YEAR IN REVIEW
SOUTHWESTERN COMMISSION BOARD & STAFF

BOARD ELECTIONS

On November 23, 2020, the Southwestern Commission Board of Directors held their bi-annual nominations and elections for the Executive Committee seats. Canton Mayor Sid Smathers became the Board’s new Chairman, while Macon County Commissioner Ronnie Beale took over as Vice-Chair. The Board nominated and elected Graham County Commissioner Connie Orr for the 2nd Vice-Chair position, and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians Principal Chief Richard Sneed was elected as Treasurer. Outgoing Chairman, Hayesville Mayor Harry Baughn, was presented with a plaque and Commission jacket upon completion of his two-year term.

RETIRED

In October 2020, Roger Wiggins retired after working for 34 years. Larry Reeves, the Commission’s Regional Long Term Care Ombudsman, retired at the end of 2020 after 7.5 years with the Agency. Larry presents a unique perspective of representation to older adults, nursing home residents, and families. Larry was also the Commission Finance Officer for 34 years.

The year 2020 was not business-as-usual. When 2020 was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Southwestern Commission transformed the way in which we did our work throughout the region, focusing on our goal of being a regional connector and providing assistance to local governments, nonprofits, businesses, older adults, and the region’s workforce. In the first few months of the pandemic, useful information about relief programs, safety protocol, and other pertinent topics was flowing from every direction. To assist the region in making sense of it all, we created the COVID Resource Guide, which was updated regularly on our website southwesterncommission.org.

Access to high speed internet was a big issue before the pandemic. It quickly became evident that our lives would move online during the pandemic, and that our region’s broadband challenges would create a real barrier, particularly in the areas of telehealth and education. We created and published an interactive map of free public wifi hotspots throughout the region, which has been viewed thousands of times. At one point, a local doctor’s office had recorded a voicemail message directing patients to our website to access the map to help their patients connect to the internet for doctor’s appointments. This map will remain on our website as a useful tool.

Broadband expansion was a major focus of state and federal efforts to respond to the COVID crisis, with a push to fund projects in underserved areas of the region, which has been viewed thousands of times. At one point, a local doctor’s office had recorded a voicemail message directing patients to our website to access the map to help their patients connect to the internet for doctor’s appointments. This map will remain on our website as a useful tool.

SOUTHWESTERN COMMISSION’S ROLE DURING THE PANDEMIC

BROADBAND

Resource Guide.

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The Area Agency on Aging immediately began assisting efforts to disseminate information and resources to the network of aging service providers for older adults and their caregivers, including assistance in distributing personal protective equipment. The Family Caregiver Support program saw increased calls in the first few months of the pandemic, including information and resources for those who found themselves filling the role of caregiver for their loved one. This role can often lead to burnout and other challenges, which were compounded by the pandemic. The Legale Program was also very busy connecting older adults to attorneys to prepare legal documents, free of charge to income-qualifying seniors.

Residents of Long-Term Care facilities were especially affected by Covid. Window visits, social isolation, covid testing, quarantine, and vaccines are a few of the obstacles that families, residents, and staff faced over the past year. Our Long-Term Care Ombudsman helped facilities and families navigate through policies and information and served as a valuable resource. To best distribute the information, we created an instructional video series, which was released for Long-Term Care facilities, family caregivers, and individuals considering long-term care placement.

Nutrition, a home delivered meal, was on the forefront of everyone’s minds when quarantine began. Departments on Aging and Senior Nutrition sites were above and beyond to ensure that every older adult was served. Sites went above and beyond to ensure that every older adult was served. Departments on Aging and Senior Nutrition sites were above and beyond to ensure that every older adult was served.

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WITH A LITTLE PLANNING

VIRTUAL FUNDERS FORUM
OCTOBER 27, 2020

We had planned a Funders Forum for March 2020, where representatives from local, state, and federal funders would provide information about their programs and meet our region’s local government and non-profit leaders. The week before the summit was to take place, the pandemic forced us all into quarantine, and we postponed the event. However, we were able to reschedule and pivot to a recorded Virtual Funders Forum. The video, which is available on our YouTube Channel, has been viewed over 300 times.

THE FEDERAL CARES ACT PROVIDES $1.8 MILLION IN LOW INTEREST LOAN FUNDING TO THE REGION FROM THE US ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ADMINISTRATION

The Southeastern Commission was the recipient of federal CARES Act funds intended to boost the economy by capitalizing a low interest loan program. The funding is available to businesses, non-profits, and governmental units in the Commission’s 7-county service area. Eligible uses of the loan funds are machinery and equipment, construction and renovation, land and property acquisition, and working capital. Introductory interest rates are as low as 1%.

Once lent out through the CARES Act program, the funds will forever revolve in the Commission’s existing Revolving Loan Fund Program, significantly increasing the pool of available funds.

NOTABLE ACHIEVEMENTS

Executive Director Sarah Thompson was named Chair of the Board of Directors of the North Carolina Rural Center.

Senior Planner Rose Bauguess was chosen to serve as Vice President of the North Carolina Association of Rural Planning Organizations.

Workforce Development Director David Garrett was chosen to serve as Chair on the Nantahala Health Foundation Board.

Office Manager and Clerk to the Board Debra Ivey was chosen to serve on the Board of Directors for the North Carolina Association of County Clerks.
In September 2020, our region was awarded a HOME GRANTS Plan by NC State University. The GREAT Bridges project is a 30-month strategic planning initiative designed to strengthen the retail, accommodation, tourism, and entertainment sectors. The process is being led by the Southwestern Commission and the Mountain West Partnership. Haywood County, Jackson County, Swain County, and Graham Counties as well as the Qualla Boundary.(1) The process is to first understand the size and scope of the issue. With that in mind, the Southwestern Commission conducted a region’s housing issues in 2019. That report showed an unmet demand of low- to moderate-income and subsidized housing units across the region. The home consortium in 2020. Haywood, Jackson, Swain, Macon, and Graham Counties as well as the Qualla Boundary. Rural communities are eligible to participate if they join together to form a HOME consortium. The purpose is to plot a process for helping rural communities build their capacity for strengthening the retail, tourism, hospitality, and entertainment sectors. These sectors, which have been particularly hard hit by the coronavirus pandemic; provide jobs, business opportunities that frequently support rural economies. The CREATE Bridges project provides opportunities for community leaders to represent real people who have needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Partners include NC Cooperative Extension, the State University, the Institute of Emerging Issues, and the NC Association of Counties of Government. The CREATE Bridges project provides opportunities for community leaders to represent the region’s needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Partners include NC Cooperative Extension, the State University, the Institute of Emerging Issues, and the NC Association of Counties of Government. In December 2020, three public forums were held to gather ideas on how to strengthen the retail, tourism, and the accommodation sectors. The process includes stakeholders to determine the needs and priorities of the region and to develop an action plan for deployment of the HUD HOME funds, which is expected to begin in fall/winter of 2021. Many partners have come together to make the project possible, including the Dogwood Health Trust, which contributed financial resources to pay for planning, matching funds, and training. In response to the pandemic, the state announced a Round 3 of GREAT grants in September of 2021. Three projects from the region were funded during this round, adding 554 households in Cherokee, Clay, and Haywood Counties, and 290 households in Swain County for a total of 959 households with newly installed broadband, which is expected to result in $1.152 million in grant funds and $1.5 million in leveraged private investment. Other successful projects and developments in 2021 include a $100,000 grant to Haywood County and the Education Research Consortium (ERC) from the Appalachian Regional Commission to expand broadband, and a $50,000 award from Mountain Resources Council to expand broadband service. The purpose is to pilot a process for helping rural communities build their capacity for strengthening the retail, tourism, hospitality, and entertainment sectors. These sectors, which have been particularly hard hit by the coronavirus pandemic; provide jobs, business opportunities that frequently support rural economies. The CREATE Bridges project provides opportunities for community leaders to represent real people who have needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Partners include NC Cooperative Extension, the State University, the Institute of Emerging Issues, and the NC Association of Counties of Government. 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NC WORKS
The local NCWorks Career Centers continued to offer valuable services to individuals and employers throughout the region during the pandemic. The NCWorks team found creative ways to connect with people and businesses, such as drive-thru job fairs, and outdoor hiring festivals targeted to specific industries. They also worked with community partners to offer needed resources and supportive services to individuals and employers impacted by COVID-19.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) provides funding for local programs and services to enrich the local workforce through education and training to meet the needs of area businesses. Case Managers work with youth and adults with barriers to employment, and with dislocated workers (people who have lost their job through no fault of their own), to help them gain success within the workforce.

WORKFORCE STORIES

Stephanie participated in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) program that is facilitated by Mountain Projects and operated out of the Haywood County NCWorks Career Center. WIOA helped Stephanie with tuition, transportation, and supportive services as she completed her AAS degree in Automotive Systems Technology at Haywood Community College. WIOA also provided Stephanie with emergency Finish Line Grant assistance to help with her bills as she completed training. Stephanie graduated with honors in May 2021.

I felt like I had to try harder because it’s a male-dominated field. If it was back in the 1960s, this would never fly. I would be shunned! I’m the kind of person that if someone tells me I can’t do something, I’m going to prove them wrong. By the end of it, I earned the respect from the guys. They trust me more than I trust myself sometimes. The help of WIOA and the Finish Line Grant allowed me not to have to worry so much financially so I could really focus on my classes and being the best I can be.

IN 2020, WE WERE ABLE TO ASSIST A TOTAL OF 761 PARTICIPANTS THROUGH OUR STATE AND FEDERAL PROGRAMS.
FILLING THE GAPS, CONNECTING THE DOTS

The Southwestern Commission Area Agency on Aging serves as an umbrella organization bridging the vast network of senior programs and resources across the seven western counties. Staff of the Area Agency on Aging wear many hats, connecting the public with their services, coordinating and supporting partner agencies, overseeing state and federal programs at the local level, and advocating for senior resources.

The scaffolding provided by the AAA took on new importance during the pandemic, as general awareness for the well-being of seniors took center stage.

“When COVID happened, there was a huge emphasis on ‘Are we taking care of our seniors?’” said Laraine Melton, director of the Southwestern Commission AAA. “There was a heightened awareness over the safety and security of older adults.”

AAA stepped up to the plate by serving as a bridge—something it was perfectly positioned to do given its decades of experience. AAA stepped up to the plate by serving as a bridge—something it was already perfectly positioned to do given its decades of experience. AAA worked with senior centers and senior meal sites in each county to help formulate plans from in-person to no-contact services.

“It was a collaborative effort. If something was working in one county, it was ‘Tell us what you’re doing, and we’ll see if it could work in another county.’” Melton said. “We had bridge across the region. All those things that AAA does all the time provided the foundation for heightened response in crisis mode.”

MoneyFollows the Person (MFP) is a state project that helps Medicaid-eligible North Carolinians who live in institutional facilities move into their own homes and communities with supports.

The Southwestern Commission Area Agency on Aging (AAA) became the regional MFP coordinating agency in 2014. There have been many transitions over the years, and we would love to share one of you.

I met Beth “Belle” Seagle, a resident of a long-term care facility in Haywood County, in February of 2015. She was living in the facility receiving from 32 and 36 degrees burn due to an apartment fire, along with other health issues that she already had that had been exacerbated by the fire. It was very apparent that Beth was an independent and motivated person who was ready to move back into the community.

We spent several month investigating housing options. Beth was approved for a Section 8 Housing voucher, and we were able to find a small trailer for rent that she could move into. The Southwestern Commission Area Agency on Aging (AAA) was able to find a small trailer for rent that she could move into. Once she was able to move, she was able to adopt a dog! She was her beloved dog that perished in the fire. Once she moved, she was able to adopt a dog! Her new life has been truly transformative.

How did being a participant in MFP help you?

Being part of this program allowed me to start a new life. In a way, Beth is like a new person. She was able to move into the long-term care facility and enroll in the MFP program. She now maintains her weight between 155-165 lbs. She also has the best relationship I have ever had with my mom. I discovered fishing was a big part of what led to my life changing. With his support and encouragement, I continued Mission Weight Management. Being able to do that I began to change everything I ate and drank. My life has changed for the better. I now live a healthy lifestyle. I have a new urologist. I mention him because he was a number of times. In May 2016, I began seeing a new urologist. He first saw me he figured I had about 2017. I now maintain my weight between 155-165 lbs. I have learned to love myself and learned more about who I am. I discovered things that kept me from having a relationship with my mom. I have learned to live a healthy lifestyle. I have never thought possible. I used to go to a primary care doctor that has been off medication. I never thought I’d come off it.

Would you recommend MoneyFollows the Person to others? Why or Why Not?

I would recommend the MFP to others who are looking to move out of a long-term-care facility and live independently. Once someone took the time and energy to connect with me, it was able to function out of a facility. They should be able to function out of a facility. They should be able to function out of a facility. They should be able to function out of a facility. They should be able to function out of a facility.

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SOUTHWESTERN RURAL PLANNING ORGANIZATION (RPO)

The Southwestern Rural Planning Organization (RPO) includes Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Jackson, Macon, and Swain counties. The core duties of the RPO include: develop local and regional multimodal transportation plans, provide a forum for public participation in transportation planning processes, and prioritize projects the organization believes should be included in NCDOT’s State Transportation Improvement Program, and provide transportation-related information to local governments.

TRANSPORTATION PLANNING

Southwestern RPO staff work collaboratively with NCDOT and local governments to develop transportation plans for each county, called Comprehensive Transportation Plans (CTPs). These plans forecast the transportation needs of a county about 30 years into the future, based on the vision for growth that the county has identified in local land use plans. In 2020, RPO staff continued to focus on updating Macon County’s Comprehensive Transportation Plan, which is scheduled to be adopted in 2021.

BIKE PLAN

In 2020, RPO used updated bicycle maps of Cherokee, Clay, Graham, and Macon counties and created brochures for public distribution. The brochures include maps of bicycle routes, traffic laws, skill levels for routes, and bicycle safety tips. Contact Rose Bauguess at rose@rpo.org if you want maps to distribute.

RPO STAFF

Southwestern RPO Administrator Rose Bauguess continues to be involved in statewide efforts by serving on the Executive Committee of the North Carolina Association of Rural Planning Organizations as well as other steering committees with NCDOT.

The Southwestern RPO provides technical support as local agencies relate to transportation. In 2020, the RPO provided support at local governments in the region pursued funding for safety fencing at airports, explored options for electric vehicle charging stations, and pursued potential greenway options in their communities. We encourage you to reach out to the Southwestern RPO if you have any questions about transportation-related projects in your community.

FINANCIALS

ANNUAL REPORT 2020 13
## FINANCIALS

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<th>Year</th>
<th>Annual Report</th>
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*This increase was due primarily to large grants from Golden Leaf and CPF for the EDNET Projects.*

## FROM THE CHAIRMAN

Though 2020 brought unparalleled challenges, it was not without its success. As Chair, I can report the Southwestern Commission overcomes these challenges with triumphant success and a renewed sense of optimism. As Chair, I do not have shoes, but I do “walk in them” according to Mayor Harry Baughn. Simply put, our region is in the business of helping people thrive. Our Director, Sarah Thompson continues to help her team and local government from Canton to Murphy. I also want to thank our employees. Every day these men and women work incredibly hard. They believe, and they are correct, their work matters in shaping the future of our mountain towns. They continue to create jobs and improvements in the lives of our citizens; those who have been here for generations and the ones who just joined us.

At Chair, I have seen Chair of each year, serving in an elected official capacity for ten times, as at a best challenge—the most ever—meeting, the leather, the new and old, the core away from our families. Many would look and wonder why we would choose to do that. We do. I contend that we are not crazy, but that we hold the belief that we can make a difference. We may live in different towns, have differing political opinions, and different goals, but what we can agree on is that there is still a place for sincere leadership and cooperation.

The challenges ahead will require us to work together to find common solutions for our citizens, those who have both here for generations and the ones who joined us. Finding those solutions and the resources to implement change is why the Southwestern Commission was created and will continue to be a central leading force for all of us.

It is my hope for the next two years as Chair that we continue to meet, work together, and change the conversation about the challenges of the past into the successes of tomorrow. It will be of any assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me. All my Best,

ZEB SMATHERS
Chairman

## FROM THE DIRECTOR

Though 2020 brought unparalleled challenges, it was not without its success. As Chair, I can report the Southwestern Commission overcomes these challenges with triumphant success and a renewed sense of optimism. As Chair, I do not have shoes, but I do “walk in them” according to Mayor Harry Baughn. Simply put, our region is in the business of helping people thrive. Our Director, Sarah Thompson continues to help her team and local government from Canton to Murphy. I also want to thank our employees. Every day these men and women work incredibly hard. They believe, and they are correct, their work matters in shaping the future of our mountain towns. They continue to create jobs and improvements in the lives of our citizens; those who have been here for generations and the ones who just joined us.

At Chair, I have seen Chair of each year, serving in an elected official capacity for ten times, as at a best challenge—the most ever—meeting, the leather, the new and old, the core away from our families. Many would look and wonder why we would choose to do that. We do. I contend that we are not crazy, but that we hold the belief that we can make a difference. We may live in different towns, have differing political opinions, and different goals, but what we can agree on is that there is still a place for sincere leadership and cooperation.

The challenges ahead will require us to work together to find common solutions for our citizens, those who have both here for generations and the ones who joined us. Finding those solutions and the resources to implement change is why the Southwestern Commission was created and will continue to be a central leading force for all of us.

It is my hope for the next two years as Chair that we continue to meet, work together, and change the conversation about the challenges of the past into the successes of tomorrow. It will be of any assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me. All my Best,

ZEB SMATHERS
Chairman

### ANNUAL REPORT 2020

**It probably goes without saying that 2020 was a challenging year for all of us. Until then, now we will be telling stories about that week in March of 2020 when everything started to shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Meetings and conferences were cancelled, priorities shifted, home offices were hastily created, and Zoom became a household name.**

**I spent the early days of quarantine creating a work-from-home policy for our staff making sure everyone had the equipment they needed to be productive in a home office environment. I am proud to say that once the stress of the first couple of weeks passed the Southwestern Commission team hit the stride, not missing a beat.**

**Each department felt the pressure of being a regional leader in their respective fields, and eagerly filled the roles needed for end and support of their. The role has helped transform the drug and alcohol treatment services system, and the one that allowed us to respond to the needs of our older adults safely.**

**The workforce department was there for the businesses that were forced to close or shift operations while putting together a federally funded housing program to help with the emerging affordable housing crisis.**

**It was the strength of the Commission’s local government and community partnerships that allowed us to navigate a very uncertain year gracefully and effectively, getting aid to the people and organizations in need.**

**I am ever so grateful to serve our Southwestern Commission’s local government from Canton to Murphy. I also thank all of the people and organizations that made it possible to serve our citizens.**

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The mission of the Southwestern Commission is to improve the quality of life in its seven-county service area by assisting local governments in reaching their goals.

The Southwestern Commission is the council of government (COG) for North Carolina’s Region A, covering the western most part of the state; Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Jackson, Macon, and Swain Counties, the Qualla Boundary, and the 17 municipalities therein.