



HICKORY TAKES NEW PATH

With investments totaling \$90M, the Catawba County city has laid the foundation for growth following the model of civic engagement proven out by Greenville, Chattanooga and others

The remake of the Union Square area of the City Walk downtown corridor under construction is designed to maintain the historic feel while emphasizing storefront visibility, a defined center path connector across the lawn, improved lighting and outdoor seating.

CITY OF HICKORY



By **Ken Elkins** – Senior Staff Writer, Charlotte Business Journal

Hickory is spending millions of dollars to build a more connected future. It's not an investment in super high-speed internet that city officials consider the path to growth.

In fact, that path is more specifically made of ... paths — a system of urban greenways connecting, and in some cases reconnecting, destinations across the city. The Catawba County city's plans for growth also included funding for a 270-acre corporate park that could eventually be home to 2,000 jobs and other public investments in a broad modernization and revitalization effort.

The overall project has totaled more than \$90 million in investment — a combination of a bond financing, federal, state and private grants and city funding.

“At a fundamental level, we’ve got to create a community that has the quality of life that can attract the workforce that we need,” says Hickory City Manager **Warren Wood**. “That’s really where it all starts.”

The impetus came from industry and investors who were contemplating redeveloping three closed mills in Hickory, says Mayor **Hank Guess**. Two are now mixed-use retail and commercial centers; the third is now the center city home to Transportation Insight.

“We were told that they were contemplating going somewhere else,” Guess says. But all three decided to redevelop existing businesses in Hickory after the city launched its Crafting Hickory trails projects.

Now all three are successful businesses, he says.

“They encouraged development before we started turning the first bucket of dirt,” Guess says.

Wood believes the urban trails are the key to making Hickory a more attractive place to live. One pedestrian, bike and stroller trail will link Lenoir-Rhyne University to Union Square downtown.

Another would run along Old Lenoir Road and cross U.S. Highway 321 on a new walking and biking bridge that would reconnect the Hickory Airport and ballpark area to downtown. That link has been broken for years after the widening of U.S. 321 made the trip a car ride.

Yet another breaks off Old Lenoir Road and runs along Lake Hickory in the north where a prominent family is financing the redevelopment of Geitner-Rotary Park, creating a showplace on the water.

The trails initiative started with a Hickory program called Inspiring Spaces in 2010. It was modeled after programs in Greenville, South Carolina; Chattanooga, Tennessee, and other cities that worked to “reinvent themselves” after difficult economic times, Wood says. Greenville was an excellent example of what Hickory wants to do.

“So, 30 years ago I don’t think Greenville would have been a place where a lot of folks wanted to live,” Wood says. “But today that is completely changed, largely due to all the amenities they’ve put in place.”

As an outgrowth of the Hickory trail system, redevelopment, new investment and high-density residential projects would be added to the areas within a half mile of the greenways. Rick Beasley, assistant city manager, says Hickory’s plan to reconnect its attractions and neighborhoods has raised the interest of the business community.

“We have a lot of people looking all along the trails,” he says.

A Hickory Trail study showed how an initial 5.2-mile pathway could attract \$500 million in private investment and 8,000 jobs. Plus, Hickory’s population would grow by 3,500 and 1,750 housing units would be added.

That same study predicted Hickory could develop an 18-hour downtown, which would go far to attract young people, a population that five years ago was leaving the city for Charlotte, where jobs and nightlife abound.

A \$40 million bond issue to support the trail project was approved in 2014; it included \$4.5 million for the 270-acre Trivium Corporate Center, which has attracted two tenants: Corning Inc. for a 110-job optical cable plant and Isotopen Technologien Munchen AG, or ITM, with 230 jobs in a plant to make radio-pharmaceuticals for the treatment of cancer patients.

The city has also focused investment on its downtown, where the City Walk project has seen private investment over \$30 million in new entertainment, headquarters and shops along Main Avenue. The city is paying for \$27.5 million in greenways, parks, bridges, sidewalks, lighting enhancements and plazas. The construction contract for the final 18-month component of the downtown improvements was approved at the end of June with completion expected in December 2020.

Wood expects an announcement soon for City Walk from a commercial and residential project that economic development officials have been working on for a year.

The Crafting Hickory plan follows some really difficult years for the metro area. For Hickory, the problem was the Great Recession coming on the heels of the twin departure of the furniture and textile industries that were the

lifeblood of the city. Between 2000 and 2014, the metropolitan area of Hickory lost 45,000 jobs, Wood says.

“We recognized that we were going to have to do some things differently than we had been doing them,” Woods says. “We’ve seen what no growth concept looks like and it is no fun.”

But Crafting Hickory wasn’t entirely a reaction to difficult times, Woods says.

“Our population is growing, our tax base is growing, our jobs are growing,” Wood says. “We just feel like we’re in a very good place. We just need to tap into that momentum.”

Lake Hickory, the Hickory Airport, L.P. Frans Stadium, downtown along Union Square, Lenoir-Rhyne University, the Ridgeview neighborhood to the south and redeveloped mills will be linked by a series of pathways for walking, biking and running. Those pathways will carry such names as City Walk, River Walk and Book Walk.

The trails project also leveraged the largest single gift Hickory has ever received, from the Robert Lackey family of Hickory. It’s millions of dollars, but neither the city nor the family will disclose the exact amount.

The money will be used to improve access to Lake Hickory, just to the north of the central business district. Public access has been limited until now.

The Lackey donation, which was made in memory of Robert Lackey’s late wife, Deidra, will be used to renovate up to 30 acres of the Geitner-Rotary Park, which is at the northern most end of the River Walk greenway trail.

River Walk will start at an over-the-water walkway leading to a pathway to the northeast and culminating at the mid-century modern Lake House in the Lackey Project, also alongside Lake Hickory.

Moretz Mills and Hollar Mill have been renovated into lively commercial centers. Transportation Insight has moved its headquarters into the renovated Lyerly Mill.

Part of the plans will pay for solving some connectivity problems that development and road building in Catawba County and elsewhere have created. U.S. Highway 321, which links Interstates 40 and 85 on the western side of the Charlotte region, carves a canyon between downtown and the

Hickory Airport and the L.P. Frans Stadium, home of the Hickory Crawdads, the Single-A affiliate of the Texas Rangers.

A federal grant will pay for a wide pedestrian and biking bridge to reconnect downtown with the western side of the city.

“Ideally, you will be able to hop on the City Walk (trail) and end up by the River Walk or out by the airport,” Wood says. “Another piece of this goes through the Ridgeview community on the south side.”

The trails and connectivity project are just part of the improvements coming to Hickory metro. Wood says the N.C. Department of Transportation has \$650 million allocated to the region to solve highway problems.

“Hickory is going to be transformed, with the bond projects over the next four or five years,” Wood says. “And then with the N.C. DOT projects over the next 10 years.”

BY THE NUMBERS

Hickory wants to attract the following by 2035:

- **\$500M**in private investment
- **8,000**new jobs
- **1,750**new housing units
- **3,500**new people (population growth)

Source: city of Hickory