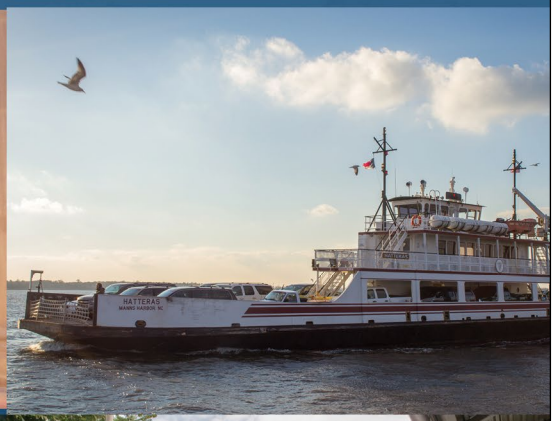
The Economic Impact of a Salisbury-to-Asheville Rail Corridor

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Institute for Transportation Research and Education

STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION
RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT

The Economic Impact of a Salisbury-to-Asheville Rail Corridor

FINAL REPORT

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Submitted by

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16. Abstract

Reestablishing passenger rail service between Salisbury and Asheville presents a significant opportunity to strengthen North Carolina's economy and transportation network. By connecting major population centers—including the Charlotte metro, the Piedmont Triad, the Research Triangle, and the Blue Ridge region—the corridor would enhance mobility for residents, commuters, and visitors while providing a more sustainable and efficient alternative to highway travel. Communities along the route stand to benefit from increased tourism, greater visibility, and new economic activity, particularly in towns with cultural, recreational, and historic appeal.

The economic benefits of the corridor are wide-ranging. Capital investments in the corridor will create a one-time stimulus for North Carolina's economy through activities such as construction spending on rail infrastructure, station development, and related upgrades; the purchase of materials and equipment from local suppliers; engineering and design services provided by in-state firms; and temporary job creation in sectors like construction, architecture, and project management. It is estimated that capital investments will result in a total of 5,280 job-years, $360.5 million in employee earnings, $1.05 billion in economic output, and $33.6 million in local and state tax dollars (monetary estimates provided using 2025$).

The corridor will also create sustained economic impacts resulting from ongoing operations and maintenance, new occurrences of visitor spending, and improved access to North Carolina's labor pool. Altogether, the corridor is estimated to sustain 305 jobs, $19.9 million in employee earnings, $59.8 million in total economic output, and result in $1.8 million in local and state tax revenue on an annual basis.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Reestablishing passenger rail service from Salisbury to Asheville, North Carolina presents a transformative opportunity for western North Carolina, offering significant benefits to communities along the corridor. This service would create a critical link between the Charlotte metropolitan area, the Piedmont Triad, the Research Triangle, and the Blue Ridge region, increasing accessibility for visitors, workers, and residents from across the state. Rail travel offers a convenient and sustainable alternative to driving, easing congestion on major highways while offering a comfortable and efficient mode of transportation. By removing cars from the road, especially along the heavily traveled I-40 corridor, the train would help reduce roadway wear, emissions, and traffic delays—all while improving overall travel safety.

The towns and cities along the Salisbury-to-Asheville route stand to gain substantially from increased tourism and economic activity. Asheville is already one of North Carolina's premier tourist destinations, drawing visitors from across the country for its vibrant arts scene, culinary offerings, and outdoor recreation. Study findings show that Asheville has been the most requested location not currently on the NC By Train Amtrak service (Hofmann, 2023). Improved access by train will only bolster its visitor numbers, particularly among travelers who prefer to avoid driving. Similarly, communities both within Asheville and across Western North Carolina stand to benefit from increased exposure and foot traffic as travelers explore destinations along the rail corridor. Towns throughout the region, each offering a mix of historic charm, natural beauty, and cultural attractions, could become far more accessible and visible with a functioning passenger rail connection, strengthening not only Asheville's role as a hub but also the broader network of communities it links.

The economic impacts of passenger rail service would be far-reaching. Capital investment in rail infrastructure would generate jobs and business opportunities during construction. Over the duration of the project implementation, it is estimated that the Salisbury-to-Asheville corridor will generate a one-time impact of **5,280 job-years, $360.5 million in employee earnings, $1.05 billion in economic output, and $33.6 million in local and state tax dollars** (monetary estimates provided using 2025$).

The corridor would also support sustained economic impacts in western North Carolina that radiate throughout the state. For example, long-term operations and maintenance would create stable employment across multiple sectors. Additionally, tourism-related spending by rail passengers would infuse local economies with new revenue, supporting restaurants, shops, hotels, and other service providers. Moreover, improved transportation options help expand market access by linking employers with a larger labor pool. Rail service enables more workers to travel efficiently across the region, which can help reduce labor shortages and support business growth. It is estimated that the Salisbury-to-Asheville corridor will generate **sustained economic impacts, including 305 jobs, $19.9 million in annual employee earnings, $59.8 million in annual total economic output, and result in $1.8 million in local and state tax revenue recurring on an annual basis**.

Ultimately, the Salisbury-to-Asheville rail corridor offers a unique opportunity to create a more connected, resilient, and dynamic regional economy. It addresses transportation challenges, boosts tourism, enhances workforce mobility, and supports sustainable growth for communities both large and small. By investing in this rail line, North Carolina would be laying the groundwork for a future that balances economic opportunity with environmental stewardship and quality of life.

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Introduction

Asheville was served by passenger rail from October 1880 until July 1975. When Southern Railway discontinued the Asheville Special, it ended 95 years of passenger rail connections to the region.[1] Since then, Western North Carolina has had no direct passenger rail service, though the demand for such service has remained high among residents, local governments, and tourism stakeholders. A picture of Asheville's historic train station is shown in Figure 1.

To reestablish passenger rail service to Asheville and Western North Carolina, the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) adopted a formal plan in March 2001 focused on restoring passenger rail along the Salisbury-to-Asheville corridor. The plan has evolved to include constructing or renovating train stations that can function as multimodal community hubs, incorporating local transit, biking, walking, and other transportation options alongside rail service.

Figure 1. Southern Railway's Historic Asheville Station

Source: A.C..Kalmbach sourced from American Rails.com.

In December 2023, NCDOT completed its Western North Carolina Passenger Rail Feasibility Study, which analyzes the potential for restoring passenger rail on the Norfolk Southern line between Salisbury and Asheville. This route would offer passenger rail service from Salisbury to Asheville (NCDOT, 2023).

The feasibility study includes ridership projections, cost estimates, and revenue information. A more detailed Service Development Plan will be developed through the Federal Railroad Administration's (FRA) Corridor Identification and Development Program (CIDP), which aims to support new and restored intercity rail corridors across the U.S. (FRA, n.d.).

NCDOT is continuing to work through the CIDP process to advance the project and is working closely with local communities and other stakeholders to restore passenger rail service to Western North Carolina. Reestablishing this service would not only reconnect the mountains to the state and national passenger rail network, but also support sustainable tourism, regional economic development, and multimodal mobility.

[1] Information sourced from Ray Rapp, Co-Chair of WNC Rail Committee, Inc. on December 18, 2025 and partially documented in Southern Railroads, 2025.

Figure 4. Old Rural Train Station Along the Proposed Corridor

Source: Digidreamgrafix (Adobe Stock No. 125977114).

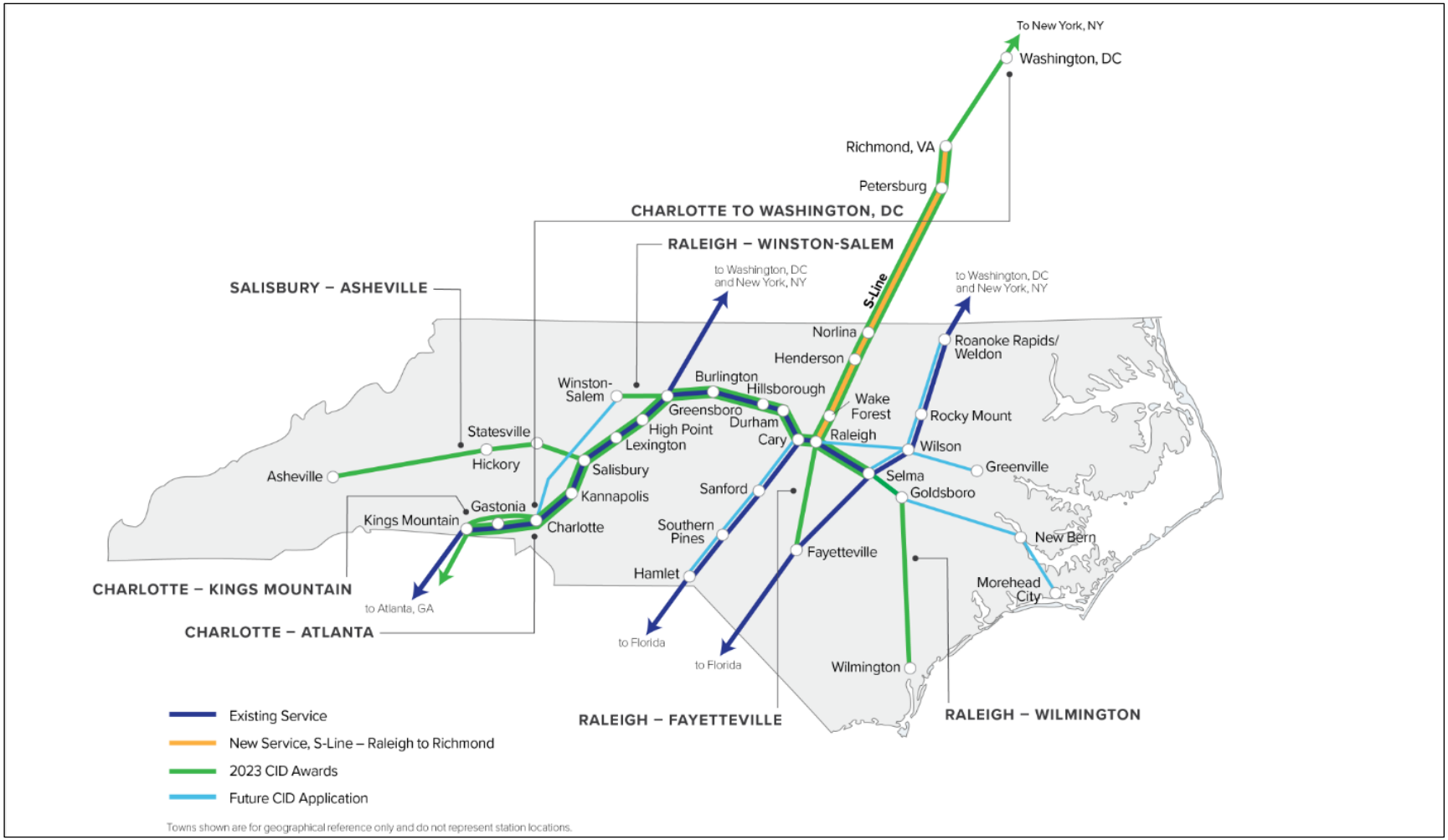
Passenger Rail Corridor to Asheville

The proposed passenger rail corridor between Salisbury and Asheville would span approximately 139 miles, offering a much-needed connection between Western North Carolina and the broader Piedmont rail network. The route would link rural mountain communities to major urban centers and existing Amtrak service at Salisbury, enhancing access to employment, tourism, and essential services (see Figure 3 for a North Carolina passenger rail system map). Communities along the line, such as Statesville, Hickory, Morganton, Marion, and other locations along and beyond the corridor, would directly benefit from this corridor, gaining both passenger mobility and economic development opportunities. For these towns, many of which were historically shaped by the rail industry, revitalized passenger service offers a chance to reclaim the economic and social vitality that rail travel once provided.

The corridor ends in Asheville, a cultural and economic hub of Western North Carolina located in the Mountain and Western Piedmont region. Unlike the more urbanized central and eastern parts of the state, such as Charlotte, the Triad, and the Triangle, Western North Carolina is defined by steep mountain slopes, dense forests, and a more rural population spread across a wide geographic area. With limited interstate highway infrastructure, many communities in this region face connectivity challenges. Restoring passenger rail could significantly reduce travel barriers, particularly for residents without access to personal vehicles or long-distance bus options, while strengthening the ties between smaller towns and regional job markets and services.

Tourism, a cornerstone of the Western North Carolina economy, would also see direct benefits from the proposed rail line. The region is home to iconic public lands such as Pisgah and Nantahala National Forests and parts of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the most visited park in the country. These landscapes, along with destinations like Lake Lure, Fontana Dam, the Great Smoky Mountains Railroad, and the Blue Ridge Parkway, draw millions of visitors each year for outdoor recreation. Passenger rail would offer a new and more sustainable way for travelers to access these high-demand areas, helping to ease road congestion and support long-term tourism growth. In addition, rail station investments could catalyze business development, housing, and local transit infrastructure, improving regional equity and economic resilience in historically underinvested communities.

Figure 7. Existing and Proposed Passenger Rail Corridors in North Carolina



Source: NCDOT, 2025.

Economic Impact of the Corridor

1.1 Economic Impact Analysis

An economic impact analysis was undertaken to account for the capital investments, operations and maintenance expenditures, visitor spending, and business productivity effects associated with the development of a Salisbury-to-Asheville rail corridor. This analysis uses IMPLAN (Impact Analysis for Planning) to quantify the economic activity generated by the project across several dimensions. This includes short-term impacts from construction and long-term effects from ongoing rail operations, visitor spending, and improved regional connectivity. The analysis provides insights into how spending circulates through the local economy, supporting jobs, incomes, and business growth.

Direct effects represent the immediate economic activity generated by the railroad project. These include construction spending on infrastructure and facilities, jobs created by the rail operator, and ticket sales. For example, hiring contractors to build new stations and rail lines or purchasing railcars directly injects money into the construction and transportation sectors.

Indirect effects refer to the secondary economic activity created when the suppliers of goods and services to the railroad project also experience increased demand. This includes manufacturing materials like steel or concrete, producing train equipment, and providing consulting and engineering services. Local businesses that supply fuel, maintenance services, or construction equipment also benefit from the increased demand.

Induced effects capture the broader economic impacts generated when employees working on the railroad or in its supply chain spend their wages in the local economy. This spending supports jobs and income in industries like retail, restaurants, housing, and healthcare. For instance, a construction worker on the project may spend wages at a local grocery store or eat at a nearby diner, further circulating money through the regional economy.

The analysis also captures long-term economic impacts through visitor expenditures and business commuter benefits. Visitors arriving by rail contribute to the local economy through spending on lodging, dining, entertainment, and retail. Additionally, enhanced rail connectivity between Salisbury, Asheville, and the towns in between expands labor market access. This improved mobility enables businesses to tap into a broader and more diverse workforce, thereby increasing productivity and facilitating regional economic growth. Combined, these factors highlight the railroad corridor's potential to generate sustained economic benefits across western and central North Carolina.

1.1.1 Input-Output Modeling

IMPLAN is an input-output model, and like all such models, has inherent limitations. Only backward-linkages, the indirect and direct effects described previously, due to the planning, design, construction, and operation of the Salisbury-to-Asheville Rail Corridor were modeled, as well as those due to visitor spending and business spending, and investment; economic effects due to travel time savings, increased productivity, congestion reduction, or environmental benefits were outside the scope of this study. This analysis assumes the ready availability of the physical and human capital resources necessary to complete this project, without any relevant supply constraints or labor shortages. Similarly, this effort does not account for the economic effect were the project to divert capital or workers that would have been used elsewhere in the North Carolina economy if not for the project, nor does it account for the opportunity cost of the fiscal resources being used on the project's expenditures.

All economic activity associated with this project was modeled as occurring in the counties along the proposed rail corridor, and the effect was measured on the economy of the State of North Carolina as a

whole. If planning, design, or other spending were to occur elsewhere, the economic impact would differ from these estimates, and any spending that were to occur outside North Carolina may not have a meaningful economic impact in the state at all. Events were modeled using year-of-expenditure dollars using IMPLAN's 2023 dollar year and 2023 data year and reported in 2025 dollars. Any significant changes that may occur to the overall price level or to prices for specific, relevant goods and services would not be reflected in these estimates.

1.2 Capital and Operations Impacts

1.2.1 Capital Impacts

Capital impacts were projected based on conceptual capital cost estimates from the "Western North Carolina Passenger Rail Feasibility Study" (NCDOT, 2023). Capital expenditures include track and signaling improvements and the construction of new stations and a maintenance facility. Capital expenditures were measured as occurring in the counties along the Salisbury to Asheville rail corridor, and economic impacts were measured across the state.

Table 1. Total Economic Impact of Initial Capital Expenditures (2025$)

Impact	Job-Years[2]	Labor Income	Output
Direct	3,240	$220,780,000	$587,830,000
Indirect	850	$68,580,000	$239,170,000
Induced	1,190	$71,090,000	$221,280,000
Total	5,280	$360,450,000	$1,048,290,000

Source: ITRE IMPLAN Analysis, 2025.

Table 2. Total Fiscal Impacts of Initial Capital Expenditures (2025$)

Impact Category	Fiscal Impact
Local and State Tax Revenue	$33,580,000

Source: ITRE IMPLAN Analysis, 2025.

The project was modelled as using the Biltmore Village station location in Asheville and did not include the possible River Arts District station as an alternative or additional location. No rolling stock purchase was included as part of the modelling exercise.[3] No amount of capital spending was allocated toward right-of-way (ROW) acquisition due to the use of a preexisting corridor and multiple possible station locations already being under public ownership. Any spending on land or ROW acquisition would be an asset transfer—an exchange of one asset (cash) for another (land) —without creating new value, rather

[2] One job-year equals the employment of one individual for one year. If project spending were to all occur in a single year, it would be equivalent to jobs.

[3] If the rolling stock for the proposed corridor were manufactured at the future Siemens plant in Lexington, North Carolina, it would be expected to support approximately 1,060 jobs, $335 million in output, and $9.8 million in state and local tax revenue. An out-of-state purchase would support approximately 505 jobs, $113 million in output, and $6 million in state and local tax revenue.

than economic activity and would not generate an economic impact; any economic impact from acquired properties would occur from capital and maintenance spending on those properties rather than the purchase of this property itself.

1.2.2 Operations Impacts

Operations impacts were calculated based on the conceptual annual financial results of the *Western North Carolina Passenger Rail Feasibility Study Update*. Operations expenditures include costs directly due to the operation of the service, as well as track and signal maintenance. Operational and maintenance expenditures were measured as occurring in the counties along the Salisbury to Asheville rail corridor, and economic impacts were measured across the state.

Table 3. Annual Economic Impact of Operating Expenditures (2025$)

Impact	Employment	Labor Income	Output
Direct	40	$4,880,000	$17,590,000
Indirect	35	$2,730,000	$8,150,000
Induced	30	$1,820,000	$5,670,000
Total	105	$9,430,000	$31,410,000

Source: ITRE IMPLAN Analysis, 2025.

Table 4. Annual Fiscal Impacts of Operating Expenditures (2025$)

Impact Category	Fiscal Impact
Local and State Tax Revenue	$240,000

Source: ITRE IMPLAN Analysis, 2025.

1.3 Visitor and Business Impacts

1.3.1 Visitor-Related Economic Impacts

Restoring passenger rail service to Asheville would generate significant economic impacts for North Carolina by increasing visitor expenditures across the state. As one of the nation's leading tourism destinations, Asheville attracts millions of visitors each year for its vibrant arts scene, outdoor recreation, culinary offerings, and scenic beauty. A passenger rail connection linking Asheville to the rest of North Carolina—and beyond—offers a convenient and appealing travel option for visitors who prefer alternatives to driving, especially from urban areas such as Charlotte, the Piedmont Triad, and the Research Triangle. This connection would not only make Asheville more accessible but also encourage new and repeat travel to the region.

In addition to benefiting Asheville, the new rail corridor would strengthen the economies of the communities along the route, containing train stations. Train access in these communities has the potential to boost local tourism by attracting day-trippers and overnight visitors who might not otherwise have traveled to these areas. These trips can lead to increased spending in local restaurants, retail shops, hotels, cultural sites, and outdoor recreation businesses, stimulating small business growth and job creation in these communities.

While Asheville would serve as the western terminus of the proposed Salisbury-to-Asheville passenger rail corridor, the benefits of such a connection extend well beyond the city itself. A rail line into Asheville creates a critical gateway to the wider Western North Carolina region, where many visitors are drawn to destinations such as Cherokee, Bryson City, and the Great Smoky Mountains. Once travelers arrive in Asheville by rail, they are likely to continue their journeys using other modes of transportation, rental cars, shuttles, tour services, or regional transit, bringing economic and cultural benefits to communities further west and south. In this way, the Salisbury-to-Asheville corridor is not just about linking one city to the national passenger rail system. Instead, it serves as a regional access point that enhances mobility across a much broader geography, amplifying its value for the entire region rather than just the endpoint of the line.

Economic expenditures tied to rail-enabled travel would include meals, lodging, transportation services, entertainment, and shopping—ranging from quick visits to local markets to multi-day stays that support hotels and tour operators. As passengers become more familiar with the service and as frequency and convenience improve over time, these economic impacts are likely to grow. Enhanced service levels will encourage higher ridership and create a virtuous cycle of demand and investment, reinforcing the role of passenger rail as a long-term economic driver for Asheville and the broader Western North Carolina region.

Methodology for Estimating Visitor Impacts. To estimate the visitor impacts associated with the proposed Salisbury to Asheville passenger rail corridor, a methodology was developed that integrates ridership projections, trip purpose profiles, and visitor spending behavior. The analysis relied on ridership calculations and station profiles developed for the feasibility study, which provided annual ridership estimates for the corridor based on expected travel patterns and station catchment areas. These annual ridership values were then disaggregated into specific ridership scenarios, including travel for leisure, business, visiting friends and family, commuting to work, traveling for school, or other purposes.

The composition of these trip purposes was informed by onboard survey data collected by NCDOT from passengers on existing passenger rail routes within the state. This data was used to estimate both the purpose of travel and the average duration of stay associated with each travel type. These observed onboard survey characteristics were then extrapolated to reflect the expected behavior of future riders on the Salisbury to Asheville corridor, allowing for a detailed understanding of how travelers would engage with communities along the route.

To estimate visitor spending, the analysis incorporated Visit NC's visitor profile data, which provides average expenditure amounts for both day trips and overnight stays in North Carolina. Using this data, average nightly expenditure profiles were applied to the trip duration estimates derived from the NCDOT onboard survey results. This approach enabled the modeling of visitor-related economic impacts that reflect realistic travel behavior and spending patterns. By combining projected ridership with purpose-specific travel characteristics and established tourism spending data, the methodology provides a grounded and data-focused estimate of how passenger rail service could generate visitor spending and support local economies across Western North Carolina.

Economic Impact of Visitors of the Salisbury-to-Asheville Corridor. The annual economic and fiscal impacts of the Salisbury-to-Asheville rail corridor would be notable, supporting approximately 165 jobs and generating $7.3 million in employee earnings. In total, the corridor would contribute $21.8 million in economic output and $1.3 million in local and state tax revenue each year. See Table 5 and

Table ***6*** for the breakout of direct, indirect, and induced effects.

Table 5. Annual Economic Impacts of Rail-Facilitated Visitor Spending (2025$)

Impact	Employment	Labor Income	Output
Direct	115	$4,100,000	$12,220,000
Indirect	25	$1,760,000	$5,170,000
Induced	25	$1,420,000	$4,440,000
Total	165	$7,280,000	$21,830,000

Source: ITRE IMPLAN Analysis, 2025.

Table 6. Annual Fiscal Impacts of Rail-Facilitated Visitor Spending (2025$)

Impact Category	Fiscal Impact
Local and State Tax Revenue	$1,280,000

Source: ITRE IMPLAN Analysis, 2025.

1.3.2 Business-Related Economic Impacts

Passenger rail service to Asheville offers meaningful benefits to North Carolina's business community by improving regional connectivity and expanding access to talent and markets. A rail connection that links Asheville to cities across the state provides a practical and attractive travel option for local commuters and for businesses with employees who live and work in different parts of North Carolina. This connectivity enhances operational flexibility for firms and supports business development across multiple sectors, from technology and healthcare to tourism and professional services.

Train access to Asheville and to the communities west of Salisbury is also an asset for recruiting and retaining talent. By increasing the accessibility of Western North Carolina, the rail corridor broadens the effective labor catchment area for businesses located near train stations. This means employers in these regions can more easily draw from a larger, more diverse labor pool, improving workforce stability and competitiveness in both rural and urban markets.

In addition, passenger rail offers a cost-effective and reliable alternative to driving, helping business travelers and employees save money on fuel, vehicle maintenance, and parking. This not only benefits individual workers but also creates broader economic gains by reducing traffic congestion and wear on highways, which in turn supports other North Carolina businesses that rely on efficient transportation networks. As service expands and ridership grows, the corridor will help strengthen the state's economy by making it easier for businesses to connect with people, places, and opportunities across North Carolina.

Methodology for Estimating Business Impacts. To estimate the business impacts of the proposed Salisbury to Asheville passenger rail corridor, a data-focused methodology was developed that incorporates ridership projections, commuter profiles, and regional economic data. The analysis began with annual ridership calculations and station profiles developed and used in the feasibility study. The business impacts analysis focuses specifically on the share of riders forecasted to commute to work.

Improved passenger rail service can significantly influence the availability and quality of the regional labor pool. Using data from IMPLAN and Data Axle, researchers calculated the average annual revenue generated per worker across relevant sectors along the corridor. The underlying assumption is that rail

access expands the geographic area from which businesses can attract employees, enabling firms to recruit individuals with skillsets better aligned with their specific operational needs.

To quantify the impact of this expanded labor market access on business productivity, a conservative estimate of a 1.5% productivity gain was applied. This assumption is grounded in transportation and economic development literature, which shows that productivity increases from improved labor access via rail typically range from 0.5% to 7%. On the lower end, gains are seen among firms in industries that are less reliant on labor mobility or already have strong workforce access. On the higher end, labor-intensive industries or businesses in previously underserved regions often see transformative impacts from rail access, as it opens up new workforce opportunities, reduces recruitment costs, and supports business expansion.

By applying these assumptions, the analysis was able to estimate the potential uplift in business output along the corridor attributable to improved worker access made possible by passenger rail. These productivity gains represent a long-term economic benefit that not only supports the success of individual firms but also strengthens regional economies through enhanced labor-market efficiency and competitiveness.

Economic Impact of Business Commuters of the Salisbury-to-Asheville Corridor. The annual economic and fiscal impacts resulting from expanded market access to North Carolina's labor pool would be substantial, supporting 35 jobs and generating $3.2 million in employee earnings. This increased connectivity would contribute $6.6 million in economic output and $270,000 in local and state tax revenue each year. See Table 7 and Table 8 for the breakout of direct, indirect, and induced effects.

Table 7. Annual Economic Impacts of Expanded Market Access (2025$)

Impact	Employment	Labor Income	Output
Direct	20	$2,150,000	$3,410,000
Indirect	5	$430,000	$1,160,000
Induced	10	$640,000	$2,000,000
Total	35	$3,220,000	$6,570,000

Source: ITRE IMPLAN Analysis, 2025.

Table 8. Annual Fiscal Impacts of Expanded Market Access (2025$)

Impact Category	Fiscal Impact
Local and State Tax Revenue	$270,000

Source: ITRE IMPLAN Analysis, 2025.

1.4 Summary of Recurring Economic Impacts

The Salisbury-to-Asheville rail corridor is projected to have a meaningful and lasting impact on North Carolina's economy. This impact stems from several key sources, including ongoing operations and maintenance of the rail service, increased visitor spending, and expanded access to the state's labor pool. Together, these elements generate substantial economic activity across multiple sectors and regions.

The total estimated economic impacts, such as job creation, employee earnings, and overall economic output, are detailed in Table 9, while the corresponding fiscal impacts, including state and local tax revenue, are presented in Table 10. These figures underscore the broad and sustained value of reestablishing passenger rail service along this important corridor, not only as a transportation investment but as a catalyst for statewide economic growth. For a breakout of total annual impacts by category, see Table 11.

Table 9. Annual Economic Impacts Generated by a Salisbury-to-Asheville Rail Corridor

Impact	Employment	Labor Income	Output
Direct	175	$11,130,000	$33,220,000
Indirect	65	$4,920,000	$14,480,000
Induced	65	$3,880,000	$12,110,000
Total	305	$19,930,000	$59,810,000

Source: ITRE IMPLAN Analysis, 2025.

Table 10. Annual Fiscal Impacts Generated by a Salisbury-to-Asheville Rail Corridor

Impact Category	Fiscal Impact
Local and State Tax Revenue	$1,790,000

Source: ITRE IMPLAN Analysis, 2025.

Table 11. Total Annual Impacts by Category Generated by a Salisbury-to-Asheville Rail Corridor

Impact	Employment	Labor Income	Output	Tax Revenue
Operating Expenditures	105	$9,430,000	$31,410,000	$240,000
Rail-Facilitated Visitor Spending	165	$7,280,000	$21,830,000	$1,280,000
Expanded Market Access	35	$3,220,000	$6,570,000	$270,000
Total	305	$19,930,000	$59,810,000	$1,790,000

Source: ITRE IMPLAN Analysis, 2025.

Conclusions

Reestablishing passenger rail service from Salisbury to Asheville offers a powerful opportunity to reshape the economic and transportation landscape of western North Carolina. The corridor would create a vital connection between the Charlotte metropolitan area, the Piedmont Triad, the Research Triangle, and the Blue Ridge region, enhancing mobility for residents, workers, and visitors across the state. As a sustainable and convenient alternative to driving, passenger rail can ease pressure on congested highways like I-40, reduce emissions, and improve safety while offering travelers a more comfortable and efficient experience.

Communities along the route, from Asheville to Morganton to Statesville, stand to benefit substantially from renewed access to passenger rail. Increased tourism, expanded foot traffic, and greater visibility will boost local economies, particularly in towns that blend historic character with cultural and recreational attractions. In Asheville, one of the state's top destinations, improved rail access could support further tourism growth while connecting the city to untapped visitor markets across central and eastern North Carolina.

The economic benefits of the corridor would extend well beyond tourism. Rail infrastructure investment would generate jobs in construction and long-term operations, while expanded market access would help connect employers with a broader labor pool. This improved connectivity would support workforce mobility in key employment centers like Hickory and Asheville and ease regional labor shortages. Ultimately, investing in the Salisbury-to-Asheville rail corridor is an investment in North Carolina's future—one that advances sustainable growth, strengthens regional economies, and improves quality of life for communities across the state.

In summary, the proposed corridor would result in both a one-time stimulus from construction spending and annual recurring benefits resulting from ongoing passenger rail operations, increased tourism, and improved market access for business. These impacts are substantial and would positively impact North Carolina's economy in the following ways –

Stimulus impacts (in 2025$) *(one-time impacts, spread over the duration of the project)*

- 5,280 job-years
- $360.5 million in employee earnings
- $1.05 billion in economic output
- $33.6 million local and state tax revenue

Annual Recurring Impacts (in 2025$)

- 305 jobs
- $19.9 million in employee earnings
- $59.8 million in economic output
- $1.8 million in local and state tax revenue

Implementation and Technology Transfer Plan

The NCDOT Rail Division can use the developed research products (economic impact estimate, report, and presentations) to inform decisions relating to reestablishing passenger rail service between Salisbury and Asheville. This includes impactful presentations, visualizations, economic and contribution values that can be used for communications about the rail line's role in the state's economy and business decisions. By connecting major population centers—including the Charlotte metro, the Piedmont Triad, the Research Triangle, and the Blue Ridge region—the corridor would enhance mobility for residents, commuters, and visitors. Communities along the route stand to benefit from increased tourism, greater visibility, and new economic activity, particularly in towns with cultural, recreational, and historic appeal. The research team provided information that can be used by the Rail Division and other NCDOT staff to explain the impact of the rail system on the local and statewide economy. Rail Division staff can use the information in communications with elected officials, communities, and industry.

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