



Governor Stein and GROW NC Plan for a Strong WNC Economic Recovery

Two years after Hurricane Helene, western North Carolina has made significant progress on rebuilding, but more work remains to ensure a full economic recovery. The [WNC Economic Recovery Plan](#) frames a vision for a healthy and vibrant economy across the region. This plan was built with input from 28 counties and other local and state partners and seeks to build on the region's existing strengths.

Helene deepened economic challenges that western North Carolina had been carrying for years: the loss of traditional industries, uneven job growth, housing costs that push working families out, aging water systems and roads, and long drives to reach a doctor or a classroom. According to the North Carolina Department of Commerce, the region's labor force has shrunk by more than 16,000 people since 2023, even as the rest of North Carolina's population has grown. Economic recovery must account for not only losses caused by Helene but also preexisting challenges.

A strong economic recovery means families in safe and affordable homes, businesses open and growing, water and roads people can count on, good jobs close to home, expanded transportation options, a thriving creative economy, and communities ready for the next storm.

Building on Existing Progress

Western North Carolinians have been hard at work rebuilding, and state government has worked to match that determination. Since Hurricane Helene, Governor Josh Stein and his team have taken action to support economic recovery, including:

- **Supporting jobs** – The Western NC Small Business Grant Initiative and the Helene Small Business Recovery Fund awarded \$105 million in grants and loans to nearly 3,000 small businesses to retain nearly 15,000 jobs. The state has also awarded more than 50,000 scholarships and emergency grants to Helene-impacted college, university, and community college students, helping them stay enrolled and keeping a strong workforce pipeline in the region.
- **Creating pathways** – The Stein team has created a new health care apprenticeship program in Burke County, celebrated \$63.7 million in grants from the US Economic Development Administration to expand economic opportunity, and supported the



Good Jobs WNC program, a partnership between 11 community colleges to connect 1,200 people to good jobs with good wages that can support a family.

- **Fixing downtowns** – Since 2025, NC Commerce has awarded 42 projects totaling more than \$30 million through the Small Business Infrastructure Grant Program (SmBIZ). These funds are being used toward downtown streetscape repairs, water and sewer lines, stormwater controls, and utility relocation. Additionally, OSBM's Local Government Capital Grant program has awarded nearly \$50 million for to repair, renovate, or replace infrastructure damaged by Helene.

[Click here to read more about the state's commitment to western NC recovery.](#)

Building on Existing Strengths

The WNC Recovery Plan seeks to build on the strengths and assets that already define the region. These include but are not limited to:

- **Strengthening the workforce** – Investing in workforce development means connecting people to good jobs with good wages that can help a family afford to live in a community. The plan calls for improved coordination to recruit and retain talent, encourage work-based learning, support remote workers, and strengthen available child care options so parents can get to work.
- **Expanding connectivity via rail, air, and highway** – A better-connected region means more economic opportunity. The plan calls for completing the I-40 and I-26 highway improvements, investing in resilient infrastructure, and recruiting more direct flights to and from the Asheville Regional Airport.
- **Promoting tourism and the region's creative economy and outdoor recreation opportunities** – Western North Carolina is renowned for natural beauty that is matched only by the creativity of its crafters and artisans. The plan calls for developing new tourism hubs, revitalizing historic downtowns, and amplifying the creative economy.
- **Strengthening local agriculture and food processing** – Agriculture is a foundational industry in North Carolina, and restoring farmland protects jobs and food sources for generations. The plan calls for restoring and conserving farmland, supporting agritourism, processing more food and agricultural products in the region, and creating more opportunities for local beverage manufacturing.



- **Supporting local leadership** – Western North Carolinians know best what their region needs. The state and the region have long valued leadership development, including programs such as Leadership NC, the Rural Center’s Homegrown Leaders and Rural Economic Development Initiative (REDI), and other more local initiatives. The plan calls for continuing to develop the next generation of leaders.

Building Toward Progress

This plan sets a vision and provides a framework to deliver results:

- **Setting direction:** GROW NC and the Governor’s Advisory Committee on Western North Carolina Recovery steward the plan. It brings the region’s five federally recognized economic development strategies together into one shared framework, and a regional steering body tracks progress and clears roadblocks.
- **Delivering on the ground:** Priorities set by western North Carolina communities and councils of government become funded projects through existing state, federal, philanthropic, and private programs. Progress is tracked against the plan’s scorecard and reported.

The plan does not create a new appropriation or replace the plans communities have built for themselves. Rather, it points existing resources toward local priorities and positions the region for additional federal investment.

Hurricane Helene forever changed many parts of western North Carolina, but not the grit and resiliency of its people. From the devastation, the State of North Carolina has an opportunity to chart a new future for the region.