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Hickory, North Carolina, blazes a new trail for economic growth and development

By City of Hickory
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Last year, Hickory, North Carolina, celebrated its sesquicentennial anniversary midst unprecedented challenges, and the Latin motto of “*vestigia nulla retrorsum*” in the city’s seal still rings as true as ever today. The phrase, which translates to “no steps backwards,” reflects the city’s resilience and describes the collective mindset of a community of doers and makers determined to craft a stronger, more vibrant Hickory for tomorrow.

Amid the challenges and uncertainty of the coronavirus pandemic over the past year, Hickory continued to forge ahead with its now \$90 million revitalization plan to create job opportunities, enhance quality of life, and drive economic development. Hickory leaders and community members established a path towards revitalization and growth.

Crafting the future

The Hickory region is no stranger to economic uncertainty... or resurgence.

Facing several hardships over the last few decades, Hickory has always managed to reinvent itself and emerge stronger on the other side. The year 2020 proved yet again that Hickory can achieve great things despite adversity.

When furniture and textile manufacturing jobs left the region in favor of cheaper labor markets overseas during the Great Recession, Hickory leaders and citizens rallied to develop a plan for transforming the city and passed a \$40 million bond referendum.

Since then, Hickory has leveraged the \$40 million bond funds to secure an additional \$50 million in state and federal grants for complementary projects.

The result of the now \$90 million investment will be a 10-mile multimodal urban trail system connecting destinations across the city, placemaking through streetscapes and gateways, and a 270-acre Class A advanced business park to attract industry and create jobs.

Hickory Trail

The Hickory Trail, a catalyst project with the potential to transform the community, combines five phases of development - City Walk, Riverwalk, Historic Ridgeview Walk, OLLE Art Walk, and Aviation Walk - to create a 10-mile pathway that connects amenities and destinations

throughout the city from Lenoir-Rhyne University through downtown to Lake Hickory and the Hickory Regional Airport.

The Hickory Trail presents an opportunity to shape growth for the next few decades and beyond. With all bond and bond-related projects either completed, under construction, or under design, Hickory is already seeing economic activity in the form of new housing projects, mixed-use developments, corporate headquarters expansions, and industrial facilities.

The City of Hickory came into 2020 with great momentum and continued to make significant progress on its bond program, amid the pandemic, while providing essential city services to residents.

Contractor Neill Grading & Construction worked throughout 2020 on construction of the City Walk. Hickory residents and visitors watched month after month as sections of the trail came to life. The City Walk segment of the Hickory Trail is scheduled for completion by summer 2021.

The Riverwalk officially broke ground in January 2020, following Hickory City Council's approval of a construction contract with David E. Looper & Company for the city portion of the project. Construction of the overland trail for the Riverwalk progressed throughout the year and is anticipated to be completed by late spring 2021.

In October 2020, Hickory City Council approved a construction contract with W.C. English, Inc. for the remaining Riverwalk components, which include the trail entrance, parking lot, and overwater bridge. Construction for this portion of the project is now underway with completion estimated for summer 2022.

Other segments of the Hickory Trail are also advancing. Historic Ridgeview Walk, OLLE Art Walk (via Old Lenoir Road), and Aviation Walk are under way and construction is slated for later this year.

Trivium Corporate Center

In addition to the advances made with the Hickory Trail, Trivium Corporate Center also achieved a few milestones in 2020 and the first quarter of 2021.

Trivium is a Class A business park located between Robinwood Road and Startown Road, which is being jointly developed by the City of Hickory and Catawba County, and marketed by the Catawba County Economic Development Corporation (EDC).

Since breaking ground on the business park in May 2018, Trivium has announced five tenants and a speculative building:

- Corning - investing \$60 million; creating 110 jobs.
- ITM - investing \$17 million; creating 137 jobs.
- Cataler - investing \$42 million; creating 151 jobs.
- Stonemont speculative building - investing \$10.5 million in 192,000 square feet.
- American Fuji Seal - investing \$52 million; creating 101 jobs.
- Gusmer Enterprises - investing \$38.2 million; creating 73 jobs.

According to the Trivium Corporate Center site plan, there are three available lots remaining.

Downtown Hickory renovation completed

As the Central Business District, downtown Hickory is filled with a variety of unique retail shops, restaurants, corporate headquarters, professional offices, and entertainment venues, all in a park-like setting in the middle of Hickory. As part of the City Walk project, Hickory completed a major renovation of Union Square and the downtown block in 2019.

The plans increase “dwell time” in downtown by creating spaces where visitors can comfortably enjoy solitary or group activities. The designs maintained the historic feel of the Square. They also modernized aesthetics and enhanced the space with a distinguished promenade along Union Square storefronts, a central pathway bisecting two large lawn areas, additional seating areas called garden rooms or parklets, and a new public restroom and a multi-purpose shade structure on the east side of the Square.

The World War I German Howitzer cannon is now housed on a multi-tiered brick spiral ramp, nicknamed Cannon Hill. Additional elements of the plans entailed increasing lighting and security, and adding atmospheric music.

On May 19, 2020, the city accepted a \$275,000 product donation from Hickory-based CommScope for Downtown Union Square Wi-Fi. In honor of the sizable donation and its impact to the community, the newly added multipurpose shade structure on Union Square will be named “The CommScope Stage.”

Streetscapes and gateways

The city also has plans in place for streetscape improvements to major City entrances, like Lenoir-Rhyne Boulevard, which is exit 125 off I-40. The city also completed a gateway of spring and fall leaves on U.S. 321/70 to welcome people to Hickory.

Economic development

Hickory’s Vision for Economic Development is to establish a diversified and sustainable economy through the growth of business opportunities, jobs, tax base, and population, and to improve the quality of life for its citizens.

The goal of the bond program is to drive economic development, which creates jobs, attracts population, and increases the tax base to help the city provide better services to citizens.

The city's bond program and revitalization efforts are yielding positive results. The investments of the bond program have ripple effects throughout the entire Hickory region. These efforts not only directly create economic development opportunities, but they also enhance quality of life for prospective job hunters, residents, and visitors.

Bond program impact to date:

- \$371 million private investment.
- 3,091 - Construction related jobs.
- 1,331 - Permanent jobs.
- 397 - New housing units in buffer area.

Additionally, Hickory's housing market saw 1,135 new residential housing units from 2018 to 2020.

Additional Hickory highlights

As the city of Hickory moved forward with crafting the future through its bond program, the daily business of running a local government also continued. The city remained focused on providing essential services to citizens and customers.

The year 2020 held challenges; yes, but also celebrations and successes. Here is a brief list of these achievements and highlights:

150th anniversary: Jan. 3, 2020, marked the city of Hickory's 150th "Sesquicentennial" anniversary. The historic milestone year was kicked off with a proclamation by Mayor Hank Guess and a birthday celebration in Council Chambers. A special lecture series was presented by Patrick Daily with the Hickory Landmarks Society to revisit significant points in Hickory's past. Although the pandemic postponed other celebratory events in June 2020, the city has rescheduled events planned for June 2021 with #Repeat150. Visit www.HKY150.com for event updates and links to the lecture series.

New artificial turf field: In January 2020, the city started construction of its first artificial turf field at Henry Fork River Park. The artificial turf field was completed in March 2020, with Hickory becoming the first municipality in the United States to install revolutionary T°Cool evaporative cooling technology for cooler and safer play.

New park: Not only does the city of Hickory have 25 amazing parks with impressive bike trails for beginner and experienced riders, hiking trails along Lake Hickory, picnic and playground areas, multiple soccer and baseball fields, splashpads, an all-children's playground and tree house for children with disabilities, beautiful sitting areas, and much more, Hickory is also developing a new park, called Bruce Meisner Park, to make that 26 parks.

Hickory's single largest private investment: In late September 2020, Merchants Distributors, LLC (MDI), a wholesale grocery distributor founded in Hickory in 1931, announced plans to invest \$120 million to expand its services and operations to create 111 jobs. At \$120 million, this project is the single largest economic development announcement in the city of Hickory's history.

Hickory Pedestrian + Bicycle plan: City staff worked with Alta Planning + Design, stakeholders, and the community throughout 2020 to develop a comprehensive plan to guide the future of walking and biking in Hickory. In December 2020, Hickory City Council adopted the new Hickory Pedestrian + Bicycle plan.

Ready to craft your home or business in Hickory? Visit www.MyHKY.com for an interactive, virtual tour and the city's newest economic development video.

Hickory, North Carolina, a metropolitan hub of 365,000 people, is located between Charlotte and Asheville at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains, along I-40. For business information, Contact Catawba County EDC President Scott Millar at 828-267-1564 or smillar@catawbacountync.gov or

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