignment became obvious below the presidential level throughout the rest of the western counties.

Analysts have debated whether the South's Republican realignment can be understood as a white reaction to the Democratic Party's transformation on the issue of civil rights. That was certainly part of the picture in the counties that now comprise NC's Western Zone. Perhaps the civil rights issue alone would have been sufficient to promote a partisan realignment. But, as political journalist Tom Edsall put it, Democrats faced a "chain reaction" in regions like NC's Western counties on interlocking issue fronts from the 1960s onward [See Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (1991)].

Scholars Bruce Stewart and Christopher Manganiello have similarly emphasized "the growing disenchantment of many western *North Carolinians with the Democratic party as a whole.*" In western North Carolina and the rest of the South, as Stewart and Manganiello put it in their recent study, "white Democrats began to question the direction of the national party. The Kennedy and Johnson administrations' endorsement of the civil rights movement and support for the expansion of the welfare state troubled many white Southerners who had embraced New Deal liberalism. These Democrats wanted the party to reduce government spending, protect states' rights, and restore the racial status quo" [Stewart and Manganiello, "Watershed Democracy: Rural Environmentalism and the Battle Against TVA in Western North Carolina," *Environmental History* (October 2018)748-773, 756].

But Stewart and Manganiello add one major issue to the chain reaction specific to the N.C. Western region. This was the grassroots battle which broke out across Western North Carolina against the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) during the mid-1960s.

The passage of the TVA Act in 1933 was a centerpiece of FDR's New Deal and a major symbol of regional hope for many Southerners. A mainstream coalition of business leaders, politicians, and many residents throughout Western North Carolina immediately started urging the new TVA to develop a comprehensive flood control plan for the region. The envisioned network of multipurpose dams would also boost the region's horribly depressed economy by stimulating tourism and creating storage for hydropower and stream navigation. (Stewart and Manganiello, 749) But when the TVA in 1965 finally announced such an ambitious water control system for the region's Upper French Broad River basin, a surprising coalition of conservatives and environmentalists emerged to oppose it.

Top Democratic political leaders -- from Senators Everett Jordan (Durham) and Sam Ervin (Morganton) to the region's 11th District Congressman Roy Taylor (Buncombe) -- were fervent supporters of the TVA and its big-dam plan. (755) But in the anti-LBJ backlash mid-term election of 1966, Transylvania County (Brevard) native Charles Taylor jumped to the front of the TVA opposition movement and rode it to a widely-noted upset in the predominantly Democratic State House District. (Stewart and Manganiello, 756). In the 1965 General Assembly, only one Republican in the General Assembly came from a county (House member Dean Garren/Hendersonville) in today's Western Zone. But along with Taylor, the GOP

added another House member (Edley Hutchins/Black Mountain) for a total of three representatives. Two GOP Senators from Buncombe (Bruce Briggs and Theodore Dent) were also elected in 1966.

Over the next few years, opposition to the TVA big-dam plan became a mass crusade throughout the region. In 1971 the new Environmental Protection Agency issued a report criticizing the environmental impacts of the proposed project (Stewart and Manganiello, 765). By 1972 North Carolina Republican politicians from top to bottom were riding the anti-TVA bandwagon.

GOP Gubernatorial nominee Jim Holshouser (from the Boone/Watauga County area east of the Western Zone) and US Senate candidate Jesse Helms became converts to the cause. Their TVA opposition helped ensure the first sweep of western North Carolina and thus North Carolina overall by statewide Republican candidates below the presidential level since Reconstruction. Charles Taylor moved up to the State Senate (Stewart and Manganiello, 766).

One week after the 1972 election, the TVA formally abandoned its dam project for the Upper French Broad River basin (Stewart and Manganiello, 766). Jimmy Carter's 1976 presidential candidacy triggered a temporary resurgence for Democrats in the West. That year Charles Taylor decided not to run for re-election to the State Senate and returned to private life.

But after making an initial comeback in 1988 and barely losing to incumbent Democrat 11th District Congressman Jamie Clark, Taylor was able to unseat him in 1990. Since Republican Cass Ballenger was the House member in the 10th District, Republicans now represented all the counties in the Western Zone. (Ballenger had taken over the 10th District seat in 1986 after his GOP predecessor Jim Broyhill had first been appointed to the US Senate and then ran for the position but lost to Terry Sanford.)

The 11th District had been flipping back and forth between the two parties after the Republicans won it for the first time in 1980. But Taylor demonstrated a firm grasp on the 11th District for the next seven congressional cycles. And Taylor continued his anti-governmental attacks on the TVA [On Taylor's congressional history with TVA, see his profile in *The Almanac of American Politics*, 2004 (2003) 1222-24]. After Taylor's extensive financial empire -- including his partnership with a former Russian KGB agent -- continued to come under public scrutiny, he lost to Democrat (and former Washington Redskins' quarterback) Heath Shuler in 2006 [See Wilke, "Seat in Congress Helps Mr. Taylor Help His Business," *Wall Street Journal* 10/11/06]; Whitman, "Congressman Develops Ties with Russia," *Associated Press* (9/17/06); Burgess, "Taylor Associates Sentenced in Case," *Hendersonville News* (1/28/2005)].

Almost certainly the Democrats' loss of political control in Western North Carolina could have ultimately taken place without the TVA big-dam issue. But as Stewart and Manganiello have emphasized, it underlines the treacherous cross-ideological turf that Western North Carolina represented for mainstream Democratic governmental action by the 1960s. They cited a statement from Henderson County resident Reba Kilstrom during the TVA controversy as exemplifying this ideological scissors trap. "[A]nytime we try to change things which God has ordained, such as our rivers and streams, destroying the natural habitat of wild life, which is so necessary to our well-being, we are opening Pandora's box and are in for serious trouble" (Stewart and Manganiello, 749-50).

In general, the Western opposition to the TVA big-dam plan in the 1960s could be likened to the grassroots revolts across the nation against expressway plans through cities during the same period. [See,

e.g., Waldron, “Memphis Debates Road Through a Park,” *New York Times* (1/18/70; Citizens to Preserve Overton Park v. Volpe 401 US 402 (1971)]. The continuing ideological entrenchment of environmental as well as conservative evangelical sentiment in Western North Carolina could result in a cross-ideological scissors that could be equally or even more threatening to any major infrastructure project today. [On the local controversies surrounding even the construction of the Blue Ridge Parkway during the New Deal era, see Whisnant, *Super-Scenic Motorway: A Blue Ridge Parkway History* (2006).]

In the wake of the 2018 mid-term elections, Buncombe is the only clear Democratic stronghold county in the Western Zone. And Jackson is the only county constituting competitive “purplish” territory for Democrats on an overall basis. But the sources of Democrats’ limited competitive strength in federal and state elections can be more precisely identified as (i) the city of Asheville and the immediate area around it, (ii) other college-town areas, (iii) the largest of the small towns in some outlying counties, and (iv) clusters of minority populations in some outlying counties.

After its slide to Bush in 2000 and 2004, Buncombe has strikingly bucked the Republican trend. It was the only western county won by Hillary Clinton in 2016 (54.3%-40.1%) and Barack Obama in 2012 (55.3%-42.8%). Buncombe also delivered a bigger victory to Obama in 2008 (56.32-42.40%).

In 2008 Jackson supported Obama by a far closer margin (51.97-46.57%). After sliding away from Obama to Romney in 2012 (49.4%-48.05%), Jackson emphatically joined the other western counties in 2016 with a double-digit margin (52.7%-41.2%) for President Donald Trump over Clinton. But in the gubernatorial race, Cooper (barely) beat McCrory in Jackson (49.02-48.80%).

In US Senate and gubernatorial elections, many other western counties (such as Henderson, Madison, and Swain) frequently joined Buncombe and Jackson in supporting Democratic Senate and gubernatorial candidates as late as 2008. But beginning with the backlash Tea-Party mid-term elections of 2010, Buncombe and Jackson have been the only counties in the Western Zone voting for a Democratic senatorial or gubernatorial candidate. Buncombe stood alone in its support for Elaine Marshall in the 2010 Senate election and Walter Dalton in the 2012 gubernatorial election. Jackson rejoined Buncombe in the Democratic column for Senator Kay Hagan’s narrow loss in 2014 and Roy Cooper’s even more narrow victory in 2016.

At the state legislative level, Democrats from the Western Zone in the General Assembly are now solely from Buncombe and Jackson. In the 2019 General Assembly, 15 state legislators – 11 House members and 5 Senators -- represent some part of a county in the Western Zone. Of these 15 Western Zone legislators, only 5 are Democrats.

Buncombe’s whole delegation of three House members (Susan Fisher/Dis. 114, John Ager/Dis. 115, and Brian Turner/Dis. 116) and one Senator (Terry Van Duyn) are Democrats.

The other Democrat is House member Joe Sam Queen from Jackson in the musical-chair District 119 (which covers all of Swain and part of Haywood as well). Republican Mike Clampitt had lost challenges to then incumbent Queen in 2012 and 2014 before unseating him in 2016. Queen won back District 119 by a 52.33%-47.67% margin in 2018. Queen ran up a comfortable 1,306 (54.35%-41.65% margin) in Jackson, won the part of Haywood in the district by a closer 52.97%-47.03% (572 votes), and lost the smaller vote in Swain by a 54.78%-42.22% margin (496 votes).

At the local County Commissioner level, Democrats now have close voting majorities in the Buncombe and Jackson. In 2018 Democrats were able to flip a 3-2 margin in their favor on the Jackson County Commission. They held on to a 4-3 majority on the Buncombe County Commission. (In 2018, Democrats also held on to a 3-2 majority in Swain and expanded 3-2 majority to a 4-1 margin in Madison.)

However, despite its strong Buncombe base and Jackson competitiveness, the Democratic Party has been without a congressional representative from the Western Zone since 2012. There is one GOP Congressman with counties in the Western Zone: Patrick McHenry in the 10th District (first elected in 2004 after serving a single term in the state House). Former Republican Congressman Mark Meadows' seat in the 11th District (Meadows was first elected in 2013) is also in the Western Zone, but it is, of course, now vacant.

As part of their gerrymandering efforts after coming to power in 2011, state legislative Republicans severed most of Asheville from the 11th congressional district. GOP legislators placed it in the highly conservative 10th District which GOP candidates have won continuously since 1968. (McHenry's predecessor GOP representatives were Cass Ballenger and Jim Broyhill.) So along with all of Polk and Rutherford counties from the Western Zone, Asheville is districted with all of Cleveland, Gaston, Lincoln, and parts of Catawba as well as Iredell to its east (All of these other counties are in the same Metropolitan Statistical Area as Charlotte.) McHenry was born in Gastonia and now his residence is in Lincoln County.

The 11th District now includes all the other 9 counties in the Western Zone plus the more north-east counties of Avery, Burke, Caldwell, McDowell, Mitchell, and Yancey. After the Republicans' 2011 gerrymandering of Asheville out of the 11th District, Democrat Heath Shuler retired from Congress and Representative Meadows easily won election in 2012.

When first elected, Representative Meadows' residence was Cashiers in Jackson County (he now lives outside Asheville in Buncombe). Meadows was chair of the highly conservative Freedom Caucus in the U.S. House and, before being named the President's Chief of Staff, was considered to be one of President Trump's closest allies in Congress. Reflecting the ideologically fluid and partisan swing nature of Jackson, Cong. Meadows (barely) won his old home county in 2018 (a 49.35%-47.86) despite the success of Democrats there in other races.

While the district drawing of recently-empowered GOP leaders in the General Assembly has been on the 21st century technological cutting edge, gerrymandering of the Western Zone is hardly unprecedented. As V.O. Key pointed out in 1949, Democrats successfully ensured for the first half of the twentieth century that as few Republicans as possible were elected to Congress even when some western counties were bolting to GOP presidential candidates. What Key called "bacon-strip congressional districts" that the Democrats laid out in mainly horizontal fashion to stretch beyond any cluster of questionable western counties worked to "smother" many Republican congressional prospects [Key, *Southern Politics*, 226].

Inside the Democratic stronghold of Buncombe, Asheville has been the central voting bloc for its candidates. For state and national elections, the North Carolina Board of Elections reports voting results by county but not by city. Yet for 2016 the precinct analysis of the North Carolina Public Press organization confirmed that in the case of Buncombe "Hillary Clinton claimed a 54 percent majority thanks primarily to heavily Democratic Asheville, the region's largest city." At the same time, however,

Clinton's Buncombe majority was not a "landslide" because "beyond Asheville, she carried few of the county's small towns and rural precincts" [Taylor, "Breaking down the Mountains: Precinct-Level Analysis of WNC's Vote," *North Carolina Public Press* (11/14/16)].

The growth in Democratic voter registration over the last decade demonstrates the party's partisan strength in Asheville. In 2005, the city's registration numbers showed 27,776 Democrats and 12,734 Republicans. Today Democratic registration has grown and Republican registration has shrunk.

While Asheville's city elections are non-partisan, the political profiles of its winners also exhibit a distinctive progressive Democratic bent. In her successful 2017 re-election bid, Mayor Esther Manheimer received endorsements from the AFL-CIO, Sierra Club, Equality NC (gay rights PAC) and Democratic State Senator Terry Van Duyn. She received 80% of the vote against the second-place primary finisher Martin Ramsey – who was a self-described socialist and ran a token campaign. First elected to the City Council in 2009 and then Mayor in 2013, Manheimer (who is white) succeeded Terry Bellamy, another female who was Asheville's first African-American mayor.

Local observers have emphasized the emergence of a progressive majority on Asheville's city council over the last decade. In 2015 stalwart conservative Carl Mumpower, who had served on the city council from 2001-2009, launched an unsuccessful comeback bid because in his view all seven current members were "liberal Democrats" and moving the city in a far-left direction. While disagreeing with Mumpower's conservative views, *Asheville Citizen-Times* columnist John Boyle in 2015 agreed that the city had a "far left board that represents a certain large slice of Asheville, but it leaves another sizable slice voiceless" [See Burns, "Has Asheville Council Veered Too Far Left?" *Asheville Citizen-Times* (6/13/15)]. While disagreeing with the notion that Asheville city government had been taken over "by some far-left faction," David Forbes of the *Asheville Blade* acknowledged that "progressives" were now "winning repeated majorities in successive elections" [Forbes, "About Asheville Politics," (7/22/15)].

In 2017, two new members of the council (Vijay Kapoor and Sheneika Smith) with strong endorsements from progressive groups proved to be the two-top vote-getters and were elected along with incumbent Vice-Mayor Gwen Wisler. Before the election, the chairman of the Buncombe Democratic Party (Jeffrey Rose) praised "the overall strength" of the candidate field. In contrast, Republican Party chair Mumpower charged that most candidates exhibited "a built-in carelessness with other people's money married to bigger government as their lustless answer to social problems" [Burgess, "Asheville's City Council Candidates Are More Diverse, Qualified and Liberal, Observers Say," (*Asheville Citizen-Times*, 10/7/17)].

The current seven-person city council (including Mayor Manheimer) has a four-woman majority, two African-American members, and only one white male. This demographic diversity is striking in a city with an African-American (12%) and other minority (a little over 8%) populations well below the state average of 22.2% and 14.8%. In April 2018, the Council underlined the extent of its progressive outlook by unanimously issuing statement on its directions to the city police force against cooperation with the deportation efforts of the ICE and thus confirming Asheville as a "sanctuary city" in the view of many conservatives [See City Council Issues Statement Regarding ICE Operations in Asheville Area, 4/19/18].

A contrast can be drawn between the uniformly progressive Asheville City Council and the currently close 4-3 partisan split on the Buncombe County Commission. The contrast can be somewhat questioned

because all members of the Asheville City Council are elected on an at-large basis while all Buncombe County Commissioners represent districts. Republicans in the General Assembly have been pushing controversial legislation to turn city council elections into at-district races. As of 2015, respected Western Carolina University political scientist Chris Cooper was quoted as saying that “there are a sizable number of Republicans in Asheville and a sizable number of old mountain Democrats ... and they’re not represented on the Asheville City Council.” [See Boyle, *supra*]

Still in a non-binding referendum on the ballot with the 2017 city elections, a 75% super-majority of those Asheville voters who went to the polls opposed the legislative effort to create city council districts. Regardless of the dispute about requiring Asheville’s city council to have districts, the registration numbers in Buncombe confirm the lesser strength of Democrats outside Asheville. While now enjoying a 3-1 registration dominance over Republicans in Asheville, Democratic registration in Buncombe outside Asheville is less than 55%. And while Asheville is by far its biggest population center (91,902), the part of Buncombe outside Asheville in total is decidedly larger (165,705).

The North Carolina Public Press’ 2016 precinct analysis indeed found that Secretary Clinton in non-Asheville Buncombe had a slight edge only in the town of Woodfin and the western portion of Black Mountain. In contrast, Trump gained “strong support” in the towns of Montreat, Weaversville, as well as Biltmore Forest and won such unincorporated communities as Candler, Enka, Leicester, Swannanoa, Barnardsville, Arden, and Fairview.

Signs indicate that that Democrats made some significant inroads throughout Buncombe during the 2018 cycle. At the local level, one GOP incumbent on the Buncombe County Commission (Robert Pressley) held on to his seat by a narrow 50.96-49.04% margin. But Democratic candidate Quentin Miller became the first African-American sheriff in Buncombe’s history with 61% of the vote [Walton, “Democrats Find Widespread Success in County Races,” *Mountain Xpress* (11/9/18)]. Such an overwhelming victory was especially impressive because of Buncombe’s low African-American population (6%).

The 2018 move toward Democrats in Buncombe outside Asheville was even clearer in the state legislative and congressional election results. While 11th District Congressman Meadows in 2016 (barely) won with 50.67% within his mainly non-Asheville slice of Buncombe, he lost that area in 2018 to challenger Philip Price by a 54.16-43.78%. Similarly, while GOP State Senator Chuck Edwards won the Buncombe slice of his district (which is mainly outside Asheville) in 2016, he lost that area of the 48th Senate District by a 52.94-47.06% margin in 2018.

Even with this apparent spread of Democratic strength more throughout Buncombe, it should still be understood that the Democratic base is the city of Asheville not the larger Asheville metropolitan area. The federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) defines metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) based on commuting patterns into a central employment hub. According to OMB, the Asheville MSA includes the rest of Buncombe County and all the counties of Haywood, Henderson, and Madison. In recent federal and state elections, the Republican dominance in this trio of outlying counties has either come close to neutralizing or has overwhelmed the leads that the Democrats amass coming out of Asheville/Buncombe.

In 2016, for example, President Trump won the Asheville MSA. Fueled by an Asheville city vote with a super-majority for her which may have reached the 75% level, Secretary Clinton came out of Buncombe

with 54% majority amounting to about a 20,000 vote lead. But Trump countered with a 34,226 aggregate margin in Haywood, Henderson, and Madison. In his narrow victory over GOP incumbent Governor McCrory, Attorney General Roy Cooper was able to pull out a win in the Asheville MSA. But the trio of outlying Republican red counties cut Cooper's Asheville/Buncombe lead of 30,000 votes in half and only a 52% win in the Asheville MSA.

While North Carolina experienced a so-called "Blue Moon" election cycle with no US Senate or governor race, the Asheville MSA's same partisan pattern was evident in the 2018 vote pattern for congressional candidates -- 10th plus 11th Districts -- in the Western Zone. For a mid-term election, overall turnout of registered voters was even more impressive in the Asheville MSA (59%) than the relatively high turnout throughout North Carolina (52.98%) But the rates were still lower than in the 2016 presidential year (69.98% North Carolina). In this lower 2018 turnout context, the combined Asheville/ Buncombe margin of just over 30,000 votes for the losing Democratic candidates in the 10th (David Brown) and 11th Districts (Philip Price) was quite impressive. But the Republican vote in the trio of outlying Asheville MSA counties again cut the Democratic margin in half.

Democratic strength in college town areas has been evident in recent election cycles across the nation. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* has reported that in 2016, for example, Secretary Clinton overwhelmingly won the home counties of flagship state universities by an average of 18 percentage points and her margin in those counties was on average 11 points higher than her statewide percentages. As a primary example, *The Chronicle* pointed to North Carolina. While only gaining 46.7% overall, Secretary Clinton swept UNC-CH's home county of Orange with 74% of the vote. [See Najmabadi and Knott, "Yes, You're Right, Colleges Are Liberal Bubbles. Here's the Data," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (11/14/16)]

The Western Zone does not contain a flagship public university. But state political observers have noted that such four-year higher education institutions as UNC at Asheville (enrollment 3,595) as well as such smaller private schools as Warren Wilson College (enr. 595) and Montreat College (enr. 461) significantly contribute to the liberal political culture of Asheville/Buncombe [See Janz, "Buncombe County," *PoliticsNC* (3/15/2018)]. Based on volunteered anecdotal student comments, the website Niche.com ranks Warren Wilson as the most liberal and UNC-Asheville as the 5th most liberal college in North Carolina.

Asheville is also a "college town" in terms of its residents' high 48.2% college attainment level (adults above 25 years of age with a bachelor's degree). This almost fifty percent mark significantly exceeds the state average of 29.9% and the national average of 30.9% Indeed Asheville's level exceeds attainment in Charlotte (42.5%), Durham (41.2%), as well as Greensboro (37.4%) while almost matching it in Raleigh (50.0%) and Forsyth (50.2%).

And in Buncombe outside of Asheville, the precincts around Warren Wilson College were one of the few areas where Clinton won. The small town of Woodfin (6,123) was another Buncombe outlier for Clinton and has no four-year higher education institution. But this former manufacturing town in decline on the norther border of Asheville has been enjoying a renaissance as a new affordable suburban residence, and its town center is only two miles from UNC- Asheville.

Observers have also pointed to the town of Cullowhee surrounding Western Carolina University (enr. 11,043) as the strongest hotbed of Democratic support in Jackson. [See Wynne, “Jackson County,” PoliticsNC (4/24/13/)]. While Trump in 2016 won by over 10 percentage points and led in every other precinct in Jackson, Clinton won a majority in the Cullowhee precinct. [Taylor, “Breaking Down the Mountains ...,” *North Carolina Public Press* (11/14/16)]

The same 2016 pattern occurred in Transylvania County. Trump swept the county by a 59-37% margin. Secretary Clinton lost and usually by big margins throughout precincts in the county. But she won three precincts in the town of Brevard around Brevard College. [Taylor, “Breaking Down the Mountains...”] In Madison, Trump won by 60% overall and carried all precincts. Besides her victory in the precinct around the small town of Hot Springs, the only precinct where Clinton broke 40% was the one in Mars Hill around Mars Hill University.

Outside but near the Western Zone, college-town support for Democrats has been especially evident in Watauga County. In recent elections, Watauga (pop. 51,079) has become an island of narrow blue victories in the otherwise solid red Republican sea of the Fifth Congressional District outside the Democratic stronghold of Winston Salem/Forsyth County. Boone is the largest town in the county (pop. 17,122) and the home of Appalachian State (undergraduate enrollment 16,126) Fueled by her vote in Boone, Clinton won Watauga by a few hundred votes in 2016. [Taylor, “Breaking Down the Mountains,” *North Carolina Public Press* (11/14/16)]

The exact relationship between many higher education institutions and the Democratic voting patterns of surrounding areas is subject to debate. But as the NC Public Press wrote in its 2016 analysis, it appears that the “combination of liberal professors, young millennial students, and ethnically diverse student and staff populations” has created a progressive core which attracts more like-minded people to live there. At the same time, as the *Public Press* speculated, the solid Republican vote otherwise in the Western region could involve at least in part a rejection of the perceived “elite ideals” of such educational institutions.

Democrats apparently had some limited bases of competitive support in the biggest of the small towns among some small outlying Western Zone counties which are otherwise voting solidly Republican. No precinct analysis for Western Zone counties is readily available for 2018. But even as unpopular as Hillary Clinton was overall in these outlying counties, the *North Carolina Public Press*’ 2016 precinct indicated such pockets of support. For example:

- While Henderson County (pop. 106,740/registered voters 86,596) – the second most populous county in the Western Zone -- gave Trump a 61.55-34.08% victory overall in 2016, the precincts in the county seat and biggest town of Hendersonville (pop. 13,137) went for Clinton.
- While Trump won 61.90% in small Polk County (pop. 20,558/registered voters 16,220), Clinton won the largest town of Tryon (pop. 1,646 and home of the Tryon International Equestrian Center).
- A much weaker version of this pattern occurred in Haywood County (pop. 61, 084 /registered voters 45,369): while Trump took the county overall by a 61.60-34.08% margin, Clinton was able to win the central precinct at the heart of the county seat and largest town of Waynesville (pop. 9,971).

As emphasized previously, the Western Zone are overwhelmingly white and only Buncombe is a solidly Democratic outlier from their Republican pattern of support. But in some other counties, clusters of minority populations contribute to a modicum of Democratic competitiveness. For example: In Jackson, Native American voters living in a portion of Qualla reservation within the northernmost part of the county can provide a base of Democratic support in addition to voters in the Western Carolina University/Cullowhee area. [Wynne, “Jackson County,” 4/23/13] In 2016, although Trump won in this area heavy with Native American voters, it was the most competitive area for Clinton after Cullowhee. [Taylor, “Breaking Down the Mountains...,” *North Carolina Public Press*] (Due to evidence of discrimination against native American voters, Jackson became the only Western Zone county whose electoral practices were subject to the US Justice Department pre-clearance restrictions under the Section 5 of the 1965 Voting Rights Act until the Supreme Court constitutionally annulled them in the 2013 *Shelby County v. Holder* case.)

Swain County is home to the majority of the Eastern Band of Cherokee. Native American voters compose 29% of the population. Although Trump won Swain overall by about 58%, Secretary Clinton gained a 48% plurality in its eastern precinct around Cherokee. [*Id.*] In the Polk County town of Tryon, which delivered an outlier victory to Clinton, the African-American population (22%) rivals the state average. The presence of other groups increased Tryon’s minority population into the 25% range.

The previous comments focused on the current contours of two-party electoral politics involving Republicans and Democrats. Political observers however have observed the growth in registered “Unaffiliated” throughout North Carolina and the rest of the nation. Indeed, unaffiliated rank second behind Democrats statewide in North Carolina.

Yet the western part of the state stands out because “Unaffiliated” now represents its largest number of voters. While its politics were distinctive during the first half of the 20th century due to the amount of two-party competition, the partisan independence of voters now puts a new political stamp on the Western Zone.

Observers often point out that Democratic registration totals in Southern states can be inflated; they do not reflect current voting patterns because especially older cohorts of voters have not changed their registration despite becoming reliable Republican voters in state and national elections. That phenomenon is probably contributing to Democratic registration totals being higher in such reliably Republican voting counties as Haywood, Madison, Swain, and Transylvania, as well as the purplish Jackson.

But the more striking pattern is the strength of “Unaffiliated” registration throughout the Western Zone. Unaffiliated is now the first or second registration category in every county except for tiny Graham (total registration 5,571). And Unaffiliated voters now represent the highest total in second-most populous Henderson as well as three other Western Zone counties – Jackson, Polk, and Transylvania. In only six other counties do Unaffiliated voters outstrip Republicans as well as Democrats – nearby Watauga/Boone, New Hanover/Wilmington, Onslow, and three small counties in the Northeastern Zone (Camden, Currituck, and Dare).

In Buncombe, Unaffiliated voters (70,004) are now only 1,500 registered voters behind Democrats (71,589). This near first-place status in Buncombe has no parallel among the state’s five more populous counties. Like Buncombe, all these other high-population counties vote solidly Democratic. But

Unaffiliated voters still rank third in Wake County. In Mecklenburg, Guilford, Forsyth, and Durham, Unaffiliated voters significantly outpace Republicans but come nowhere close to matching Democrats.

For several years, the political science literature has been teaching that a large number of Unaffiliated voters and/or those who claim to be “independent” in public opinion surveys turn out to be reliable Democratic or Republican voters [See. E.g., Professor Jon Sides’ summary “Most Political Independents Actually Aren’t,” *Washington Post* (1/8/14). But the growth in voters refusing to affiliate with the Democrats or Republicans should not be ignored. The political science literature has also recently been pointing out that more and more voters identifying themselves as Democratic and Republicans are “negatively” affiliating with their chosen parties: they oppose the other party rather than positively embrace the one for which they usually vote [See Abramowitz and Weber, “Negative Partisanship: Why Americans Dislike Parties But Act Like Rabid Partisans,” *Political Psychology* (Feb. 2018) 119-35].

Likely, standard partisan competition with its binary choice between Republicans and Democrats still will endure for a long time. Even with its distinctively strong growth in Unaffiliated voters, the Western Zone has not yet shown any major attraction to third-party candidacies. In 2016, for example, the small average vote of about 3% for Libertarian candidate Gary Johnson in Western Zone counties barely exceeded his state average of 2.74%. Jackson (3.97%), Swain (3.82%), Buncombe (3.08%), Madison (2.98%), Haywood (2.95%), and Henderson (2.79) were the Libertarian candidate’s better-than-state average counties. (Due to the state’s tough ballot requirements, Green Party candidate Jill Stein was not on the ballot.)

But the possibility of significant partisan instability if not explosiveness in the Western Zone cannot be entirely discounted. Both the left-Democratic and right-Republican outlooks dominant in the Western Zone have insurgent features that fit awkwardly at best with the mainstream traditions in both parties.

On the one hand, the liberal reform tradition of the Democratic Party in North Carolina -- as George Tindall among other historians have demonstrated -- first emerged as a white “business progressivism” during the first decades of the 20th Century. [See Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945* (1967) 224-25] In the latter half of the 20th Century, this Democratic business progressivism began an uneasy coalescence with African-American voters as they became fully enfranchised across the state. Such major urban population centers as Raleigh, Guilford, Forsyth, and eventually Charlotte began to form versions of what political scientist James Q. Wilson had labeled an “Atlanta coalition” of mainly upscale whites and downscale African-American voters. [Wilson, “The Negro in Politics,” *Daedalus* (Fall 1965) 949-73, 953]

Governors Terry Sanford and Jim Hunt personified this liberalized business progressivism; so did more recent Democratic governors as Mike Easley and Beverly Perdue. Current Democratic Governor Roy Cooper is also a product of this tradition. And all these governors came from Eastern North Carolina (below the Northeastern Zone) [See generally Christensen, *The Paradox of Tar Heel Politics* (2008); Eamon, *The Making of a Southern Democracy: North Carolina Politics from Kerr Scott to Pat McCrory* (2014); Christensen, “Cooper-McCrory Race to be Close, Costly, Conspicuous,” *Raleigh News & Observer* (10/13/15)].

But the Western progressivism that has developed out of Asheville does not conform to or feature the key political elements in this Atlanta coalition. As already emphasized, Asheville’s long-time percentage of

African-American voters (12%) has been significantly below the state average (in the 20% range) and Buncombe's percentage remains in the single digits (currently 6%). Moreover, scholars Elizabeth Strom and Robert Kerstein have recently shown that Asheville's revitalization in recent decades has not depended on the big business-oriented "growth machines" so familiar in the revitalization of other cities [Strom and Kerstein, "The Homegrown Downtown: Redevelopment in Asheville," *Urban Affairs Review* (2017) 495-521].

Indeed, as Strom and Kerstein emphasize, Asheville's revitalization turned on rejecting the "*traditional growth paradigm of megaprojects*" – in particular, a 1981 bond referendum defeat of a corporate-oriented downtown mall project which envisioned demolishing 11 city blocks (502). The ensuing Asheville progressive style has reflected what Professor Ronald Inglehart has called "post-materialist" and journalist David Brooks has characterized as "Bobo" or "bourgeois bohemian." In political terms, it can be understood as more left-wing due to its strong environmentalist commitments but criticized as "elitist" due to the relative lack of emphasis on economic prosperity-growth concerns of New Dealish Democratic constituencies in North Carolina and elsewhere [See Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Publics* (1977); Brooks, *The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (2000)].

On the other end of the political spectrum, today's Western conservatism is hardly the moderately conservative Mountain Republicanism of yore. Instead the kind of anti-governmental Republican conservatism against TVA pioneered by former 11th District Congressman Charles Taylor and now typified by former Congressman Mark Meadows and its state legislators is unapologetically insurgent and populist. It has special appeal with rural white constituencies in outlying and economically distressed areas throughout the Western Zone [On Transylvania County in particular, see the blog post of Southern historian Dan Carter in "Good-Bye to All That?" *Southern Spaces* (12/19/14)].

At the same time, the cross-cutting environmental appeal in the fight against TVA has a living legacy among Western Zone GOP state legislators: Chuck McGrady from Henderson (117th House District) represents something of a mix in the old and new Western Republican traditions. He a former national president of the Sierra Club and an otherwise solidly conservative member elected in the Tea Party election of 2010 when the GOP took over the General Assembly. [See "Chuck McGrady's Political Summary," *VoteSmart.org*; and for McGrady's recent sponsorship of a bipartisan bill to end partisan gerrymandering, see Doran, "Bill May Change Who Draws Districts," *Raleigh News & Observer*, 2/14/19].

Perhaps in this highly polarized atmosphere, common ground can be found in such steps as major infrastructure projects that enhance economic growth and interconnectedness in the Western Zone. But it must be remembered that opposition to these type projects has served as key moments in the development of both today's Asheville-style liberalism and the now dominant insurgent Republican conservatism's campaign against TVA.

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT)

Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats are always an important aspect of any region's prospects for economic prosperity.

In the Western Prosperity zone, generally, the following SWOT observations pertain:

Strengths

- Western Carolina University, UNC-Asheville
- Asheville strong metro area with significant tourism appeal
- Natural amenities that have seen steady growth in an otherwise rural area
- Appeal as retirement destination

Weaknesses

- Population aging: high appeal as retiree destination means that population is relatively older and has more deaths than births. This may create issues for future workforce.
- Emergence as a retiree/tourism destination may increase cost of living, creating affordability challenges for residents who fill those service sector jobs.
- Less diverse than the state overall

Opportunities

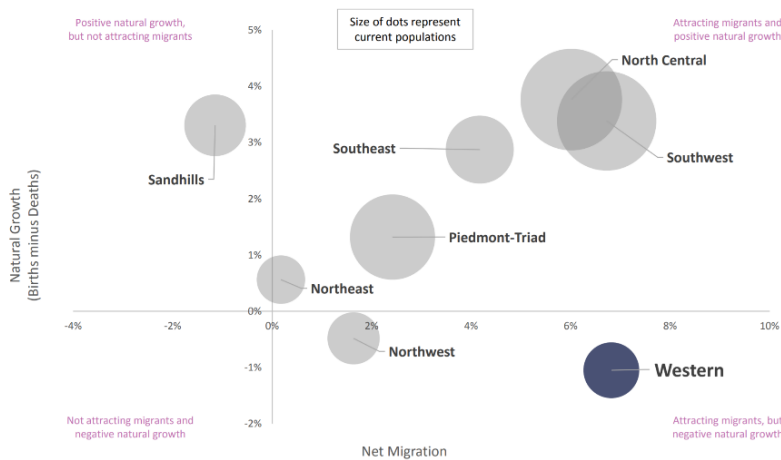
- Build pathways for young adults and working-age adults to stay in the area – currently there is a lot of youth drain of early career adults.

Threats

- Growth entirely dependent on net migration, much of which is from retirees. Economic downturn could slow growth substantially. Figure 10, below, from LEAD on components of population growth by Prosperity Zone shows that the Western has among the highest growth from net in-migration, but also has the greatest decrease from natural growth or more deaths than births).

Components of Population Growth

2010 to 2016



Source: North Carolina Office of State Budget and Management

Note: Migration calculated relative to most recent Census year (2010).

Figure 10: Population migration in North Carolina

Asheville Sub-PZ

In the context of the Asheville Sub-Prosperity Zone, the following additional observations pertain:

Strengths

- Steadily increasing population fueled by growth in Buncombe and Henderson. Both counties are core counties in the Asheville metro. Madison, which is an outlying county from Asheville metro, has also experienced steady, strong growth. Henderson has been fastest-growing county in the region, largely due to suburban spillover from Buncombe
- Transylvania County (Brevard micro) had relatively strong growth 1990s-2000s but that slowed down at beginning of 2010-2017. This could be because growth that was fueled by second homes/retirees took a larger hit from the Recession. Time will tell if Transylvania will bounce back as we fully recover from the Great Recession. Polk had similar trends.
- Asheville is a prime tourism destination and that and the surrounding region benefit from a steady flow of tourists.
- Retiree destination. Net migration has been the only driver of growth in this region.
- Relatively educated, potentially because of net in-migration of highly educated retirees. As of 2017, 11% of Asheville sub-PZ adults 25+ had less than a high school diploma, two percentage points below the state rate of 13%. Conversely, they were more likely to have an associate degree or higher (42% vs. 39% statewide).

Weaknesses

- Rutherford the only county in this sub-PZ that has not grown since 2010 and it is also the county least integrated into the Asheville sub-PZ. Rutherford is more strongly tied in to Charlotte, Shelby, and Greenville-Spartanburg MSAs than to Asheville (in terms of commuting patterns) (See Figure 11)
- Does not have significant pull for young adults. Early career adults/recent college grads barely move to this region compared to individuals from other age groups.
- Relatively older region compared to the state – ages 25-54 smaller share of population (37% vs. 39%) and have fewer under 15 and 15-24. In contrast, 55-74 and 75+ a much higher share of population. As a result, Buncombe is the only county that has had more births than deaths since 2010; all other counties in this region have had natural decrease.

Opportunities

- Potential for Montana-esque tourism development – “bring your job with you”? Commuting patterns from Buncombe County may be an artifact of some data errors, but looks like a high degree of people who live in Buncombe work in Mecklenburg, Wake, or the Piedmont – could this be facilitated by high speed internet connections that enable teleworking? And is this a viable strategy for other counties in the area?
- Better opportunities for early career adults may address some of migration patterns observed.
- Counties on SC border are clearly tied to Greenville-Spartanburg MSA – strong commuting patterns from Henderson, Polk, and Rutherford to SC counties.

Threats

- Emergence as a retiree/tourism destination may increase cost of living, creating affordability challenges for residents who fill those service sector jobs.
- More tourism = more congestion, more infrastructure demands that can start to threaten natural amenities bringing people to the place to begin with.

- Current growth is entirely dependent on net migration, much of which is from retirees. An economic downturn could slow this growth substantially.
- Additionally, current projections from state demographer suggest more growth from migration than has been seen in recent years. This may be overly optimistic for future planning, or it may be appropriate. The last few years have seen a return to pre-recession growth patterns and it will take some time to see how much things stabilize at current levels.

Waynesville-Franklin Sub-PZ

In the context of the Waynesville-Franklin Sub-Prosperity Zone, the following additional observations pertain:

Strengths

- Western Carolina University in Jackson County
- All counties have been growing since 1990 except for Graham. One of the few areas in the state where rural counties are actually maintaining growth, in part because their rurality and natural resource amenities are what pull people to the area. (May be the most rural region in the state: 5 of the region's 7 counties are rural.)
- High levels of net in-migration key to the region's growth. Like the Asheville area, this generally reflects the influence of retiree in-migration.

Weaknesses

- Population aging has had a significant impact on this area for nearly 20 years. Overall, the Waynesville-Franklin area has had natural decrease since 2000 and this is only projected to intensify in coming years. Two counties—Macon and Clay—had more deaths than births in the 1990s, as well.
- Population heavily skewed towards older adults. In 2017, 33% of Waynesville-Franklin residents were 25-54 compared to 39% statewide. The region had a higher share of 55-74 year-olds (29% vs. 22% and 75+ (10% vs. 6%).
- Net out-migration of early career adults over past few decades may be concerning for future economic development. Some of this may reflect the natural outflow of WCU students, but the migration profile shown below highlights how the age structure of net in-migration to the region shifted older in the 2000s.
- Like the Elizabeth City sub-Prosperity Zone, Waynesville-Franklin contains multiple counties with small populations. This means that they may not be able to get data that is as current as data available for other regions.
- Educational attainment has improved, but still lags the state.
 - In 1990, 35% of region adults 25+ had less than a high school diploma; this had declined to 13% in 2017. The state rates were 30% and 13%, respectively.
 - In 2017, 34% of region residents held an associate degree or higher, five percentage points lower than the state average of 39%.

Opportunities

- Better opportunities for early career adults may address net migration patterns by age.
- Strengthen connection between far west counties and rest of NC. Often just as linked to Georgia or Tennessee as to NC.

Threats

- Out-migration of 75+ may indicate medical out-migration influenced by hospital closures/medical access.
- Current growth is entirely dependent on net migration, much of which is from retirees. An economic downturn could slow this growth substantially. Additionally, current projections from state demographer suggest more growth from migration than has been seen in recent years. This may be overly optimistic for future planning, or it may be appropriate. The last few years have seen a return to pre-recession growth patterns and it will take some time to see how much things stabilize at current levels.

Employment, Demographic, and Commutation Patterns

The figures below provide information about commutation and demographic patterns for counties in the Northeast Prosperity Zone.

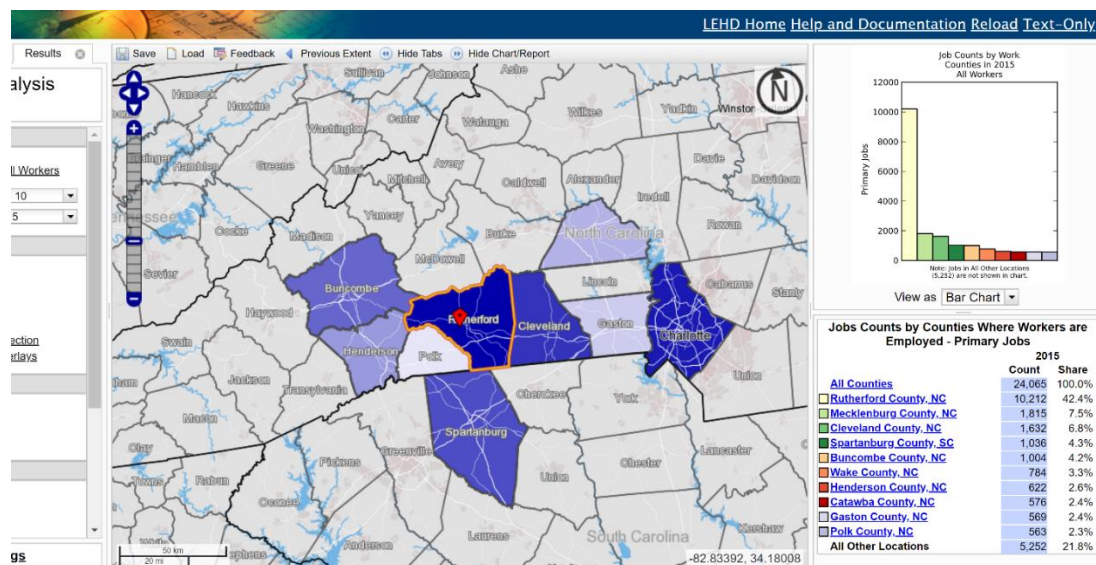


Figure 11: Commutation patterns for Rutherford county

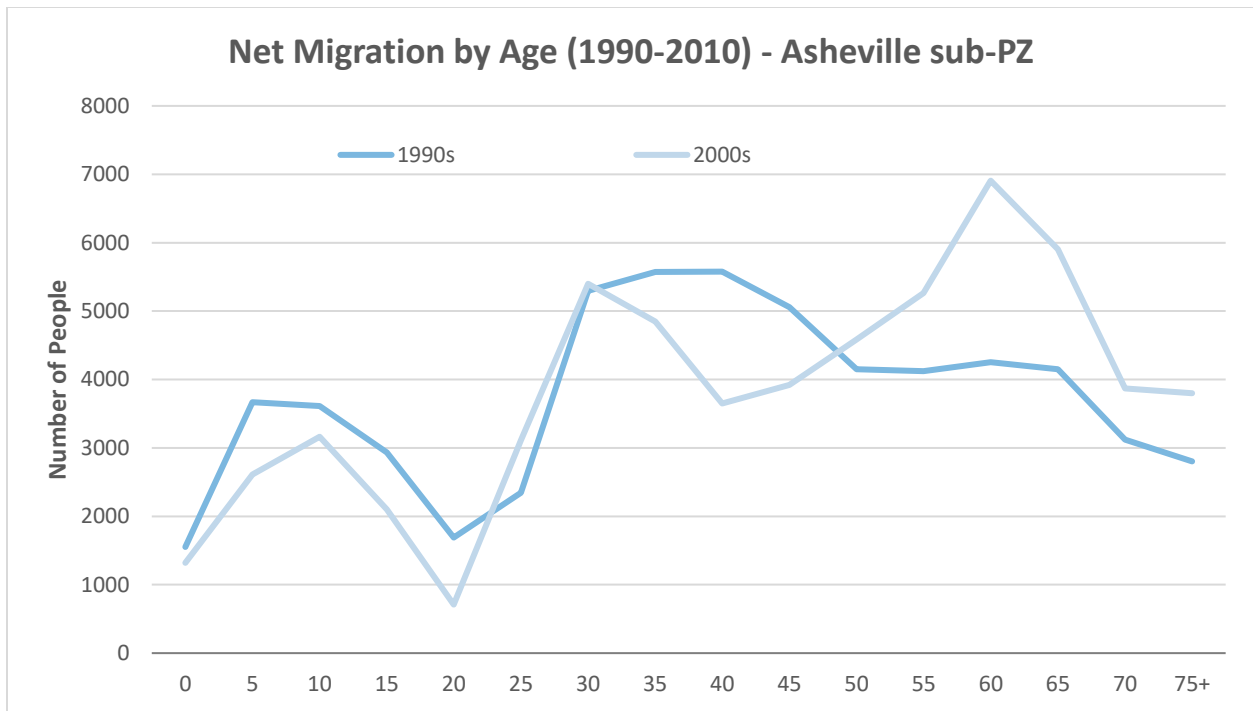


Figure 12: Net migration by age (1990-2010) – Asheville sub-PZ

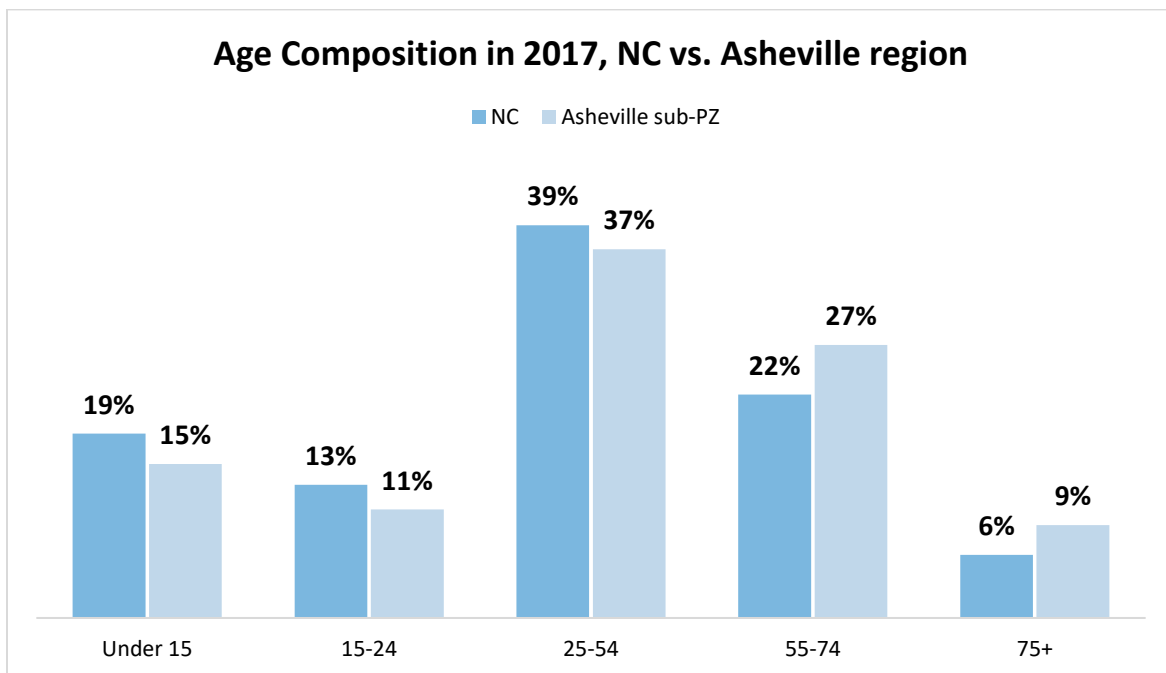


Figure 13: Age composition in 2017, NC versus the Asheville region

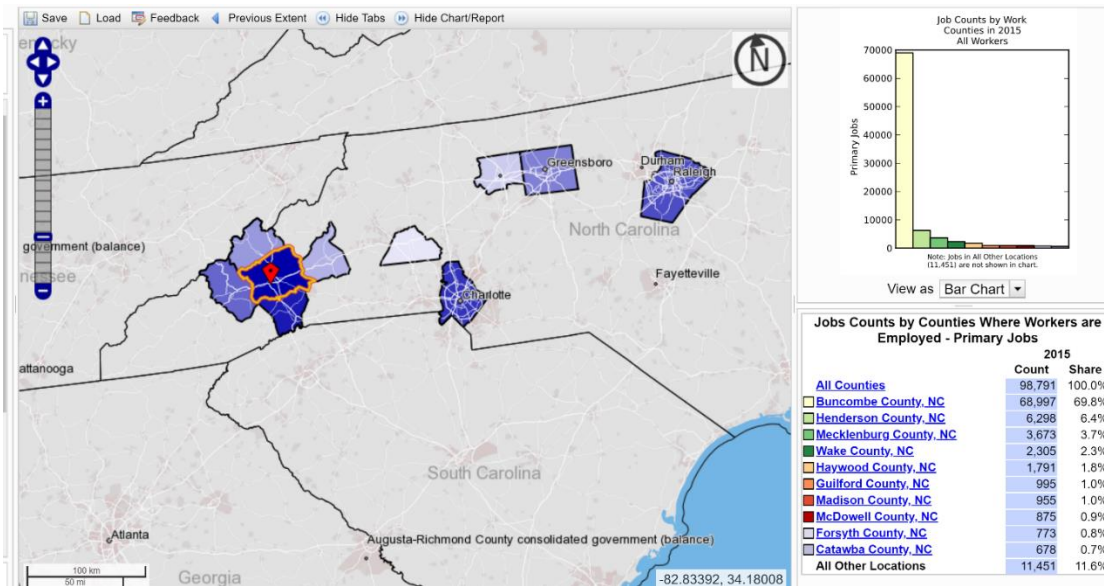


Figure 14: Commuting patterns for Buncombe county

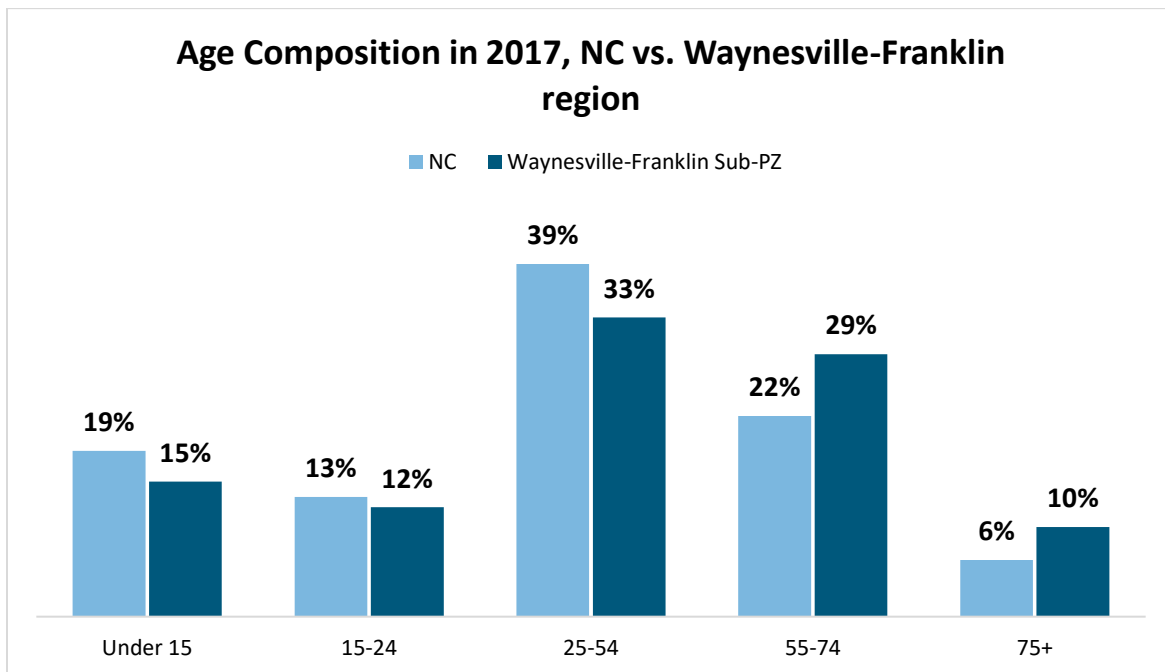


Figure 15: Age composition in 2017, NC versus the Waynesville-Franklin region

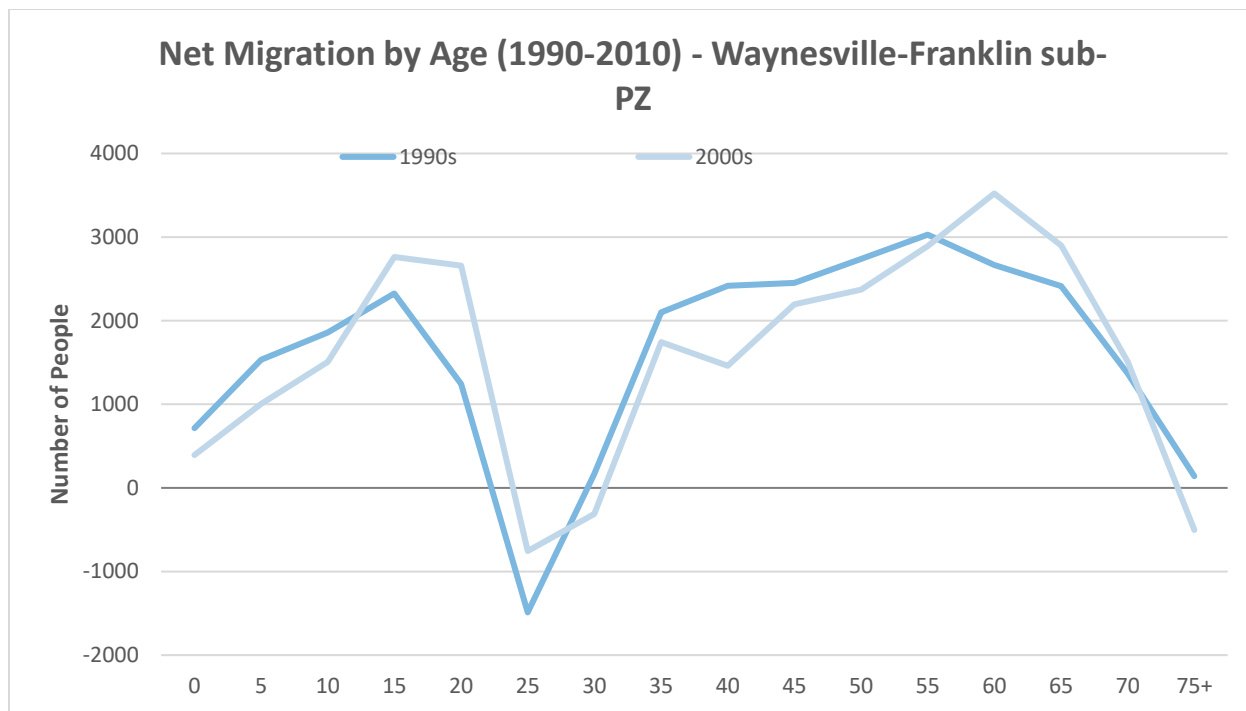


Figure 16: Net migration by age (1990-2010) – Waynesville-Franklin sub-PZ

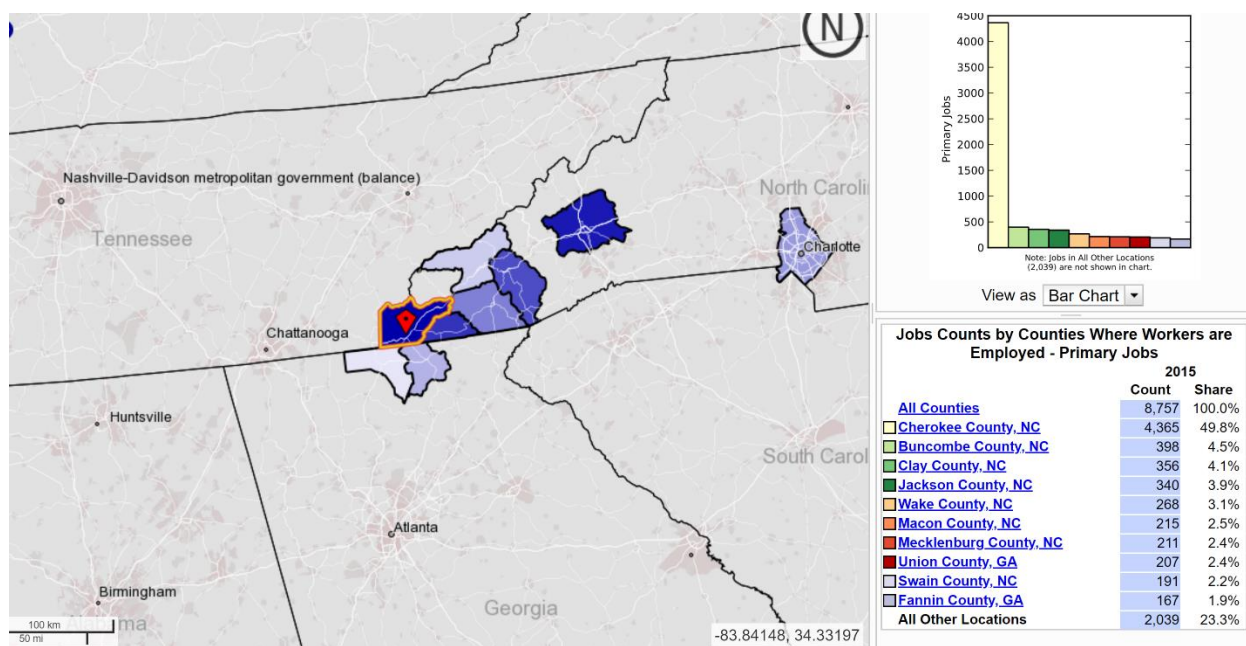


Figure 17 Commuting patterns for Buncombe county

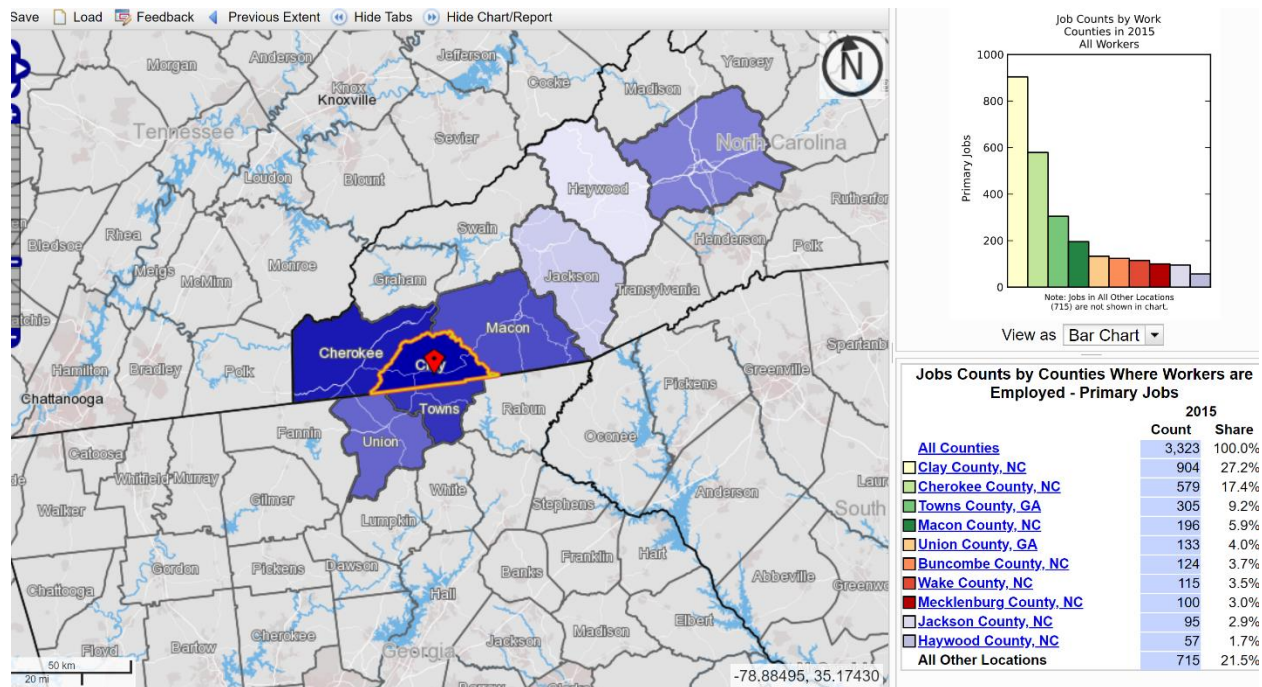


Figure 18: Commuting patterns for Clay county

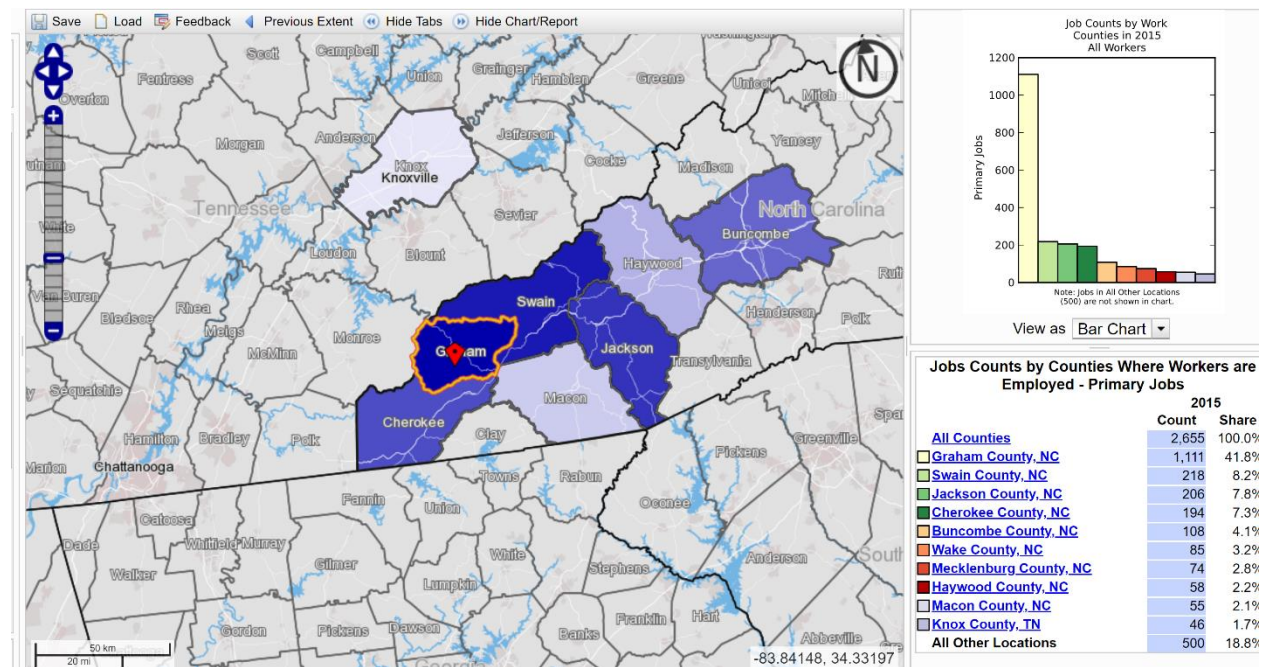


Figure 19: Commuting patterns for Graham county

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