

An aerial photograph of a town, likely Asheville, North Carolina, showing a mix of brick and modern buildings, streets with cars, and green spaces. In the background, there are rolling green mountains under a blue sky with scattered white clouds. A large yellow trapezoidal shape is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing the report's title and author information.

Land of Sky Regional Council

# Regional Resiliency and Strategic Alignment Report

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Building a better  
working world

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## Disclaimer:

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# Introduction

In December 2021, the Ernst & Young LLP (EY US) Economic Development Advisory Services (EDAS) team began to assist the Land of Sky Regional Council (LOSRC) with a labor shed and target industry analysis and the development of this resiliency and strategic alignment plan report. This strategic alignment plan intends to build upon community development priorities that are shared across multiple counties in the region. As set forth by LOSRC and other project collaborators, the ultimate objective of the planning process is to identify a handful of potential high-impact initiatives that regional leaders, especially business leaders, drive forward together.

The planning process focused on the five counties that comprise the Asheville-Brevard metropolitan statistical area (MSA): Buncombe, Haywood, Henderson, Madison and Transylvania. It included a comparative review of more than 20 existing strategic plans and studies to identify themes (e.g., strengths, challenges, priorities and goals, initiatives and target industries) shared by multiple counties in the metro area. In addition, the process involved an in-depth analysis of regional data, particularly focused on workforce and industry dynamics. Regional stakeholders provided input through interviews, focus groups, and advisory committee workshops.

Combined, the research points to several regional priorities to be the focus of more unified, cross-county initiatives. Those priorities include housing expansion and diversification; transportation and infrastructure improvement; workforce development, attraction and retention; and business growth. This report shares research highlights that guided these four priorities as well as sample project ideas related to each.

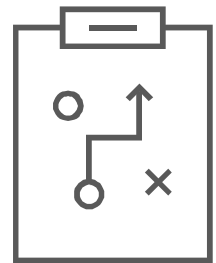
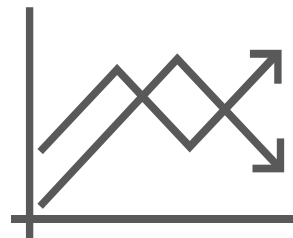
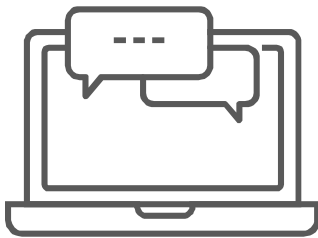
Many of the stakeholders participating in the planning process emphasized their desire for this report not to be just another plan, but one that results in measurable improvements. They acknowledged that achieving this will require private, public and nonprofit leaders from across the metro area to organize and proactively lead initiatives, staying determined from concept to fruition.

## About this report

This report summarizes the findings of a four-phased process:

1. At the beginning of the project, the consulting team reviewed 22 existing plans and studies from the five metro area counties (Buncombe, Haywood, Henderson, Madison and Transylvania). The review focused on identifying similarities among the reports such as strengths, challenges, goals, themes, target industries, project ideas and other topics.
2. Client and stakeholder engagement was another part of the process. An Advisory Committee consisting of representatives from LOSRC and area chambers of commerce met with the consulting team seven times over the course of seven months. Six additional workshops were held with other stakeholders: three with business and higher education leaders (employers) and three with economic and workforce development leaders.
3. Original research and analysis was conducted, and findings were provided to LOSRC in a Labor Shed and Target Industry Analysis report. That report includes insights on the region's workforce in terms of demographics, education attainment, migration patterns, and other variables. It also contains an evaluation of existing industry clusters and potential target industries that could be the focus of future, regional economic and community development activities.
4. With input and insights gleaned from the steps described above, this Land of Sky Regional Resiliency and Strategic Alignment plan has been developed to help clarify and refine the region's collective economic and community development priorities and potential initiatives for the next five to 10 years.

### CLIENT COLLABORATION AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT



Plan Alignment & Leadership Facilitation

Research & Analysis

Regional Strategic Plan & Report

## About this report (continued)

This report provides a summary of the findings from the stakeholder conversations, organized by themes and topics. It also includes insights from the review of existing plans and studies, as well as highlights from an analysis of the region's labor shed, target industries and possible impacts from automation. The quantitative research shows the recent performance of the region's industries and sectors and workforce trends that affect economic competitiveness.

Findings also include target industries and niche sectors for regional alignment and cooperation around business recruitment and expansion. Certain industry clusters and sectors are more mature and concentrated, while others are still nascent and have the potential for higher levels of job creation and capital investment.

Considerations for regional resiliency and strategic alignment include an overview of priorities and guiding principles, descriptions of actionable goals, and existing and new initiatives related to each goal. Suggested implementation steps to move the initiatives forward are also provided.

Finally, national leading practices that can inform and inspire collaborative efforts are included. The report concludes with a sample implementation template that LOSRC and its regional partners may refer to when organizing efforts.





# Summary of stakeholder engagement and document review

## Stakeholder views on the region's strengths, challenges and opportunities

Conversations with Advisory Committee members, business leaders, and economic and workforce development leaders revealed significant insights. The following themes and takeaways emerged through the project's stakeholder engagement sessions and were largely reinforced through the review of existing strategic plans, studies and reports. Common regional strengths and assets, challenges and vulnerabilities, and potential opportunities cited by stakeholders included:

### Strengths

- ▶ The region is a desirable place for people to live and will continue to attract talent.
- ▶ There is strong and collaborative public and private sector leadership.
- ▶ Residents are highly engaged in civic matters.
- ▶ Quality-of-life amenities abound.

### Challenges

- ▶ Housing availability at all incomes and life stages is limited.
- ▶ Regional workforce development efforts lack coordination, leading to workforce shortages and skill misalignment.
- ▶ Poor mobility infrastructure (public transit, roads and bridges) impacts access to jobs and training.
- ▶ There is a NIMBY ("not in my backyard" mindset) when it comes to certain housing, transportation and other community building projects.

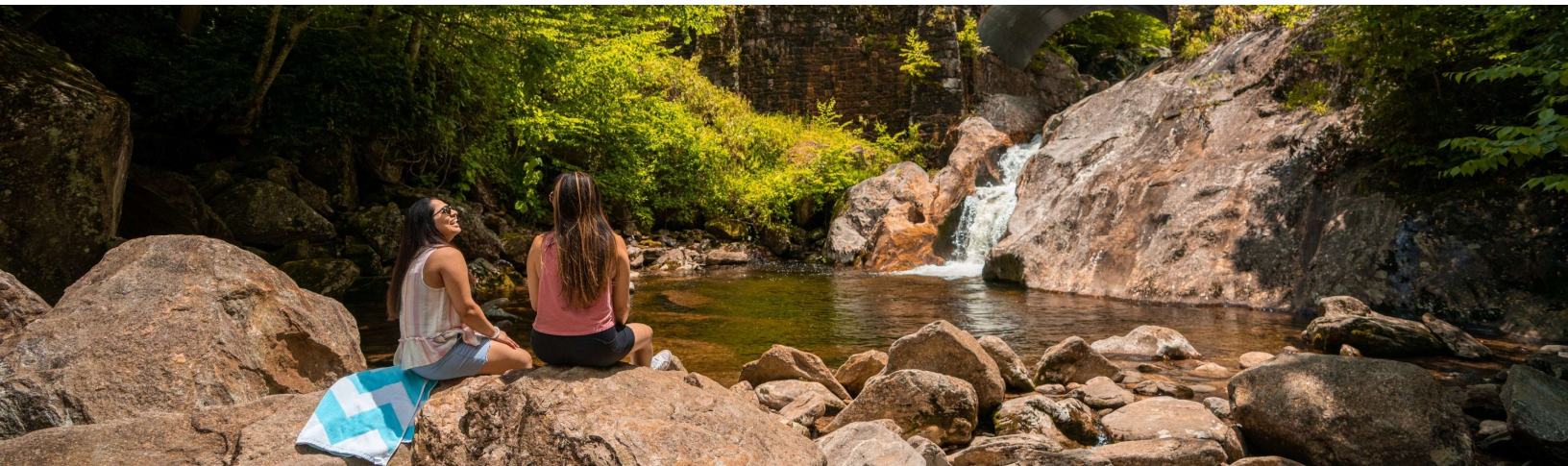
## Opportunities

- ▶ Expand housing supply and variety.
- ▶ Preserve and enhance outdoor assets through thoughtful planning and development.
- ▶ Foster connectivity through access to training and workforce development as well as transportation and mobility.
- ▶ Enhance community engagement in economic development.

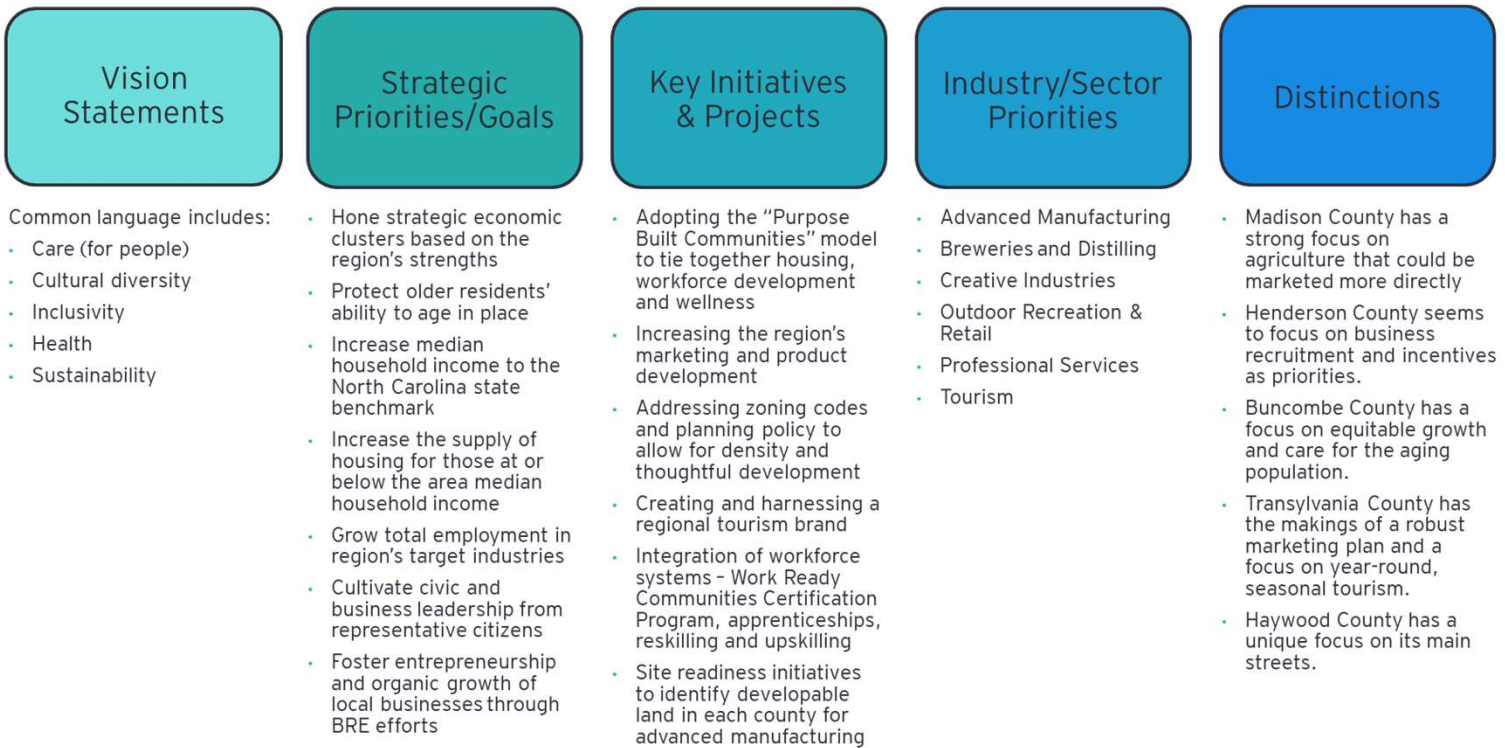
## Review of regional plans and studies

The LOSRC provided 22 existing plans and reports for review, representing each county in the five-county metro area and covering a variety of economic and community development topics. The types of plans and studies included:

	Buncombe	Haywood	Henderson	Madison	Transylvania	Regional
Comprehensive (CEDs)						X
Aging						X
Hazard Mitigation	X		X	X	X	
Housing						X
Local ED Plans	X		X	X	X	X
Tourism		X			X	
Transportation/Transit	X					X
Workforce						X



The review focused on similarities among the studies and plans. In many cases, those studies and plans reflect important insights on a particular county or issue, and it is helpful to establish this regional resiliency and alignment plan on a foundation of good work that has already been conducted. By documenting shared visions, strategic priorities, project ideas, target industries, and distinctions across each county, the strategic framework for the region began to form. Examples of those shared themes are summarized below:





The document review, coupled with additional stakeholder conversations, brought several topics of regional importance to the surface: place-based growth, economic mobility and workforce development, housing availability, transportation and infrastructure, and regional marketing and branding. While these topics were refined through further conversations and research, they were the starting point of a regional strategic framework.

## Topics of regional importance and concern

				
Place-based growth	Economic mobility and workforce development	Housing availability	Transportation and infrastructure	Regional marketing and branding

### Place-based growth

A distinctive quality of the region is a consistent interest throughout the region in maintaining quality of place, stewarding the environment and natural amenities, and caring for fellow residents. There is a general concern for balancing economic growth with the preservation of what has attracted people to the region, such as being an alternative to more congested metro areas, having safe and cost-effective living options, and keeping its scenic, outdoors appeal.

Place-based growth also factors in the value of existing businesses (from small to midsize and large) and the importance of supporting local entrepreneurs and business owners. It takes into consideration the supply of commercial sites and infrastructure needed to support businesses, and the kind of talent that employers need to compete and thrive.



## Economic mobility and workforce development

Issues around economic mobility for residents and workers were a recurring theme that came across through stakeholder discussions. Similar to other growing regions, the Asheville-Brevard MSA seemed to be experiencing degrees of economic growth in tandem with increasing economic inequity. There was a clear desire to see more residents, especially young people, connected to career pathways in dominant industries that provide economic mobility and opportunity.

There was consensus around the notion that economic mobility is intertwined with access to transportation and housing availability. Business leaders have experienced attrition due to their employees being priced out of housing options near their places of work and the lack of reliable transportation options in residential areas located farther from job centers. Economic and workforce development leaders also face challenges because talent shortages and transportation disconnects can make it more difficult to attract businesses and serve residents in need of education and training.

## Housing availability

Housing availability, or the lack thereof, was one of the most commonly discussed topics among stakeholders. While there is a need for more affordable multifamily homes, all types of housing are needed, including rental units, single-family starter homes, and senior living housing and other options. Business leaders in particular recognize the need for density and multifamily housing but are cognizant of the land use concerns associated with building large structures in certain parts of the region. A NIMBY (“not in my backyard”) mindset among many residents was cited as a barrier to new housing development, as well as infrastructure expansion. Some longtime residents are resistant to increasing the housing supply, especially affordable housing, which has implications for fostering more economic mobility and shared prosperity.





## **Transportation and infrastructure**

The region's population and business growth has put stress on existing transportation and other infrastructure. Stakeholders' primary transportation concerns were related to deteriorating roads, highways and bridges. Other critical infrastructure in need of improvement that stakeholders discussed were related to water and sewer capacity and broadband internet connectivity. Expanding commercial space for different types of businesses was also referenced, especially coworking space for the region's entrepreneurs and micro-businesses.

The overall theme among business leaders and practitioners is a desire for proactive planning and development for transportation and infrastructure holistically, and in tandem with regional economic development and land use priorities. Barriers to improved infrastructure include a lack of adequate and equitable funding. Transportation and infrastructure improvements are needed in all areas of the region, but stakeholders in more rural counties expressed that their communities have some of the most severe challenges.

## **Regional marketing and branding**

The quality of life and geographic appeal of the metro area make it a natural choice for residents and tourists who know about the area because they live in a neighboring region or state, have family or friends there, and/or have heard about it through word-of-mouth. However, based on input from stakeholders, there seems to be an opportunity for more coordination around marketing the region to potential businesses and people who could join the region's workforce.

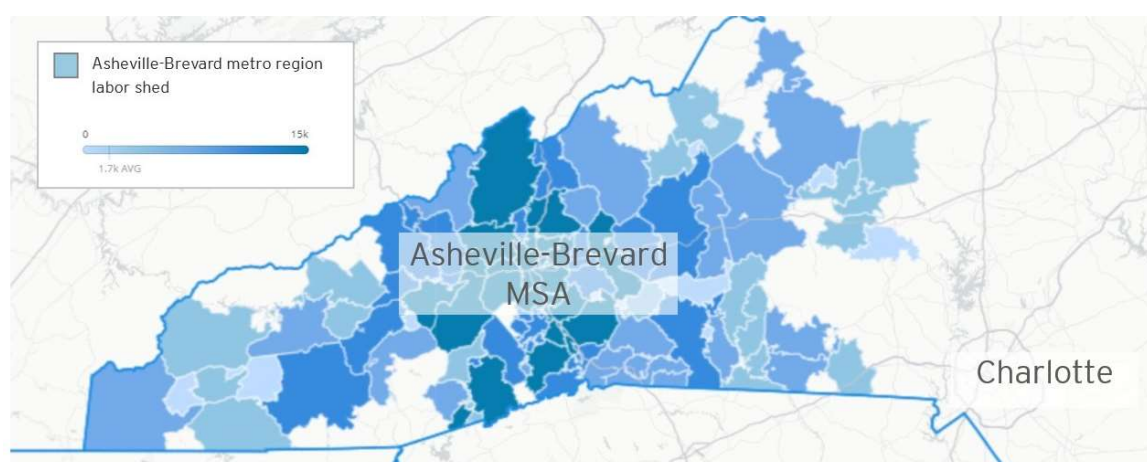
Economic development leaders in particular identified a few potential areas for enhanced collaboration, including the promotion of industry clusters and related career opportunities to out-of-market talent; marketing existing resources to small businesses and entrepreneurs in the region; and presenting a shared regional identity through marketing and messaging.

# Summary of research and analysis

## Regional labor shed analysis

Workforce availability is a top determinant of where businesses locate, start up and expand. With more than 76% of the region's jobs being filled by residents, labor demand is largely satisfied by those who live and work in the region. However, there are many resident workers who commute across county lines within the metro area to work in a county that is not their jurisdiction of residence. Intra-regional talent flow is a workforce benefit for the region because it expands the region's labor draw.

However, the region relies on its broader labor shed when it comes to filling jobs and meeting growing employer demand. As of 2019, 24% of workers in the region commute into the metro area for work from a county outside of the region. The counties that provide the highest levels of commuters tend to have rather seamless access to major transportation corridors, such as Interstate 26 and Interstate 40. Overall, the inflow and outflow of workers in the region can be deemed positive. The region has a growing population and sizable labor draw.



A region's ability to attract and retain talent is closely linked to its competitiveness for business recruitment, expansion and entrepreneurship. A workforce that has diversity in terms of age distribution, education and skills, gender, race and ethnicity, and other differentiators can be an important factor for sustained economic growth. Currently, the resident worker population within the region can be characterized as being older and above state and national percentages in terms of bachelor's degree attainment. This analysis indicates that younger workers who tend to work in lower-wage roles are more likely to migrate into the metro area for employment. On the other hand, the region is a net exporter of workers age 30 and above, among which the largest group is age 55 and older.

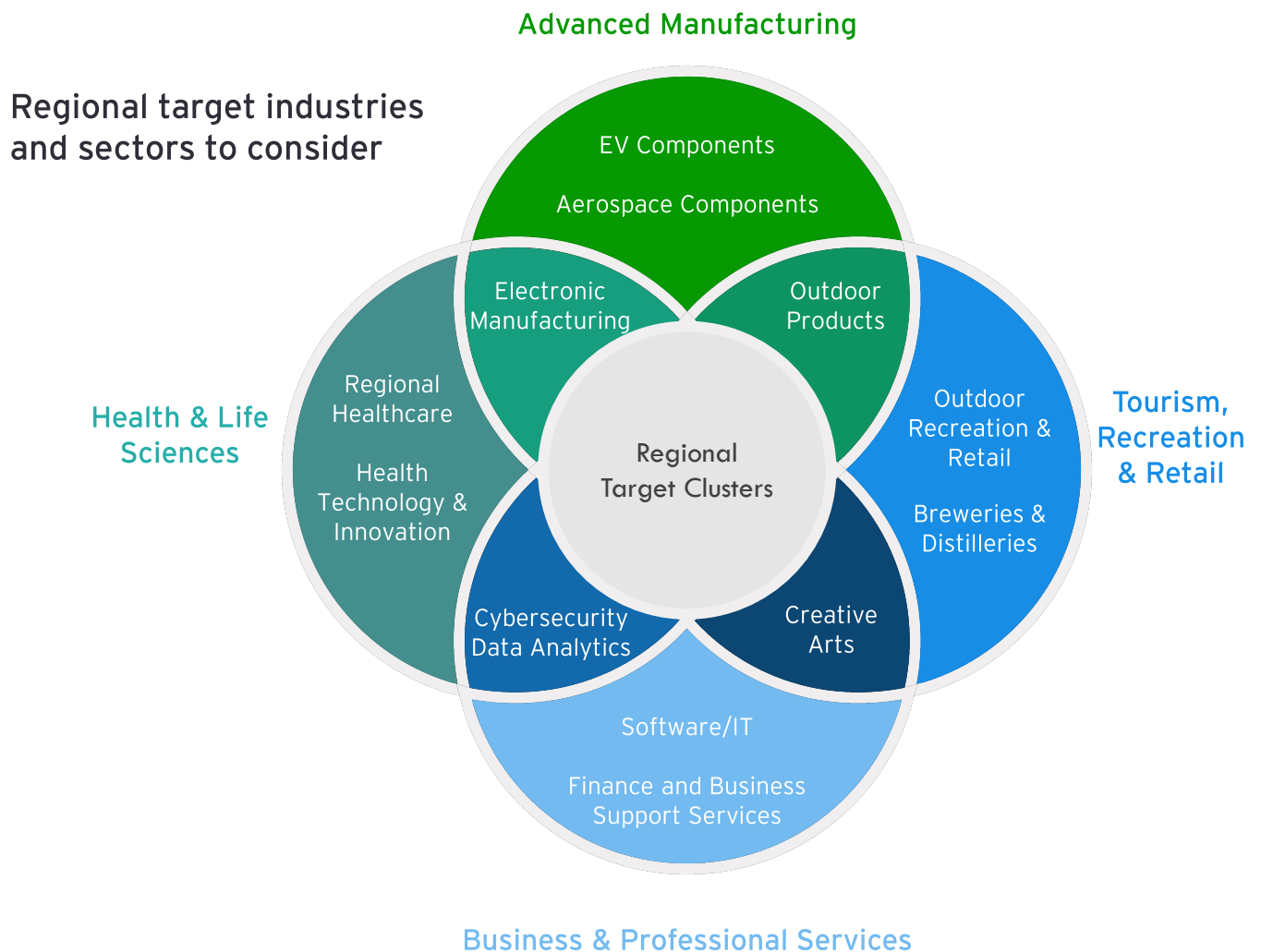
The dynamism of the region's labor shed and workforce, along with assets such as a nationally connected airport, numerous institutions of higher learning, natural beauty and a desirable quality of life have contributed to the region's resilience in the face of recent economic, technological, demographic changes and viral disruptions.



## Target industry analysis

The region experienced employment growth above the US average, with Henderson, Buncombe and Transylvania counties leading the way. In the five years leading up to 2020, virtually every industry cluster in the region experienced employment gains. Economically, the strong employment growth experienced by the region reflects several notable trends. Perhaps most importantly, prior to the pandemic, employment growth in the region was distributed across a variety of industries and sectors.

The target industry assessment revealed four clusters for the region that could galvanize collective business recruitment, entrepreneurship and expansion efforts in the region. The target clusters for consideration include Advanced Manufacturing; Tourism, Recreation & Retail; Health & Life Sciences; and Business & Professional Services. As shown in the accompanying graphic, each target contains several niche industries and sectors.



While each cluster has its own unique attributes, the clusters also share traits. Recent employment gains in all four target clusters have not only outperformed the region as a whole but have outpaced national growth. Despite the pandemic and its lingering economic impact, all recommended target clusters are also projected to generate continued employment gains in the region. In addition to strong employment performance, the target clusters also create high-wage opportunities for local workers. Growth in areas such as Outdoor Products, Component Manufacturing and Business Support Services can create new career paths for homegrown talent that might otherwise commute out of the region for employment.

### **Automation impact assessment**

Automation is an ongoing trend that communities and industries will increasingly need to address. Understanding existing and potential industry impacts can help inform economic and workforce development strategies and initiatives in the region.

An estimated 59% of all jobs (FTE) in the metro area are subject to automation, which is the application of technologies that can perform routine tasks currently or traditionally performed by humans. Occupations with higher levels of automation include Hospitality, Manufacturing, and Agriculture. Industries least susceptible to automation include Medical & Health Care and Business & Professional Services. These industries require significant customer interaction, as well as specialized expertise.

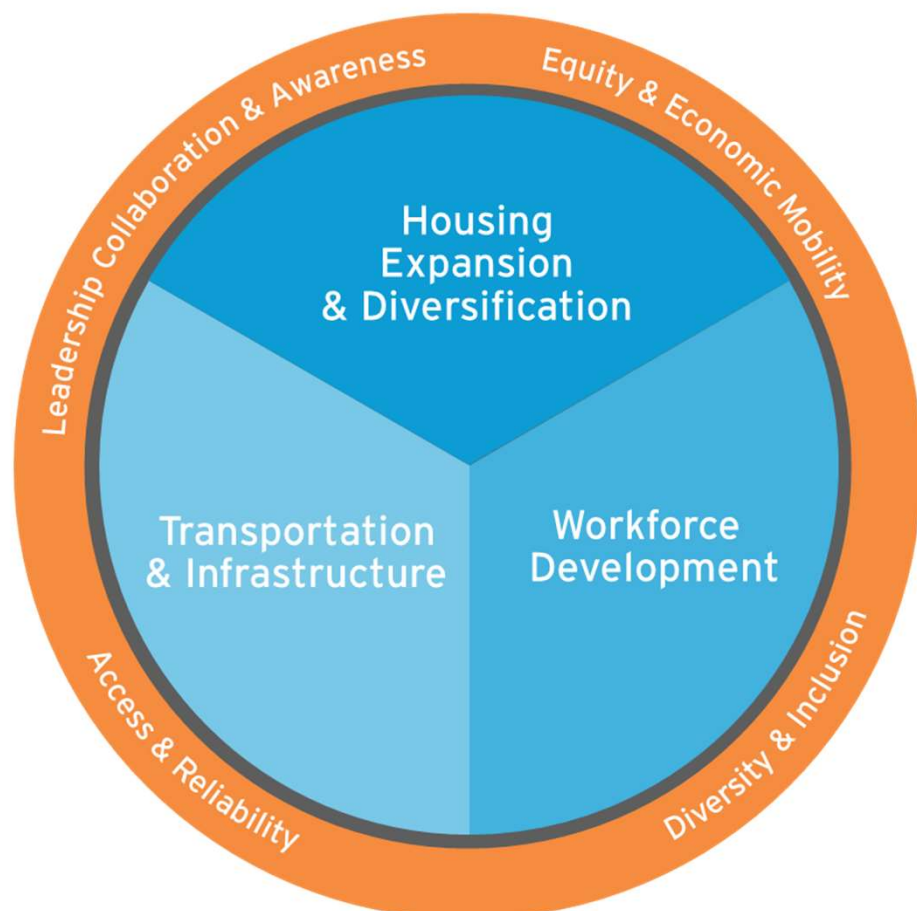
As technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning continue to evolve, higher-skilled roles may be impacted as well. Lower-skilled jobs with repetitive functions are at the highest risk of automation. Within the region, the jobs most likely to be automated are those that do not require a formal post-secondary education and/or only require a high school diploma or equivalent credential.

While the rise of automation will help maintain US economic competitiveness, it will also spark significant disruptions for industry and talent. Awareness of the jobs that may be impacted, as well as the new career paths that could result from technological advancements, are important considerations for current and future workforce development efforts.

# Considerations for regional resiliency and strategic alignment

## Strategic framework: Priorities and guiding principles

The strategic framework synthesizes insights from the review of regional plans and studies, stakeholder engagement, and research and analysis gathered through the strategic planning process with an exploration of relevant, national leading practices. Key priorities and guiding principles have been identified to foster greater alignment and impact around economic growth throughout the region.





## Priorities and goals

During the planning process, stakeholders deemed the following strategic priorities as urgent. They view them both as challenges and vulnerabilities to resolve as well as tremendous opportunities to increase economic competitiveness and community revitalization. Actionable goals and implementation considerations for each of the priorities have been listed below to clarify the areas of focus within the priorities and the outcomes to be achieved.

### Housing Expansion and Diversification

- ▶ **Goal:** The region has ample quality housing options for residents at every income level.

### Transportation and Infrastructure Improvement

- ▶ **Goal:** The region efficiently connects people to jobs and provides the infrastructure businesses need to grow.

### Workforce Development

- ▶ **Goal:** The region has a skilled, diverse workforce that meets employer needs and contributes to vibrant communities.



## Guiding principles

The guiding principles can be considered community values that emerged during the planning process. These principles can inform the implementation of the strategic plan and the collaborative work of the partners involved. LOSRC research on "[Racial Disparity in the Land of Sky Region](#)" can provide insight on key areas of focus when applying the principles to the strategic priorities and goals.

### Leadership Collaboration and Awareness

- ▶ Providing research, project ideas, and collaboration opportunities to private, public and nonprofit leaders in the region to raise awareness and compel action.

### Access and Reliability

- ▶ Maintaining the importance of connectivity and dependability in terms of the assets and resources needed for a desirable quality of life and healthy business environment.

### Diversity and Inclusion

- ▶ Valuing the full spectrum of identities, backgrounds and differences of people and businesses and cultivating a welcoming community for all.

### Equity and Economic Mobility\*

- ▶ Willingness to identify and address systemic barriers to upward mobility so that historically underserved residents and businesses can participate in, and benefit from, the economic growth of the region.



## Creating a Regional Business Council

As noted in the guiding principles, stakeholders emphasized that collaboration between, and involvement of, private sector, government and nonprofit leaders is essential for the advancement of the priorities identified in this report. Based on input from stakeholders, the participation of business leaders needs greater focus. Whereas Land of Sky Regional Council's leadership primarily consists of public sector leaders from the metro area's cities and counties, a private sector group that is also representative of the region could expedite progress on critical economic and community challenges.

A **Regional Business Council**<sup>\*</sup>, led by area chambers of commerce and consisting of voluntary executive leaders from major employers, small businesses and entrepreneurial companies, can work collaboratively to advance the priorities and initiatives that are put forth for consideration. Housing Expansion and Diversification, along with Transportation and Infrastructure Improvement, could be primary workstreams for the group, while also giving increasing attention to Workforce Development over time.

### Implementation considerations:

- ▶ The region's chambers of commerce would serve as organizing entities, with support from LOSRC as needed. Each chamber could identify three to four executive leaders from their county to serve on the Council.
- ▶ Determine the co-chairs who will serve as the primary leaders and spokespersons for the Council (e.g., co-chairs could be representative of two of the region's target industries).
- ▶ Council members could delegate some of their participation responsibilities to direct reports interested in leadership development and regional civic engagement.
- ▶ The priorities and goals can be leveraged to focus the Council's meetings and activities, and the guiding principles can serve as reference points for deliberations around process, programs and policies.
- ▶ Consideration could be given to forming a committee for one or more of the priority areas if needed.
- ▶ Elected officials and other public sector leaders (including representatives from LOSRC's Board of Delegates), as well as education and nonprofit leaders, could be invited to join meetings as needed to provide updates and information, and to exchange ideas on how private and public sector leaders can collaborate to address and advance regional challenges and opportunities.
- ▶ Meetings could be monthly in the first year to create momentum and transition to quarterly in the second or third year.
- ▶ The Regional Business Council could convene a symposium on all three priority topics (housing, transportation and infrastructure, and workforce) or host separate events addressing each topic. Either option could be useful for engaging and educating the business community on the significance of these issues and how they can get involved to advance solutions that their companies and employees would benefit from.

*\*The Council is highlighted in blue throughout the report to emphasize the vital role it can play in moving the strategic priorities and goals forward.*

## Drivers and disruptors\*



### Cost of living

- Slowing growth in housing supply has led to increased asset prices for those already owning homes and high prices for those looking to purchase or rent.



### The rise of remote work

- For the last 20 years, the number of Americans moving each year has fallen. If workers can live anywhere, this trend may finally reverse. Workers will likely choose to live where amenities and culture abound.

*\*Drivers and disruptors are macro factors that are impacting local economies and communities.*

# Goals and potential initiatives

## Housing Expansion and Diversification

**Goal 1:** The region has ample quality housing options for residents at every income level.

Among the four strategic priorities, the need to expand and diversify housing stock was perceived by stakeholders to be among the most urgent needs in the region. It was also a consistent theme in the regional plans and studies reviewed. Lack of housing availability is considered to be a significant barrier to talent attraction and retention efforts, as well as business recruitment, expansion and job creation. While there are a select number of existing initiatives seeking to address this issue at the local (city and county level), a more regional approach could accelerate housing development for residents across income levels.

### Initiatives and activities to consider

**1.1** Champion an integrated approach to housing and infrastructure development.

Together, Housing Expansion and Diversification and Transportation and Infrastructure Improvement are critical priorities for the region. Stakeholders also viewed these needs as interdependent, but in practice they tend to be siloed when it comes to planning, funding and development. A more integrated approach could help create more sustainable and successful outcomes. The [Regional Business Council](#), chambers of commerce and LOSRC are poised to help bridge these efforts and accelerate momentum and impact on both fronts.



# Housing Expansion and Diversification

## Implementation considerations

- ▶ The **Regional Business Council**, in concert with area chambers, can serve as a catalyst for exploring intersections between housing and transportation planning, and encouraging more collaboration around, and between, these priorities.
- ▶ If forming committees for the Council, consider a single committee for housing, transportation and infrastructure.
- ▶ When the Council is discussing housing- and infrastructure-related issues, it could be helpful to have those with essential subject-matter knowledge involved, including those from government and nonprofit housing agencies, real estate developers, and construction companies, civil engineering firms, and others.
- ▶ LOSRC may consider a realignment around its economic and community development offerings. On its website, housing is included under “Planning” and “Infrastructure and Community Development,” and “Transportation” is in its own category. Reframing housing, transportation and infrastructure as an integrated planning effort could help with better coordination across these facets of economic and community development.
- ▶ Continue to collaborate with local organizations around research and analysis to provide up-to-date information to the Council and other key stakeholders.
- ▶ Consider publishing an annual state of the region report that would include a research summary, as well as updates on progress made, in housing and infrastructure, as well as other priority areas.
- ▶ Explore opportunities to educate the broader community on the importance of housing and infrastructure investments and keep a pulse on shifts in public opinion (i.e., NIMBYism) through periodic polls, focus groups and other stakeholder engagement methods.

### 1.2 Enhance collaboration with the Dogwood Health Trust housing initiative and other programs.

According to its website, Dogwood Health Trust is committed to expanding affordable home rental and ownership for residents throughout Western North Carolina, which includes the Asheville-Brevard metro. Enhanced collaboration with Dogwood and other local organizations can accelerate the development of housing for more residents in the region.



## Housing Expansion and Diversification

### Implementation considerations

- ▶ LOSRC could continue its collaboration with Dogwood to conduct research and analysis on housing needs in the region and western North Carolina.
- ▶ LOSRC, chambers, the [Regional Business Council](#), and others could coordinate with Dogwood on funding opportunities, including collaboration on grant writing, to drive investment for housing in Asheville-Brevard metro area counties.
- ▶ Dogwood could have representation on the Council to help align housing development activities and related programs and events.
- ▶ The Dogwood Council member could provide regular updates and share opportunities for coordination.
- ▶ Seek opportunities to support and coordination with other organizations as appropriate.



## Housing Expansion and Diversification

### Example metrics for success

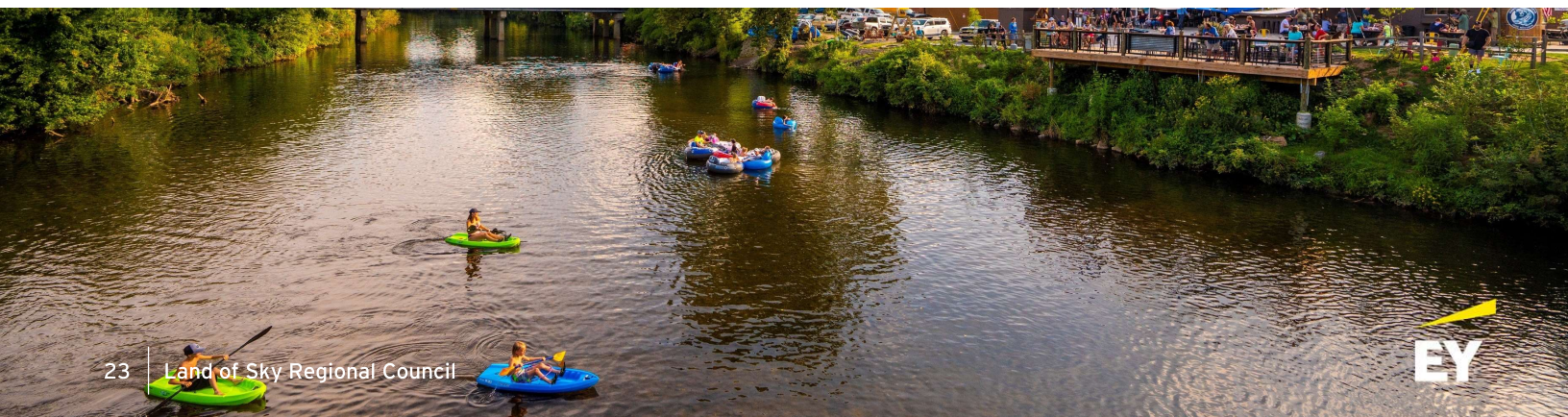
- Increase in inventory of market-rate and affordable housing units
- Percentage of new housing (single family and rental) units
- Percentage of rehabilitated housing units
- Increase in housing by county

**1.3** Explore forming a regional housing trust fund to strengthen investment in, and coordination of, housing development and rehabilitation.

LOSRC plays a key role in the promotion of affordable housing production and preservation by serving as an educational resource and liaison for public sector partners, private developers and residents. The organization is positioned to explore an expansion of operations that could include development of a regional housing trust fund to garner financial resources to support new construction, acquisitions and restorations, home rehabilitations, and other housing activities. The establishment of a trust fund, along with an expansion of LOSRC's existing services, can have a positive impact on housing availability in the region.

### Implementation considerations

- ▶ LOSRC could work with the [Regional Business Council](#) and chambers on reviewing existing models for housing trust funds, including speaking with individuals who staff those programs (See examples of housing trust funds under "Leading practices").
- ▶ Identify current and potential funding sources, including public (federal, state, local), private and philanthropic.
- ▶ Based on findings and input from the Council, determine if a housing trust or other vehicle would be most conducive for generating enhanced funding for housing development and repair.
- ▶ Explore opportunities to broaden LOSRC's support of regional housing to include options for residents of varying income levels in alignment with the need for diversified housing, not just affordable housing.
- ▶ Create a formal process for addressing recommendations from the recently completed housing needs assessment.
- ▶ Help expand local support for housing expansion by educating business leaders on the importance of diversified housing for economic growth and inviting their involvement.
- ▶ Support ribbon-cutting ceremonies for new projects and coordinate communications efforts to share successes throughout the region, state and beyond.
- ▶ Explore the NC Department of Commerce's HOME Funds allocation and how it might be used to develop multifamily housing.



## Transportation and Infrastructure Improvement

**Goal 2:** The region efficiently connects people to jobs and provides the infrastructure businesses need to grow.

Throughout the plan review and stakeholder engagement, the need to improve transportation and infrastructure was another continuous theme. If the region continues to grow at its projected pace, its roads, bridges, public transit, water and broadband will need ongoing development. These improvements are needed for sustained growth and to provide reliable access to the education, training and jobs that make economic equity and mobility possible.

### Initiatives and activities to consider

#### 2.1 Connect and expand the region's greenway and trail systems.

While the region has a robust network of existing greenways and trails, connecting these assets to create a seamless movement experience through walking and biking could contribute to the region's quality of life and place. Additionally, these resources provide an alternative to automotive transportation, which can reduce traffic and environmental impact. The Hellbender Regional Trail Plan that is currently underway could be a primary initiative to support.

### Implementation considerations

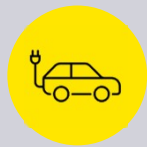
- ▶ Work closely with RPOs and MPOs to understand barriers to greenway and trail connectivity, as well as the requirements around state and federal funding for pedestrian and cycling related infrastructure.
- ▶ In addition to the public funding that would typically be invested through MPOs and RPOs, explore other funding sources, such as private enterprises and philanthropic foundations.
- ▶ Leverage the Regional Business Council, LOSRC board, planning organizations and others to develop connectivity plan and project timeline move the effort forward.
- ▶ Consider collaborating on an impact study to better understand the quantitative impact of greenways and trails on the region's economy, quality of life/place and environment.

### Drivers and disruptors



#### Federal spending surges

- The pandemic spurred a massive increase in federal spending. The Infrastructure Investment & Jobs Act (IIJA), for instance, envisions transformative spending on roadways, bridges, greenways and internet access.



#### Automobile electrification

- EV sales are predicted to rise precipitously, and with that comes increased demand for infrastructure to sustain them. Charging stations and connected infrastructure are needed community investments.





## Transportation and Infrastructure Improvement

### Example metrics for success

- Increase in transportation and infrastructure funding
- Increase in access to water/sewer, broadband and other services
- Increase in number of households with reliable broadband
- Reduction in traffic congestion

### 2.2 Reinforce current transportation planning and development efforts to foster enhanced connectivity for living, learning and working.

There are a number of efforts currently being led by the region's Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) and Rural Planning Organizations (RPOs). Similar to the housing priority, there is an opportunity to better engage business leaders in bolstering transportation and infrastructure efforts, and improving the metro area's capabilities around the movement of people and goods through an array of safe and accessible transportation modes. A more integrated regional transportation and mobility system can help foster better connectivity for residents between their homes (1.1), education and training programs, workplaces and recreational activities.

#### Implementation considerations

- ▶ The **Regional Business Council** could host special workshops with leaders from the MPOs and RPOs for brainstorming and/or design-thinking sessions to identify solutions to transportation and mobility challenges.
- ▶ Utilize the Council to explore leading transportation and mobility frameworks and initiatives from across the country. (See examples of transportation and mobility frameworks under "Leading Practices").
- ▶ Key considerations could be intercounty bus routes; last-mile rideshare services; greater pedestrian and bicycle access between residential areas, job centers and greenways (2.1); and increasing the number of electric vehicle charging stations, as well as essential road, highway and bridge improvements.
- ▶ Continue to collaborate on the pursuit of government funding opportunities through federal programs, such as the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), as well as state funding through the North Carolina Department of Transportation, and other sources.
- ▶ As of the writing of this report, LOSRC is exploring the adoption of the Transportation Management Association (TMA) model to bolster its role in this priority area and to help facilitate more coordination across regional jurisdictions. A new TMA operation could play a significant role in the advancement of regional transportation and mobility.

### 2.3 Expand the region's WestNGN Broadband Initiative.

In 2019, the Land of Sky Regional Council conducted a public survey to ascertain the region's digital connectivity. Of the 8,500 responses from residents, 13% of households reported no access to broadband internet, and 50% reported having insufficient broadband access. While initial steps have been taken, including the development of a "Digital Inclusion plan," renewing the commitment to this initiative with enhanced resources could help improve digital infrastructure and inclusion in the region.

#### Implementation considerations

- ▶ Continue working with local governments and providers on identification of areas in need of broadband development.
- ▶ Partner with providers, workforce and education partners on providing digital literacy learning opportunities virtually and in-person for those who need it.
- ▶ Explore the removal of barriers to doing business for providers, such as simplifying the permitting process for burying cable and building towers.
- ▶ Increase LOSRC WestNGN staff capacity in broadband and digital inclusion.
- ▶ Identify funding sources, such as those from the Appalachian Regional Commission, Connect America Funds, U.S. Economic Development Agency, U.S. Department of Agriculture, BEAD, GREAT and others.



## Transportation and Infrastructure Improvement

### Example metrics for success

- Increase in transportation and infrastructure funding
- Increase in access to water/sewer, broadband and other services
- Increase in number of households with reliable broadband
- Reduction in traffic congestion

### 2.4 Strengthen the region's water and sewer infrastructure with proactive planning and enhanced funding.

The region's suboptimal water and sewer infrastructure was cited by stakeholders and certain studies as a hindrance to site development for housing and industrial projects. There are myriad public funding opportunities to improve these systems including IIJA and the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) among others.

#### Implementation considerations

- ▶ Create a regional needs assessment for water, sewer and stormwater infrastructure needs.
- ▶ Leverage the [Regional Business Council](#) and LOSRC board to convene stakeholders with knowledge and involvement in this area to prioritize and determine feasibility for projects, and determine entities that need to be involved.
- ▶ Continue to explore federal and state funding required for projects.



## Drivers and disruptors



### Help wanted

- In March 2022, job openings exceeded the number of unemployed persons by 5.6 million. Despite school resuming, daycares opening, and unemployment benefits ending, labor availability is a continued challenge.



### Labor shortages

- Ongoing labor shortages are driven by wage competition from other sectors and by lack of technical worker training in middle skills.

## Workforce Development

**Goal 3:** The region has a skilled, diverse workforce that meets employer needs and contributes to vibrant communities.

Employers and other stakeholders referenced the need for a qualified workforce as one of their most critical needs. The region has numerous education and training and assets that provide a foundation for the continued development of skilled workers that reflect the demographics of the metro area. Current efforts that are connecting career-seekers with education and career paths to economic mobility can be bolstered with elevated coordination and support. The target industries that have been shared for consideration include an array of upwardly mobile careers.

The WNC Innovation Park is a noteworthy concept developed through a public-private partnership that seeks to build upon high-growth sectors in 18 western North Carolina counties, including those in the Asheville-Brevard metro area. The innovation park is intended to help grow industries and careers that provide economic opportunity, such as data analytics and information technology. There is an opportunity to integrate the initiatives and activities described below into ongoing efforts to make the innovation park a reality.

### Initiative and activities to consider

**3.1 Collaborate with workforce development and education institutions to enhance the alignment of regional programs with target industries, and foster more connectivity with employers.**

The region is home to a variety of workforce development, higher education institutions and other organizations that cultivate a skilled workforce for the region. Stakeholders shared that there is a need and opportunity to foster greater alignment between employer workforce demand and available programs. Enhanced communication and relationship building between businesses and workforce partners can increase employer awareness of current programs, while also providing opportunities for them to give feedback and contribute to the development of programs.



## Implementation considerations

### Example metrics for success

- Increase in workers with target industry related credentials
- Percentage of workers employed in target industries
- Increase in average household income

- ▶ Collaborate with Mountain Area Workforce Development Board (MAWDB), Southwestern Commission Council of Governments, higher education institutions, K-12 school systems and other partners to inventory programs and curriculum that align with target industries, and collect and share data on student enrollment and matriculation through programs.
- ▶ Share findings in a user-friendly format as a resource for employers, and seek their feedback on any perceived gaps in regional education and training in terms of the talent and skills they need.
- ▶ LOSRC's P-20 Council, which is affiliated with the myFutureNC initiative, can serve a key role in strengthening the coordination of education attainment and employment programs in the region.
- ▶ Support MAWDB's efforts to inventory local education and training programs to assess their alignment with target industries.
- ▶ Based on projected economic growth in target industries and input from employers, explore and share forecasts of future workforce demand.
- ▶ Promote MAWDB's [Guided Compass](#) online platform that helps connect career-seekers with employers, mentors and educational resources. IT career pathways are being integrated into Guided Compass and could serve as a model for connecting individuals to other pathways that are aligned with the region's target industries.
- ▶ Service workers could be a priority group for connectivity to career paths with enhanced economic mobility potential.
- ▶ While MAWDB, colleges and universities may continue to lead many employer and workforce development efforts, LOSRC and the chambers, could help align these activities at the regional level. The [Regional Business Council](#) could be valuable for increasing employer engagement.
- ▶ Continue sharing updates on employer workforce needs at LOSRC partner meetings and communicate that input to education and training providers.
- ▶ LOSRC could collaborate with local partners in a monthly e-newsletter that highlights area programs and via social media.
- ▶ Successful employer-education/training partnerships and leading practices could be shared during a council- and chamber-led workforce development conference, or as part of a topically integrated symposium as referenced previously (p. 19).
- ▶ Pursue Foreign Trade Zone designation for the region and assist the Asheville Airport in pursuing a Port of Entry designation to support job growth and business expansion.





# Leading practices

The following leading practices can help inform and inspire the initiatives that have been put forth for consideration.

## Regional councils and task forces

### Central Indiana Corporate Partnership - Indianapolis, IN

Comprised of CEOs from the region's most prominent corporations, the Central Indiana Corporate Partnership is influential in setting the region's economic development agenda through strategic initiatives in workforce, entrepreneurship and innovation, and ensuring a favorable business climate.

Website: <https://www.cicpindiana.com/>

### Regional Business Council - St. Louis, MO

The independent group engages members to take action on high-impact business, civic and philanthropic priorities, including quality of life, public policy and regional infrastructure and workforce development, for the betterment of the St. Louis region.

Website: <https://stlrbc.org/>

### Charlotte MOVES Task Force - Charlotte, NC

The Charlotte City Council-appointed task force consists of community leaders across the Charlotte metro area representing business, government, education, nonprofits and other sectors that worked together to create a transformative mobility plan and funding strategy for transportation expansion.

Website:

[https://charlottenc.gov/Mayor/Charlotte Moves Task Force/Pages/default.aspx](https://charlottenc.gov/Mayor/Charlotte_Moves_Task_Force/Pages/default.aspx)

### Councils & Task Forces - Dallas, TX

The Dallas Regional Chamber has numerous business councils and task forces that advance initiatives related to economic development and marketing; innovation and entrepreneurship; education and talent attraction; public policy; diversity, equity and inclusion; and others.

Website: <https://www.dallaschamber.org/member-resources/councils-taskforces/>

## Housing Expansion and Diversification

### Iowa Housing Trust Funds - State of Iowa

Iowa has several regional housing trust funds that support affordable housing needs across the state, including new construction, acquisition and renovation of existing properties, home rehabilitation, down payment assistance and other services.

Websites:

Northeast Iowa Regional Housing Trust Fund, <https://www.uerpc.org/housing-trust-fund.html>

Central Iowa Housing Trust Fund, <https://cihtf.org/>

### Greenville Housing Fund - Greenville, SC

The Greenville Housing Fund was established to address the shortage of affordable housing options in Greenville, SC. It works with developers, elected officials, residents and other stakeholders and partners to increase and preserve the supply of safe, accessible and cost-effective housing that supports economic growth.

Website: <https://greenvillehousingfund.com/>

### Smart Growth and Equitable Development - US Environmental Protection Agency

The EPA has presented the "Smart Growth" model as a resource for communities and regions seeking to address multiple needs through an integrated approach. The model includes four primary tenets: (1) cleaning up and reinvesting in neighborhoods; (2) providing housing choices for people of all income levels; (3) offering affordable, environmentally sustainable transportation options; and (4) improving access to jobs and services with development that is accessible for pedestrians and public transit users.

Website:

<https://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/smart-growth-and-equitable-development>



## Transportation and Infrastructure Improvement

### Connect Beyond - Charlotte region, NC

Connect Beyond is a regional mobility initiative for the cities and towns in 12 counties in the Charlotte metro area. The initiative includes a plan that can serve as a blueprint for a comprehensive, integrated public transit network, enhanced bus services and other accessible mobility options, and the application of innovative transportation technologies.

Website: <https://www.connect-beyond.com/plan/>

### South Shore Transportation Management Association - Lake Tahoe area, NV

The South Shore TMA is a not-for-profit entity that acts as the community forum for solving transportation and mobility challenges for the South Lake Tahoe region. The organization and its members advocate for improved mobility by fostering collaboration, providing education about current and ideal future transportation mechanisms, and opening doors to sustainable funding.

Website: <https://ss-tma.org/>

### New Frontier regional broadband plan - Nebraska

The Nebraska Broadband, an affiliate of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, developed by the state of Nebraska, developed several regional plans (2014-2018) to address the expansion of broadband connectivity, digital literacy and/or other economic development priorities. The New Frontier region, which consists of 10 counties, has a plan for educating people on the value of broadband, increasing availability to all communities and rural areas, and expanding access and bandwidth for health care providers, businesses, nonprofits and local governments.

Website:

<https://broadband.nebraska.gov/documents/new-frontier-regional-plan.pdf>





## Workforce Development, Attraction and Retention

### Northern Virginia talent website - Fairfax County, VA

The Fairfax County Economic Development Authority has created a talent-focused website to act as a resource hub for those exploring moving to and working in Northern Virginia in the Washington, DC metro area. The site has a job aggregator that organizes postings by industry cluster and provides easy access to information on education and training opportunities, places to live and other information.

Website: <https://workinnorthernvirginia.com/>

### Upskill Houston - Houston region, TX

Upskill Houston is an employer-led initiative managed by the Greater Houston Partnership focused on strengthening the pipeline of skilled workers to meet employer needs and foster economic opportunity for all workers. The initiative has a particular focus on supporting career pathways that require post-secondary education or training but not a four-year college degree.

Website: <https://www.houston.org/upskillhouston>



# 6 Conclusion

The Regional Resiliency and Strategic Alignment plan positions the Asheville-Brevard metro area for sustainable economic and community development. It also helps regional leaders work toward alleviating vulnerabilities that can be barriers to growth, and plan for disruptive forces (such as automation) in a proactive, concerted manner. Through enhanced collaboration between LOSRC and its partners, and alignment around impactful initiatives and activities, the region has potential to continue its trajectory as a high-quality community that provides an ideal environment for people of all backgrounds and businesses in a variety of growing industries.



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