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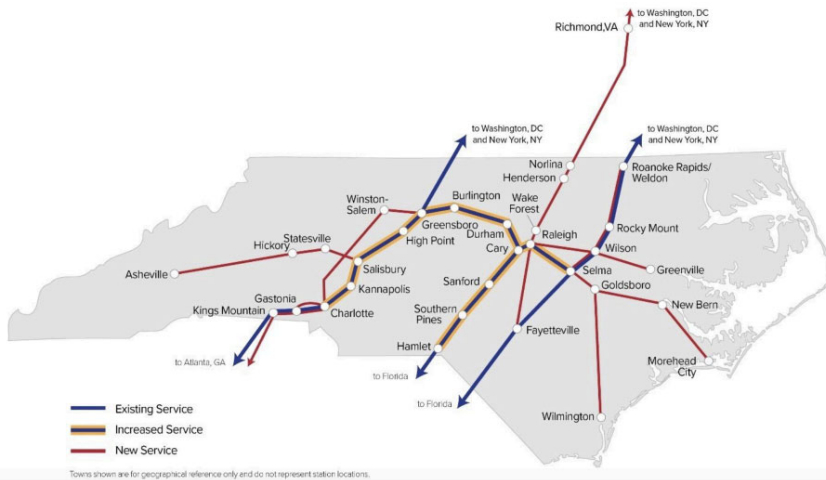
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Western North Carolina making progress on ambitious railroad plans

Posted on April 1, 2026 by Justin McGuire

Figure 4. Potential Passenger Rail Services being considered for CID



RAIL CONNECTION: Amtrak operates passenger rail service in North Carolina cities including Charlotte, Raleigh, Greensboro and Durham. Western North Carolina officials hope to add Asheville to that list within a decade. Map courtesy of NCDOT

Ray Rapp left the recent [Railroads and Regional Economic Development Conference](#) optimistic about the future of rail service in Western North Carolina.

Rapp, a former state representative and co-chair of the nonprofit WNC Rail Committee, was among 140 people who attended the March 18 conference in Morganton. Restoring passenger service between Asheville and Salisbury was a



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Asheville-Salisbury route. Now comes the hard part — how to pay for it.

Recent studies put the project cost at about \$665 million for track upgrades, station improvements, rolling stock and maintenance facilities. Federal discretionary grants could cover up to 80%, meaning about \$133 million in state and local funding would be needed.

“The biggest takeaway from the conference is we are now ready to move forward — with the state legislature and the local governments along the route — to begin developing a strategy for coming up with local matching funds,” Rapp says. “The state rail division has gotten us into the queue for funding, and now they want to see demonstrations of the community’s engagement and enthusiasm for this, along with some kind of financial commitment.”

He hopes, for example, that Asheville and Buncombe County will form a committee as soon as possible to determine the location of a passenger station. Possible sites include a city-owned property on Thompson Street along the Swannanoa River, which was damaged in Tropical Storm Helene, or perhaps a new location in the River Arts District, Rapp says.

In previous reporting, Asheville Mayor **Esther Manheimer** indicated that while the city supports continued planning for the corridor project, its top priority is maintaining a balanced budget and core services during post-Helene recovery. She said the city will focus its efforts on regional coordination to strengthen the case for investment. *Xpress* reached out to Buncombe County for comment but did not hear back before press time.

Rapp notes the committee would also need to coordinate with the Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce and the Asheville-Buncombe Tourism Development Authority to demonstrate broad community support.

Xpress reached out to the chamber for comment but did not hear back before press time.

All aboard

The proposed 139-mile passenger corridor would carry riders from Asheville to Salisbury in about 3 1/2 hours, with projections of three daily round trips and about 100,000 local trips per year by 2045. Restoring Asheville service would reconnect the mountains to Charlotte, Raleigh and the broader national passenger rail system for the first time in half a century.

Local governments along the Asheville-Salisbury route, whose support will be crucial, were well represented at the conference, Rapp says. **Ronnie Thompson**, mayor of Morganton; **Steve Little**, mayor of Marion (and co-chair of WNC Rail Committee); Manheimer; and **Susan Kluttz**, mayor pro tem of Salisbury, were among the attendees.

“These are the mayors along the route who have to help energize their communities to get started on the next step in this process,” Rapp says.

Rapp notes that while the \$133 million needed from state and local sources may seem overwhelming, regional planning organizations can play a central role in that effort.

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Tourist trains

While passenger service remains a long-term goal, tourism rail is already delivering measurable economic benefits in WNC — and expanding rapidly.

Rapp points to the Bryson City-based Great Smoky Mountains Railroad as a prime example, describing it as “the second-largest tourist railroad in the country.”

The railroad continues to build on popular seasonal attractions, he adds.

“The Polar Express continues to sell out every year,” Rapp says. “The Harry Potter train is coming, and that’s going to be a major economic boost to the region.”

At the same time, smaller operations are exploring ways to integrate rail into outdoor recreation and local tourism networks.

Rocky Hollifield, president of the Woodfin-based Craggy Mountain Line, for instance, told conference attendees his railroad is in discussions with river outfitters about linking train service to rafting destinations along the French Broad River. Taylor’s Wave, the Town of Woodfin’s artificial whitewater river wave, is expected to open soon and bolster tourism in the area.

These kinds of partnerships, Rapp says, demonstrate how rail can complement existing industries while creating new ones — particularly in a region where tourism is a major economic driver.

“We want to promote this kind of tourist rail in the region and continue that kind of growth,” Rapp says.

Freight rail’s economic impact

Freight operations are central to both the passenger rail plan and broader regional economic development. Norfolk Southern owns much of the Salisbury-to-Asheville line and has committed \$40 million to \$50 million to restore the Old Fort Loops, a mountainous stretch badly damaged by Tropical Storm Helene.

Rapp says the conference provided critical insight into how local governments can work with freight operators. “The first thing in our mission statement is how Norfolk Southern and CSX can work with local communities to develop manufacturing sites along the route,” he says. “Reliable freight service supports local economies and attracts manufacturers who can take advantage of rail connections.”

The Burke County town of Valdese, for example, is reengaging with the WNC Rail Committee to coordinate with Norfolk Southern and local economic planners. “Valdese was one of the founding members of the committee but had fallen away,” Rapp says. “They’re now back in the fold, advising their planners on how the railroad can support industrial development. Communities like Valdese are seeing how freight, passenger and tourist rail can all work together.”

The conference also emphasized the need to avoid mistakes made in other states. California’s high-speed rail project encountered delays because planners started building in remote areas without considering station placement in urban centers.

With feasibility studies complete, demonstrated ridership demand, freight infrastructure being restored and federal dollars available, Rapp is optimistic about the future.

“What we want to do is continue to build the momentum. We have interest. We’ve had background funding. Now we’ve got to move to the next stage,” he says.

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