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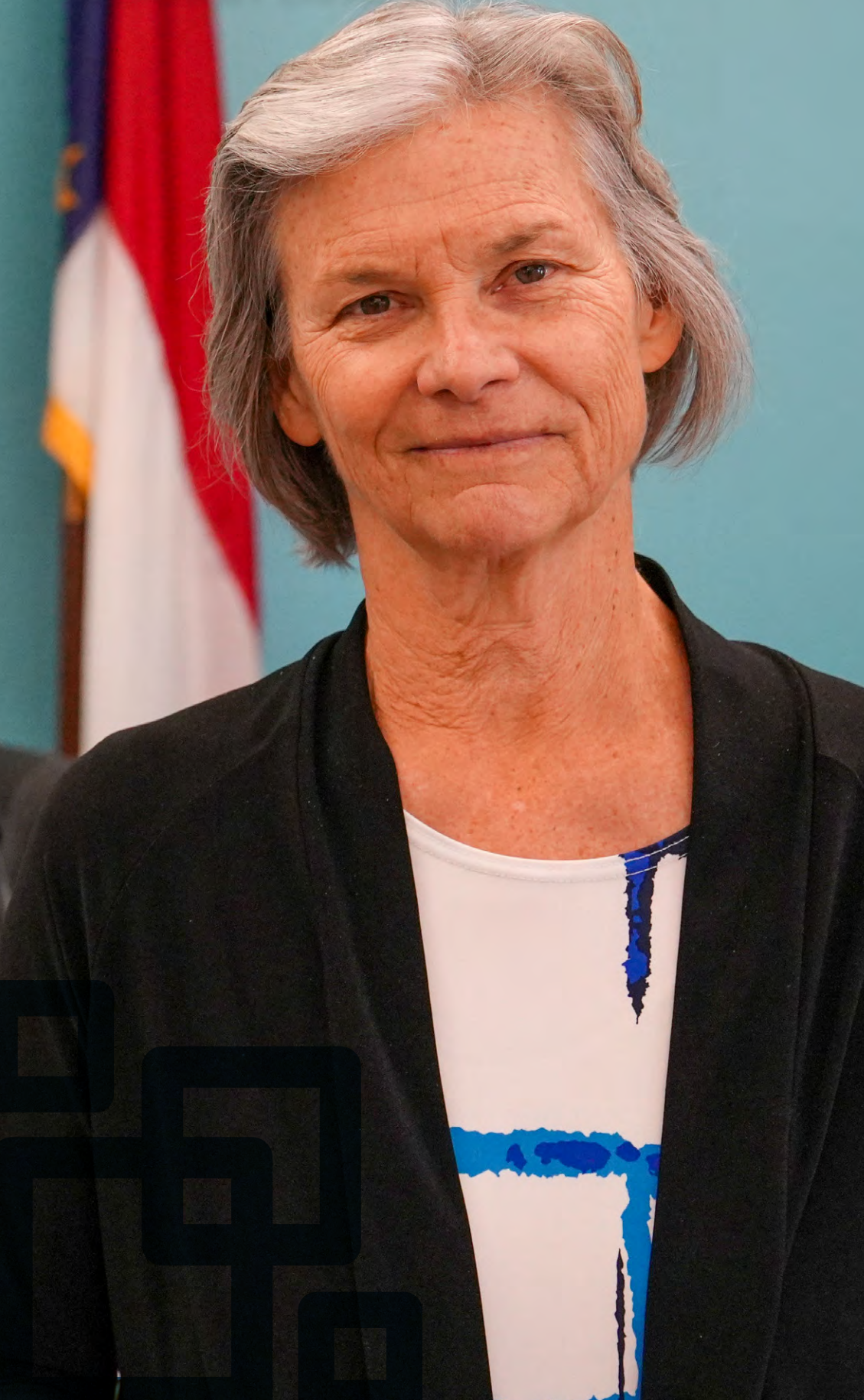


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MAYOR ELIZABETH MOREY LEADS BY LISTENING



SOUTHERN CITY

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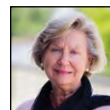
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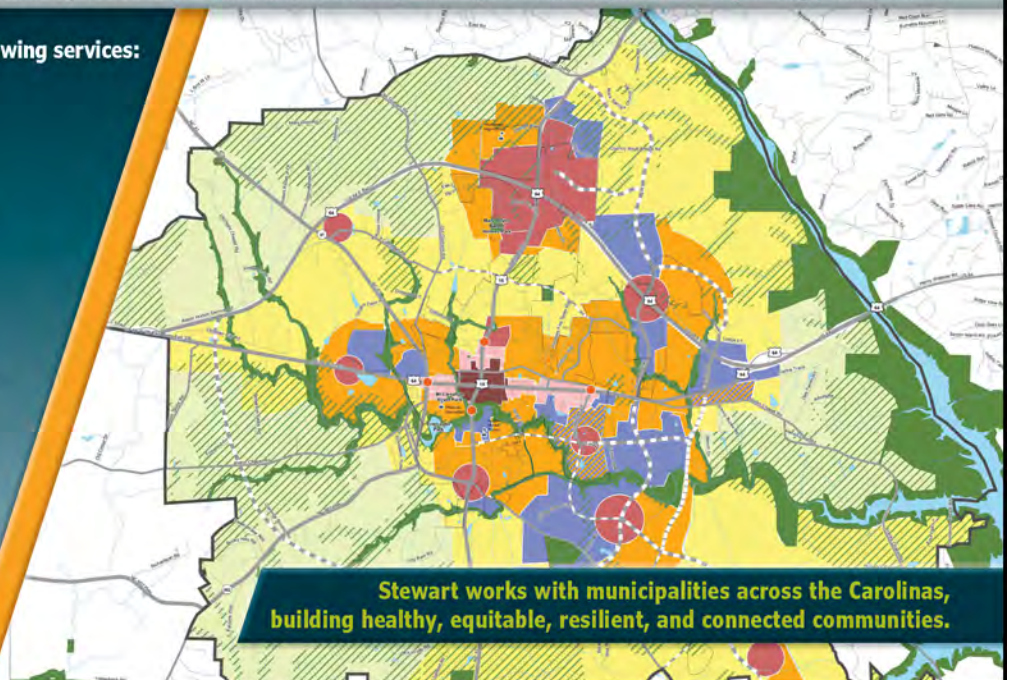


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SPEAKING OUT

Local Preemption, Bite by Bite



WILLIAM HARRIS
NCLM President

North Carolina cities and towns have plenty to be grateful for when it comes to this year's legislative session.

For a third straight year, state lawmakers in Raleigh provided a tremendous boost to local infrastructure investment, whether involving water, sewer, stormwater or transportation. With that in mind, I urge you to once again thank your locally-elected legislators for these investments as you see them in your community.

That being said, we also cannot overlook another trend that occurred as the General Assembly met over this past year. And we need to acknowledge that it is troubling.

We saw a number of local bills filed, and several passed, which eroded local control over land-use planning and how municipal elections take place.

Local bills are those that can only affect a small portion of the state and can only cover certain subject matter areas as laid out in the North Carolina Constitution. For example, the state constitution prohibits local bills affecting health and sanitation, and there have been some overturned in the courts when they have strayed into this area.

The governor also has no veto power over local bills.

In recent years, the League of Municipalities—its members and staff working effectively together—has done a great job beating back statewide legislation that undermines our local decision-making. But it is these local bills, often due to some specific and unique circumstances in individual communities, that have gained traction.

This past year, we saw local bills de-annexing property in the Town of Holly Springs and making permanent a ban on the use of extraterritorial jurisdiction in the Town of Leland. There was also local legislation that made all municipal elections in communities in Madison County partisan, against the wishes of local officials.

A local bill also creates local civil service boards in Greensboro and Winston-Salem—against the wishes of those cities—to review personnel actions, potentially disrupting the chain of command with local police departments and making it more difficult to remove officers involved in the misuse of force.

Yet another local bill switched the election methods in the City of Gastonia from at-large, districted elections to ward district elections, again, against the wishes of local officials.

Finally, the state budget bill saw some last-minute provisions pop up that pre-empted municipal zoning codes in Dare and Wake Counties under select circumstances.

Many of these changes were made in bills that began as fairly noncontroversial measures, only to be amended to include the controversial provisions late in their consideration, giving local officials little opportunity to allow their objections to be known.

That being the case, there is really only one means to try to stop this type of legislation: Talk to the members of your local legislative delegation.

Do all you can to develop good relationships with them. Let them know specifically about these types of developments with local bills and urge that they come to you for discussions if there is some matter in which someone wants changes via local bills that affect your city or town.

If you have strained relations with a particular legislator, seek out common allies to help.

As I end this column, I want to wish all of you a happy holiday season and New Year. I know that each of you does great work in your city or town, and I appreciate all of the work that many of you do to help make NCLM a strong advocacy and service organization. ■

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Passenger Rail Expansion Rolling Down the Tracks

SCOTT MOONEYHAM

Director of Political Communication and Coordination



Over late summer and fall, five cities across the state hosted meetings organized by Rail Response, a project of the North Carolina Metro Mayors Coalition, examining how more investment in intercity passenger rail can bring economic and other benefits to North Carolina.

Those meetings—held in Wilmington, Durham, Asheville, Rocky Mount, and Salisbury—were a rousing success, bringing together community leaders at each stop, as well as media coverage that brought more public awareness about the possibilities of intercity passenger rail expansion and improvements.

The larger effort was organized by the members of the Metro Mayors Coalition and NCLM staff as the Federal Railroad Administration began considering an

expansion of passenger rail routes through funding provided by the bipartisan infrastructure bill passed by Congress in late 2021.

In addition to these regional meetings, the Rail Response workgroup has put together a report that makes recommendations on ways that North Carolina cities can encourage intercity passenger rail investments.

The workgroup was led by co-chairs Susan Kluttz, former Salisbury mayor and former Secretary of the NC Dept. of Cultural Resources, and Nick Tennyson, former mayor of Durham and former Secretary of the NC Dept. of Transportation. The other members were Durham Mayor Elaine O'Neal, Winston-Salem Mayor Allen Joiner, Salisbury Mayor Karen Alexander, Asheville Mayor Esther Manheimer, Mooresville Mayor Miles Atkins, Rocky Mount Mayor

Sandy Roberson, Concord Mayor Bill Dusch, and Wilmington Mayor Bill Saffo.

Among the findings of the group:

1. **Grassroots organization is critical:** The best transportation projects are locally owned and supported. Grassroots work is one of the most powerful tools cities can leverage to boost the state's competitiveness for federal grants and energize local communities around the possibilities and potential benefits of intercity passenger rail. Community forums, local programming, and canvassing are a few examples of how city officials can educate residents on intercity passenger rail and proactively garner support and enthusiasm for development or expansion of intercity passenger rail services in their community.



The state's goal is to eventually connect cities and towns from the coast to the mountains, from Wilmington to Asheville, with passenger rail service and to see those numbers climb even more.

2. **Mayors are most powerful as a collective:** Mayors have more power as a group than they do singularly. Transportation across city and county lines; forging connections with mayors in surrounding communities and across the state not only demonstrates a common interest in the expansion of intercity passenger rail, but also creates the opportunity for the holistic development of rail networks within the communities.
3. **Communication is key:** Establishing open communication with constituents, city council, staff, neighboring communities, and the North Carolina Department of Transportation ensures continuity, transparency, and cohesion across all levels of government. Cross-functional alliances and communication create opportunities for collaboration on complex issues like intercity passenger rail where success depends, not only on a unified understanding of the issue and the solution offered, but on significant resources and financial contributions from all persons at the table.

4. **Dedicated funding from state government can boost local efforts:** A dedicated stream of recurring dollars from the state can bolster that state's competitiveness for federal grants and create a stable investment in intercity passenger rail for years to come. Maintaining consistent communication with legislators and extending invitations for them to interact in your communities first-hand helps build meaningful working relationships that may prove beneficial when advocating for dedicated funding sources. It is always helpful to take any opportunity to leverage, research, data, and anecdotes to inform legislators of the public benefits of intercity passenger rail and how a state investment in the expansion of services will have positive economic and social benefits statewide.

Those first three findings fit well the accomplishments of the five regional Rail Response meetings.

At each, municipal officials and community leaders heard an overview of current

passenger rail in the state and the possibilities of additional funding through the bipartisan infrastructure bill.

The legislation includes \$66 billion in passenger and freight rail infrastructure investment, with \$44 billion to be distributed through the Federal Railroad Administration's discretionary grant program.

As a part of the planning process, the NC Department of Transportation has applied for 13 planning grants of \$500,000, each corresponding to proposals to connect more North Carolina cities by passenger rail or make improvements to existing routes.

Currently, 16 cities in the state are served by passenger rail service. The Piedmont and Carolinian trains, part of North Carolina's Amtrak service, each make a morning and evening run between Raleigh and Charlotte. The trains stop in Cary, Durham, Burlington, Greensboro, High Point, Salisbury, and Kannapolis. The Carolinian also makes stops in Selma, Wilson, and Rocky Mount in the eastern part of the state.

NC By Train, the state's Amtrak intercity passenger rail service, posted its highest total ridership in 2022 with more than 522,000 passengers using the service.

The state's goal is to eventually connect cities and towns from the coast to the mountains, from Wilmington to Asheville,

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Sean Egan, Transportation Director
City of Durham



Mayor of Salisbury Karen Alexander



Mayor of Salisbury Karen Alexander with
Stephen Gardner, Amtrak CEO.



Susan Klutetz, Co-Chair of Metro Mayor
Passenger Rail Workgroup, shaking hands
with Stephen Gardner.

We are going to be investing the most that we have ever invested in the network. We are here to support your vision. **I want to say how important it is for communities to come together and express how important this is, not only to NCDOT but to your legislators.**

» Stephen Gardner, CEO, Amtrak

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with passenger rail service and to see those numbers climb even more.

The final stop for the Rail Response meetings, held at the restored and majestic Salisbury historic train depot in October, was perhaps the most dramatic. With local news cameras rolling, Amtrak CEO Stephen Gardner arrived by train as the meeting got underway.

"We are going to be investing the most that we have ever invested in the network," Gardner told attendees. "We are here to support your vision."

He also discussed the importance of efforts like Rail Response.

"I want to say how important it is for communities to come together and express how important this is, not only to NCDOT but to your legislators," Gardner said.

While Gardner's participation in the final meeting may have provided fireworks, all five events attracted key community support. All saw local mayors or others writing in their local newspapers about the importance of the effort. All included key community partners like local chambers of commerce.

The effort should pay dividends as the process of intercity passenger rail expansion moves forward across the country and grants are awarded for that expanded service.

The effort should pay dividends as the process of intercity passenger rail expansion moves forward across the country and grants are awarded for that expanded service. ▣



Stephen Gardner, Amtrak CEO

THANK YOU NCLM PREFERRED PARTNERS



Legislative Session Concludes... Mostly

SCOTT MOONEYHAM

Director of Political Communication and Coordination

In recent years, state lawmakers haven't exactly left Raleigh with a lot of pomp, circumstance, and finality.

Instead, they have typically concluded virtually all of their business at some point and time, but then left the door open for a return with readjournment dates that sometimes result in actual legislating but more often open and close without any action.

This year, that "mostly concluded" date came on October 25.

As previously mentioned in these pages, the expectation was that a final budget agreement would be good for cities and towns, even as NLCM and its members returned to some familiar legislative battles over local land-use authority after something of a hiatus during the pandemic years.

That state budget was finally agreed on in early October, and as thought, it once again treated municipalities well regarding local infrastructure investments. Still, a handful of policy provisions were not so welcome.

The \$30 billion state spending plan, which Gov. Roy Cooper allowed to become law but without his signature, includes over \$3 billion in local infrastructure spending. Among those appropriations are individual earmarks of \$1.9 billion for drinking water and wastewater and an increase of \$15.5 million for street funding under the Powell Bill in each year of the two-year budget, bringing the total to \$185.8 million in the second year.

Other major funding items include:

- \$30 million to the Disaster Relief and Mitigation Fund and the Transportation Infrastructure Resiliency Funds.
- \$107.8 million for industrial megasite readiness and preparation.
- \$10 million for local governments to evaluate areas of less than 1,000 acres for industrial development sites.
- \$10 million to local governments for coastal storm damage mitigation.
- \$30 million for local and state parks and beach access, with another \$12.5 million going to the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund to provide matching grants for park facilities for persons with disabilities.
- \$17.5 million for trail development programs.
- \$35 million to the Housing Finance Agency for multi-family affordable housing.

The legislation also makes changes to the Criminal Justice Fellows Program in an effort to increase the number of graduates available for law enforcement jobs, as well as provides the NC Police Chiefs Association with some funding to assist local agencies with employee performance and wellness programs.

Concerning policy provisions include one that will subject local governments to oversight by the Joint Legislative Commission on Governmental Affairs, a legislative oversight body traditionally focused on state operations and one that would prevent retail plastic bag bans or fees, as well as penalties for retailers due to shopping carts being taken and discarded away from retail sites.

Also troubling were some provisions affecting local zoning authority in some specific circumstances in Dare and Wake counties.

Over the course of the legislative session, NCLM had pushed back successfully on statewide bills undermining local zoning authority. They included efforts by homebuilders and other groups to utilize a national housing affordability crisis to upend local land-use regulation and planning in a variety of bills.

Specifically, bills would have eliminated extraterritorial jurisdiction, abolished single-family-only zoning, and required that accessory dwelling units, or in-law suites, be allowed in all residential neighborhoods. In each, the efforts of NCLM members and staff worked to stop the legislation.

To some degree, that was because NCLM was prepared for these fights.

A report on housing, produced in association with the NC County Commissioners Association, used real data from local planning and building inspection departments to show how much growing jurisdictions across the state are doing to address housing and increase density in areas where appropriate. It also demonstrated the efforts that local governments are undertaking to improve inspection processes and included recommendations for similar procedures to duplicate those efforts.

But on another front, local elections, legislation was approved that undetermined local decisions on election districts and whether elections would be held on a partisan or non-partisan basis. Although these bills affected only a few jurisdictions, the use of local legislation to accomplish what has proven difficult through statewide legislation is a concern that NCLM will need to monitor in the future.

[The] state budget was finally agreed on in early October, and as thought, it once again treated municipalities well regarding local infrastructure investments. Still, a handful of policy provisions were not so welcome.

Positively, a number of municipalities saw occupancy tax authority granted, which will allow more cities and towns to both enhance tourist attractions and market those attractions.

The publication of this issue of *Southern City* should coincide with a detailed review of all legislation affecting cities and towns in our annual End-of-Session Bulletin. If you have not seen that publication, please contact staff and we will direct you to it on our website.

What follows is a look at our Legislative Goal Accomplishments included in the End-of-Session Bulletin.

GOAL: Create an adequate and permanent funding stream for local infrastructure.

Passage of SL 2023-134, the state budget bill, included over \$3 billion in local infrastructure spending. Among those appropriations are individual earmarks of \$1.9 billion for drinking water and wastewater. (Sec. 12.2)

GOAL: Expand state transportation funding streams for construction and maintenance of municipal and state-owned secondary roads.

Passage of SL 2023-134, the state budget bill, expands state Powell Bill funding by 10%, to \$170 million in the new fiscal year. (Sec. 41.5) The budget bill also includes \$30 million for the Disaster Relief and Mitigation Fund and the Transportation Infrastructure Resiliency Funds. (Sec. 5.9)

GOAL: Expand incentives that encourage regionalization of water and sewer, as well as other municipal services, when appropriate.

Passage of SL 2023-134, the state budget bill, sets aside another \$10 million for the state Viable Utility Reserve in

undirected funds for distressed water and sewer utilities, as that program continues to work to address utility systems' deferred maintenance needs, including through regionalization plans.

GOAL: Expand incentives and funding for local economic development.

Passage of SL 2023-134, the state budget bill, provides \$107.8 million to assist in economic development megasite preparedness, helping local communities create sites attractive to new businesses. Another \$10 million from the bill would go to evaluate areas of less than 1,000 acres for industrial sites (Sec. 11.2)

GOAL: Expand federal and state resources for affordable housing.

Passage of SL 2023-134, the state budget bill, \$35 million to the Housing Finance Agency for multi-family affordable housing.

GOAL: Enhance state systems and resources for local law enforcement officer recruitment, training, and retention.

Passage of HB 140 Civilian Traffic Investigators allows cities to employ civilian investigators to investigate motor vehicle accidents, freeing up sworn law enforcement officers to meet other public safety needs. Passage of SL 2023-134, the state budget bill (Sec. 18.3) includes additional funding within the Criminal Justice Fellows Program and modifications designed to increase the number of graduates. ■

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Inaugural Risk Management Services “Trust Matters” Conference

ISABELLA MORMANDO
Communications Associate

This October the NC League of Municipalities debuted its first Trust Matters Conference. The gathering was hosted at the Sheraton Hotel in Research Triangle Park. Participants from around the state traveled to attend in person where our Risk Management Services team presented a variety of important topics for cities and towns.

Opening the conference, NCLM Director of Business Services, Lisa Kinsey, detailed the history and management of the three insurance pools offered by the League:

- Property and Liability
- Workers' Compensation
- Health Benefits Trust

Following this information, a lively panel discussion covered some common best practices in risk management.

One particular topic covered in this session is how to successfully and safely conduct special events in cities and towns. The panelists emphasized the importance of implementing special event policies, task forces, following correct permitting processes, and post-event review procedures.

Panelists Amy Whisnant and Matt Reid, NCLM Risk Control Consultants, Ryan Ezzell, Director of Underwriting, and Kinsey answered specific questions from attendees.

Scottie Harris, Fire Chief in the Town of Weaverville, took home some advice for the town's upcoming holiday parades.

“We looked at how we can revamp some safety procedures and still give the community a somewhat traditional holiday parade,” Harris said. He mentioned that the panel “gave an opportunity for feedback and asking questions... we were able to network and get good ideas to move forward.”

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The conference also featured presentations from NCLM Human Resources Consultant Lou Bunch, Fire Services Risk Management Consultant TJ DeLuca, Risk Control Consultant Darius Chisholm, and Public Safety Risk Management Consultant, Joseph Graziano. Each consultant covered their area of expertise, ranging from OSHA inspection preparation to best employment practices.

Tracy Stubblefield, Assistant Finance Director of the Town of Clayton, was satisfied with her experience attending the Trust Matters Conference.

"The conference was very beneficial to me. It provided a deep dive into several areas of oversight, specifically best practices for special events, avoiding uninsured losses, tips for handling claims, and liability concerns," Stubblefield said.

Many attendees work one-on-one with our Risk Management Services team. The League is always looking at ways to foster and maintain beneficial relationships with municipal employees. The goal of organizing events such as the Trust Matters Conference is to inform members

of all the available resources the League provides and how to utilize them.

Harris feels like the League is a "resource that is truly on your side." He is one of the members who can rely on League staff to answer any question, no matter how big or small.

The League hopes to see the Trust Matters Conference expand and grow into a one-stop-shop for all the relevant information that cities and towns are seeking for their own risk management needs. ■



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Mayor Elizabeth Morey Leads by Listening

JACK CASSIDY

NCLM Learning and Development Project Manager

THROUGH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND A CITIZEN-FIRST APPROACH, MOREY ENSURES SOUTHERN SHORES IS NOT JUST A TOP-TIER BEACH DESTINATION, BUT ALSO A TRUE HOMETOWN.

If you live in Southern Shores, there's a good chance Mayor Elizabeth Morey has knocked on your door.

"I know what the problems are and who's being impacted. Because they've told me," Morey says. Between campaigning and her tenure as mayor, it's been hundreds and hundreds of door knocks and front porch meetings. "It turns out, if you listen, a lot of people will talk to you."

What she finds in those conversations is, above all else, a shared appreciation of their community. "Even when I'd ask what they didn't like or what they would like to see addressed, they always start with, 'I love living in Southern Shores,'" Morey says. "And I say, 'Good, because I love living in Southern Shores, too!'" On the Outer Banks, to like where you're at is a prerequisite.

To understand Mayor Morey, it's best to first understand her town. By Census count, Southern Shores hosts just over 3,000 full-time residents, though the summertime crowd numbers in the tens of thousands and is located on the northern Outer Banks in Dare County, along with the towns of Nags Head, Kill Devil Hills, Kitty Hawk and Duck, among other communities. One north-to-south road connects them all. These areas are not identical, though. "Just like each town has its own distinct borders, each town also has its own distinct personalities," Morey says.

What sets Southern Shores apart from its neighbors is a focus on residential housing. While still a vacation destination, many full-time residents of the Outer Banks find their way to Southern Shores, says Morey, who notes that only about 5% of the town's development is dedicated to commercial activity. "It's a unique footprint," Morey says. "The entire oceanfront is residential."

Accompanying that hometown makeup is a strong local sense of volunteerism. Local community groups are the engine of Southern Shores, as Morey describes, from fire response to recreation to beach access to marinas. All of it, and more, is overseen by a network of civic organizations. "We pride ourselves on being a residential community, and on being a community of volunteers," Morey says. "That's who we are."



Still, a residential town on the Outer Banks is far different than a residential town elsewhere in the state, and for a local government that distinction brings with it a host of unique challenges and circumstances. The tourist towns of North Carolina have an impact that expands far beyond the traditional metrics of population or land mass. There is the economic impact, of course, capturing the commercial activity of the many visitors and vacationers. But maybe more important is the larger reputational impact of these destinations that, like an ambassador, have an outsized role in representing the state as a whole. To many thousands of people, a trip to North Carolina simply means a trip to the beach.

That's just one of the weights carried by Southern Shores and towns like it. And as a longtime visitor herself, it's a fact Morey knows full well.

Morey grew up in the greater Dallas area of Texas before moving with her family to Atlanta when she was in middle school. That relocation started her slow pilgrimage north, first moving out

We pride ourselves on being a residential community, and on being a community of volunteers. That's who we are.

» Elizabeth Morey, Mayor, Southern Shores

I know what the problems are and who's being impacted. Because they've told me. **It turns out, if you listen, a lot of people will talk to you.**

» **Elizabeth Morey**, Mayor, Southern Shores

of Georgia to attend school in South Carolina at Clemson, then moving again for work to North Carolina, where she also got her master's degree at NC State. Finally, after several decades in the state, Morey and her husband moved to the coast.

"Southern Shores was a place we loved to visit," Morey said of the move. "We still think it's one of the most beautiful places to live. It was a goal. We achieved it and we're proud of it."

Finding public office was not part of that plan. At the same time, as Morey admits, it is not wholly unexpected. Her career was largely centered around public resources, if not exactly the public sector, working as a forester and then later in regulatory research at the NC Department of Environmental and Natural Resources (now the Department of Environmental Quality). Politically, Morey also helped with numerous campaigns, canvassing, and door-knocking during this time.

She remembers the pull towards public service beginning back as early as her childhood days in Atlanta. Morey's parents were exceptionally community-oriented and, through their work purely as active citizens, were adept at achieving change locally. Morey points to one specific example:

"When we moved to Atlanta, there was no recreation. You had to drive miles and miles and miles to get to a public swimming pool, which was unusual for them because they moved from Dallas and there were swimming pools everywhere. So, they took it upon themselves to meet with the developer and get land donated. Then, we drummed up community support, and before you know it, we had a community swimming pool and tennis court in our neighborhood. No small feat." The local organizing achievement rightfully caught the attention of developers and local leaders in the community, and Morey's father was soon asked to join the Planning Board.

"I don't know if you could do that now," Morey says. "But we did. He pulled it off." Morey's father served on the Planning Board for more than 20 years. "I was just a kid growing up, so I didn't know a lot of details. But I was exposed to it."

Upon moving to Southern Shores, she followed those same footsteps, joining the Planning Board first as an alternate, then as a regular member, and then as the chair. She served for eight years.

In the arena of local leadership, there are few better introductions to the scope of local government than planning. Zoning, land use, permitting—these responsibilities are uniquely local and affect nearly all other services offered by a local government. Morey was in the middle of it, albeit in just an advisory role. "Eventually, I wanted to not just offer advice to the decision-makers," she said. "I wanted to be one of the decision makers."

She made the leap in 2019, running as part of a four-person race for three open town council seats. She won. After one term, she made another leap and ran for Mayor. She won again, becoming the first female mayor in the history of Southern Shores. The beach-side wall in the Town Council chambers features framed headshots of all the town's mayors. "It's me and the boys, I like to say," said Morey.



Morey's experience as a public official did not begin easily. It began with a pandemic. Taking office in December 2019, Morey had only a few relatively normal months before the onset of the COVID-19 crisis in March 2020. Southern Shores, working with its neighboring towns, had to respond to a complete upheaval of the normal routine of the Outer Banks, which included briefly closing the bridge to the island, concerns about adequate groceries and resources for the residents, and, of course, the disease itself. "All my, 'I want to work on improvements, I want to work on infrastructure,' my whole list of things—it had to wait," Morey said.

As the pandemic and related public safety measures began to unwind, old challenges began to rush back in. Challenges that beach communities know intimately.

"They're called changeover days," Morey says.

Changeover days: Saturdays and Sundays from May to October, typically. The Outer Banks is slim and long, and running that length is just two roads. In tourism season, 'Changeover Days' are when the current crop of visitors departs their rentals, and the new crop of visitors arrives. They come and go at the same

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It's one of the things I did after my two experiences of running for office: talking to people at their front door. It's the opportunity for people to have somebody to listen to them. Sometimes a lot of people come, sometimes only one person comes. **The people here know, if you want to be heard, I am there to listen.**

» **Elizabeth Morey**, Mayor, Southern Shores

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time, trying to access or leave any number of the area's towns. Southern Shores is right in the middle of it.

"It's an intractable problem," said Morey. "Any public meeting, any roundtable, any community chat—traffic is the first thing that's mentioned."

There's no room for more roads. There's not much way to convince visitors to travel midweek as opposed to the weekends. And there's no way to reach destinations without driving. Solutions, then, must be incremental and creative.

"One way that we improved the situation this past summer is by keeping drivers on the main roads and out of the neighborhoods." They did so by working with the traffic navigation app Waze, which drivers use to find the quickest routes to their destinations. At the town's request, Waze stopped pointing drivers towards side streets and neighborhood roads. "It helped."

Housing has grown as an issue in Southern Shores, as it has in many other cities nationally. With new ways of working

post-pandemic, more remote employees now call Southern Shores home full-time. That has contributed at least partly to a significant demand for new housing on the Outer Banks. And as perhaps the most residential-focused town on the island, Southern Shores has acutely felt that pressure. New builds, renovations, and proposed developments are all up. How to make room for residents, new arrivals and visitors is a question Mayor Morey must answer each day.

Housing and changeover traffic, in addition to other local challenges like beach nourishment and hurricane resilience, follow a pattern familiar to Southern Shores. It's a surge, then a lull. From summer to winter, it's like two different places and two different communities, and two different sets of priorities. Keeping services, engagement and leadership steady through the tumult is a top requirement of the job.

Mayor Morey accomplishes it by talking to people. "It's one of the things I did after my two experiences of running for office: talking to people at their front door." Taking that outreach one step further, Mayor Morey instituted Mayor's chats, which are an opportunity for town residents to openly share their thoughts with town leaders.

"It's the opportunity for people to have somebody to listen to them," she said. "Sometimes a lot of people come, sometimes only one person comes."

For a role that changes by the season, her approach to engagement and outreach is one that yields results.

"The people here know, if you want to be heard, I am there to listen." ▣



SOUTHERN SHORES AND THE AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN

Like many towns across North Carolina, Southern Shores is investing its American Rescue Plan funds into transformational infrastructure upgrades. Specifically, it is addressing a bridge.

Southern Shores features an extensive canal system, and the bridge in question crosses one section. It is frequently noted among the citizens as an area to improve, both in terms of safety and structural integrity.



SOUTHERN SHORES AND NCLM'S ARP SERVICE LINE

ARP dollars were allocated based on residential population, so similar to many tourism-heavy towns, Southern Shores received a relatively small amount of money—just under \$1 million—compared to the number of people that will ultimately use the infrastructure.

So, Southern Shores is leveraging NCLM's ARP service programs to make that money go as far as possible—and to find additional funds.

The town is taking part in NCLM's grant writing program. This assistance offering pairs municipalities with grant writing professionals, who will apply for the many federal and state funding programs currently available. This program allows towns with limited staff capacity to adequately prepare and apply for grants, and, when awarded, will continue to assist towns with managing the funds.

"There are grant opportunities out there," said Mayor Morey. "And this is going to help us take advantage of them."

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Alliance Code Enforcement LLC is the premiere private Code Enforcement contractor in the state serving municipalities throughout North Carolina. With a strong focus on customer service and accountability, ACE's key to success has been communication. ACE takes a hands-on approach to help the community protect, maintain, and repair its quality of life. ACE's goal is to create an alliance with towns and residents to rectify current violations while mitigating or abating those in the future. ACE is a respected pillar of the community, working hand in hand with municipalities, to, not only enforce the code, but also expedite the abatement process by providing education and solutions.

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NCLM and the American Rescue Plan: Services, Support, and a Thriving Future for North Carolina

JACK CASSIDY AND ISABELLA MORMANDO

THE LEAGUE'S ARP SERVICE LINE IS MORE THAN JUST AN ASSISTANCE PROGRAM TO HELP IN THE SHORT TERM. IT'S A NETWORK OF SUPPORT THAT WILL ASSIST OUR CITIES AND TOWNS FOR MANY YEARS TO COME.

BACKGROUND

When defined closely, the American Rescue Plan is simply a federal law—or more accurately, aid package—that provided financial support to many sectors around the country, including local governments. In North Carolina, the amount received by cities and towns totaled more than \$1.3 billion.

Looked at from a historical perspective, though, the uniqueness of the law comes into focus. It's not a typical aid package. Never before have *all* municipalities received direct financial support. For those that have received support in the past, it was almost certainly less or more limited than what was received previously, but for many smaller localities, ARP stands as the first time they've received an appropriation from the federal government.

The rarity sets the stage. This has not happened before, and this will likely not

happen again. What has emerged through this one-time situation, however, is impact that will extend far beyond a single moment. City investments have been far reaching, both in size and timeline; our communities are building foundations that will last generations; cities are engaging their citizens in new and effective ways, and are engaging each other, too, through arrangements that are promoting regional investments; and supporting it all is a robust apparatus of support and partnerships, lifting up every town in this state.

The North Carolina League of Municipalities has become a key component of this larger ARP network. Behind every decision, there is legal guidance and information sharing from the League, and for towns new to receiving federal funds, there is step-by-step direction on how to administer the funds. The full list of services being offered by the League is all-encompassing:

legal, accounting, planning, engineering, communications, grant writing, and administration guidance.

Through the League's work with local governments for over 100 years, we know one thing for certain: when cities and towns get the support they need, they get the job done. The American Rescue Plan presented an opportunity for all 540-plus municipalities in North Carolina to showcase that very fact.

STAFF

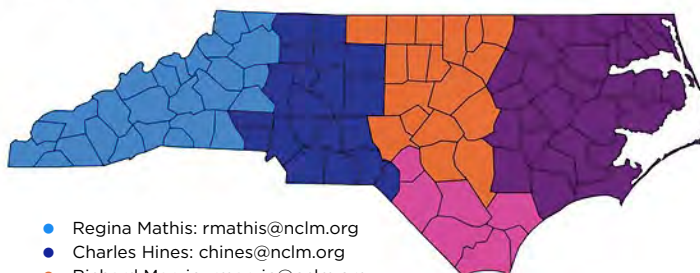
To support cities' ARP efforts, the NC General Assembly provided a generous allocation of its own ARP dollars to the NC League of Municipalities. The directive was to stand up a support system that would assist towns with every facet of the American Rescue Plan.

That aimed-for support system has become the NCLM ARP Service Line, and running that service line is NCLM's ARP Team.

"All of our towns know what investments are needed in their communities, but there are understandable challenges with limitations like staff capacity, budget constraints or just inexperience with federal funding," said Chris Nida, NCLM's Director of Technical Assistance to Cities, who oversees the League's ARP Team. "Our service line fills in those gaps and provides constant support. We're bringing them past those limitations."

An expansive staff of dedicated public servants, numbering 24 in total, the ARP Team includes former town managers, finance officers, government budget professionals, fellows from the UNC Lead for North Carolina program, and a host of

REGIONAL MAP—ARP FIELD REPRESENTATIVES





Carla Obiol, NCLM Chief ARP Officer



Chris Nida, NCLM Director of Technical Assistance to Cities



Chase Norwood, NCLM MAS Accounting Supervisor



Diane Seaford, NCLM Deputy Director for Municipal Accounting Services

other local government professionals. They are located throughout the state. Towns, regardless of geography and location, have League staff members dedicated to their region, ensuring that help can be provided both in short order and in person.

"The team that we have built at the League is truly remarkable," said Carla Obiol, Chief ARP Officer. "In every corner of the state, we have talented, public-minded members of the team ready to help. If you have a question, a concern or a need for guidance, we can help. We've already seen and helped with so many great successes in our communities."

Obiol stands as a strong example of the talent that makes up the team, as she arrived at the League with extensive experience in project management, team-building, stakeholder collaboration, and grant implementation and administration. Obiol was previously at the Foundation for Health Leadership and Innovation, where her roles included time as interim CEO and Vice President of Community Voice and Advocacy, and before that had a 33-year career at the NC Department of Insurance, where she rose to the role of Senior Deputy Commissioner for the Consumer Assistance Group, leading three of the Department's divisions.

"In helping our local leaders, we're helping our communities. We're impacting citizens," said Obiol. "That's what I'm passionate about, and that's what we're really doing here."

The impact is in many ways immeasurable. It's in hundreds of towns, affecting many thousands of citizens. A few examples showcase the work, and how the partnership between town and League yields tremendous success.

RAMSEUR

ARP Service Used: Grant writing

The Town of Ramseur, population 1,777, entered into its ARP journey with a clear vision. The goal was to build a destination park and recreation hub to serve as an economic driver for its community, and to improve the quality of life for residents. To develop the plan, they worked with nonprofit organization Unique Places to Save, which is dedicated to restoring and conserving high-quality aquatic resources.

The project is extensive. Ramseur is looking to improve the existing park, Leonard Park, through development of



additional miles of trails and through other refurbishments. That project would involve connecting a lakeside parcel of land to both the park and to the trails of the nearby town, Franklinville. Additionally, there are hopes for such amenities as an amphitheater.

Certain elements of the project are complex, and a great deal of review and analysis is required. For example, Ramseur has already secured a PARTF grant to research the lake's dam, which would potentially be used to connect the trails over the water. In total, the project is quite expensive. Much of the town's ARP funding had already been allotted for other immediate needs.

Thus, Ramseur contacted NCLM looking to take advantage of its grant writing service.

Through League vendor Witt O'Brien, a government solutions agency with a focus on grant writing and grant management, Ramseur will be pursuing additional funds through federal and state grant programs.

It's a solution for a situation seen commonly across North Carolina, said Obiol. Projects are worked towards and strategized about over a long period of time—but with limited staff capacity, smaller towns can often not take advantage of grants and other resources that help get those projects over the finish line.

Through the ARP Service Line, help can finally be provided.

"Our towns are strategic and creative and know what their community needs most. Grants exist for this very reason—to aid cities in achieving important projects. But our small towns simply lack the resources to pursue those programs," said Obiol. "Through our Service Line, we're now able to bridge that gap."

TOWN OF BLACK MOUNTAIN

ARP Service Used: Legal guidance

The Town of Black Mountain is pursuing major infrastructure investments: a flood mitigation project and utility mapping project. Total costs are more than \$5 million, and in addition to its ARP funds, the town has received additional federal funds and is working with the NC Department of Environmental Quality.

As with any large project, there is a maze of restrictions, requirements and legal questions. With multiple sources of funding, those questions multiply, and towns can often be left unsure of how to proceed. NCLM's legal assistance offering is intended to cut through that confusion, and will allow towns to confidently pursue the projects their communities need.

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The legal assistance program is operated through NCLM's partner law firm Parker Poe.

Black Mountain's Angela Reece, Project and Facilities Manager for the town, notes that the lawyers at Parker Poe were more than simply a help with the process. They were a necessity.

"We could not have done these projects without this assistance from Parker Poe," said Reece. "They are a super impressive law firm. They have been so professional and timely and thorough. I can't speak highly enough of them."

Customer service is a critical element of Parker Poe's services as well. Given the scope of projects and the approaching deadlines, legal guidance needs to be quick and immediately helpful. This service, as Reece notes, hits that mark as well.

"It's not like you're waiting. You're not asking a question and waiting for someone to say, 'Oh, I have to find the answer.' They know the answer immediately," Reece said.

"Through the guidance and advice of Parker Poe, the town is confident that our project will be successful and will meet all the ARPA and state requirements. We sincerely appreciate NCLM's guidance and leadership during this process as well and are grateful for the financial support to facilitate this partnership."

MUNICIPAL ACCOUNTING SERVICES

One offering of the ARP Service Line stands out among the rest: the Municipal Accounting Services (MAS) program.

MAS is a first-of-its-kind assistance program, designed to promote better financial accountability and reliability for smaller governments. It addresses a persistent problem facing small towns across North Carolina. Due to the hurdles of cost and access to expertise, many smaller local governments are unable to adopt up-to-date financial systems, and instead must operate inadequate software, making them susceptible to accounting and audit errors. This service is provided at no cost to participating towns through the American Rescue Plan grant period, ending in 2026.

The program's full suite of services includes software for fund accounting, payroll, utility billing, taxes, and very important hands-on expert assistance.

"Financial responsibilities are among the most important for a municipality, but also among the most challenging," said Nida. "Our smaller towns fulfill this responsibility with very limited resources. The MAS program helps them achieve better financial management both today and for many years into the future."

The League employs accounting specialists to assist the converting towns throughout the entire process. Following the successful implementation of the Black Mountain Software, the League dedicates a point-of-contact on our staff to continue assisting towns with further questions and problems that arise.

The League will pay all member costs associated with participation in the MAS Program, including the software licensing and implementation fees and the League's accounting assistance efforts, for the first three years.

The first "pilot" towns of the MAS Program were the Town of Pikeville and the Town of Jonesville. They each received demo versions of the Black Mountain Software and configured the system to their needs. The League provided various forms of support, such as contracting CPA help and sending League IT personnel to identify new technology needs in addition to expert staff helping on the ground.

"MAS holds tremendous potential for the cities and towns of North Carolina, as our local governments prove time and again that when they receive needed support, they get the job done. We are exceptionally fortunate to be able to partner with the Towns of Jonesville and Pikeville as our first participants," said NCLM Executive Director Rose Vaughn Williams.

In addition to the accounting services and consultation, MAS also features an offering that tackles one of the most pressing issues facing our towns' financial wellbeing: cybersecurity. NCLM's in-house staff is already out across the state providing cybersecurity assessments, guidance, and consultation services.

Read more about the Town of Pikeville's success story with the MAS Program in this issue.

FUTURE

By the end of 2024, all American Rescue Plan dollars will be obligated, and by the end of 2026, they'll have been spent. Three years may be a long time period in many arenas, but in the scope of public investment projects, that is a quick turnaround—hence, the flurry of activity now.

Though the dollars will be spent, the impact will only just be beginning. The examples above, of Ramseur, Black Mountain, Jonesville, and Pikeville, provide some insight into what our state can expect, as do many other cases around North Carolina.

In Sylva, public space downtown is being renovated not just to create an attractive area for residents, but to also improve the town's stormwater capacity and make it more resilient in the decades ahead.

In Havelock, investments are underway to address aging water and sewer infrastructure, improve the town's economic development outlook, and support the community's most important stakeholder, Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point.

In Lewisville, ARP money won't be evident in just one or even two large projects, but rather will be seen throughout a slew of new and ongoing projects, all of which strategically fit within the town's comprehensive vision. These include roadway enhancements, sidewalk extensions, and investments into public parks and programs at the town's centerpiece facility, Shallowford Square.

In Waynesville, ARP dollars allowed the town to continue on a strategic path already in progress—and to continue on at a quicker pace. These investments touch nearly every area of town: public safety, homelessness, sanitation and recycling, parks and greenways, town staffing and, most notably, infrastructure.

And in hundreds of other towns—large and small, urban and rural, mountainous and coastal—the same story is being written. It's a tale we know well, and that is proven true time and again: when cities get support, they get the job done.

Through the large network of support that has been created at the League and that now exists in communities all across our state, that story will only become more frequent in the coming years. Support is now entrenched. ■

Learn more about our ARP efforts and stay up to date on guidance and news at arp.ncilm.org.



NCLM'S AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN STATEWIDE IMPACT

The N.C. League of Municipalities, at the direction of the North Carolina General Assembly and with ARPA funding, has been leading an effort to partner with cities and towns across the state to provide them with customized services, including:

- Upgrading municipal accounting systems and boosting financial reporting capabilities
- Providing expert legal, grant-writing, and engineering & planning services
- Securing town assets through cybersecurity upgrades
- Assisting towns with federal ARPA compliance

685+

SERVICES
REQUESTED

283

UNIQUE
TOWNS

43

FINANCIAL
CONVERSIONS

515+

ARPA COMPLIANCE
CONSULTATIONS

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This effort is vital to the ongoing health of North Carolina's rural communities. NCLM is confident we have developed a plan that, with ongoing guidance and assistance, will help communities better meet the needs of local taxpayers.

"We are on the Unit Assistance List right now and [the League] has made sure I have all the resources I need as a new finance director to keep us going in the right direction. It's nice to know we can call on them and have someone in our corner as an advocate for a small town."

HALEE RATCLIFF, WILKESBORO FINANCE DIRECTOR



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ARP Case Study

ARP Funds Allow Town of Newton Grove to Fix Outdated Water/Sewer System

STEPHANIE HUGHES

Communications & Multimedia Strategist (ARP)

NEWTON GROVE WAS STRUGGLING WITH AN OUTDATED WATER AND SEWER SYSTEM AND DEPLETED TOWN FUNDS WHEN THE TOWN RECEIVED A ONCE-IN-A-GENERATION OPPORTUNITY THROUGH THE DISTRIBUTION OF FUNDS FROM THE AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN.

Newton Grove is a town of approximately 585 residents in Sampson County, NC. It is the type of small North Carolina town where everyone knows everyone else's name. When you drive through, you will likely notice the Newton Grove Water Tower that stands near the center of town and has become a sort of landmark within the community. Yet, while the water tower has become a symbol of the town, beneath the surface, Newton Grove was dealing with an outdated water and sewer system and depleted funds with which to make the necessary upgrades. So when it was announced that Newton Grove would receive approximately \$180,000 in ARP funds, town officials knew exactly where to invest it.

The town put the funds into reconstructing the town's two wells and repairing some of the lift stations, both of which are essential for a functioning water and sewer system. Much of the system's infrastructure is over 40 years old and has needed repairs to bring it up to date. Newton Grove recognizes that upgrading water systems is not the flashiest project, but it is one that is vitally important to residents' daily lives and one that requires an enormous amount of time and money.

"A lot of people do not understand what it takes to run a waste treatment plant or to run a clean, clear drinking water system. I hope that our municipality and other communities understand that it takes so much," Newton Grove Town Clerk and

Zoning & Planning Administrator Amanda Bradshaw said.

These funds could not have come at a more needed time. Before the ARP funds' distribution, the town was unsure how they would finance the necessary repairs. Bradshaw shared how it felt that the town was holding its breath, unsure of how they would be able to accomplish what was needed.

"We're on the UAL list and we had applied for a few grants, but unfortunately, we were not chosen for those grants, so it was kind of a scary time when I came in and took over financially," Bradshaw said. "We were at a place where we really did not know what we were going to do. So that ARP money saved us."

I cannot tell you how critical [the ARP funds] have been. It has been a phenomenal thing to have direct revenue sharing like this [...] and **it is allowing towns to see investment into their infrastructure so they can attract more growth.**

» Richard Marvin, NCLM ARP Field Representative

The League has been very helpful with the reports that we have had to do with ARP.

I cannot thank [them] enough.

» **Amanda Bradshaw**, Town Clerk and Zoning & Planning Administrator, Newton Grove

Towns may end up on the UAL (Unit Assistance List), which is overseen by the Local Government Commission within the State Treasurer's office for a variety of reasons, including when they do not have enough available funds to cover expenditures. Newton Grove was placed on the UAL prior to the pandemic, but through the assistance of the ARP funds, have seen their status improve greatly.

Bradshaw shared the incredible impact these funds will have on their town, "We have struggled so long with trying to be able to figure out how to do some of these [repairs]. And we are still in the process of needing more repairs, but that money helped us tremendously [...] to bring us up to a level where we should be."

The League has heard many similar stories from across the state where ARP funds are helping towns fix ongoing infrastructure challenges. The funds are replacing lost revenue for towns with declining populations and are allowing towns experiencing a growth in population to proactively update their equipment.

"I cannot tell you how critical [the ARP funds] have been," Richard Marvin, NCLM ARP Field Representative, said. "It has been a phenomenal thing to have direct revenue sharing like this [...] and it is allowing towns to see investment into their infrastructure so they can attract more growth."

The League has come alongside Newton Grove as a consultant for appropriately following the required procedures of accepting ARP funds and offering services for grant writing, legal counsel, cybersecurity, and communications.

"The League has been very helpful with the reports that we have had to do with ARP. I cannot thank [them] enough," Bradshaw said. "I think anybody should take advantage of anything that the League offers as an education or simply just sitting down with somebody and just speaking to them." ▣



ARP Case Study

Town of Pikeville Successfully Pilots the Municipal Accounting Services Program

ISABELLA MORMANDO
Communications Associate

THE TOWN OF PIKEVILLE WAS CELEBRATED BY THE LEAGUE FOR BEING ONE OF THE FIRST PILOT TOWNS TO IMPLEMENT THE LEAGUE'S MUNICIPAL ACCOUNTING SERVICES (MAS) PROGRAM. WITH ARP FUNDING, THE MAS PROGRAM CONTINUES TO SUPPORT THE TOWN OF PIKEVILLE TO OVERCOME OBSTACLES AND PROVIDES ASSISTANCE TO TOWN EMPLOYEES FREE OF CHARGE UNTIL 2026.

The Town of Pikeville sits quietly among rich farmland on the north-central coastal plain of North Carolina. The town occupies a half-square mile where 700 people call home.

In the years following the pandemic, the town was having trouble managing its finances. The Local Government Commission (LGC) assumed control of Pikeville's finances in 2021.

"There was no question that we didn't know what we were doing. Coming in as a new mayor I was awfully happy to learn from them," said Pikeville Mayor Garrett Johnston. "We totally submitted ourselves to their program and what they had to offer."

Eric Faust from the Department of State Treasurer was the LGC-appointed Finance Officer for the town. After working under the guidance of Eric and Deputy Finance Officer Michael Milam, Pikeville regained control of its finances in December 2022.

Faust worked with the League during the development of the Municipal Accounting Services (MAS) program and provided advice for the League's MAS Program.

The MAS program helps small towns in North Carolina convert their financial and accounting processes to Black Mountain Software. Through the software, cities can manage payroll, utility billing, taxes, and other common municipal needs. The League provides expert point-of-contacts on our staff for these transitioning towns to ask questions and work through problems as they arise.

After working with the Town of Pikeville, Faust suggested that Pikeville would be a promising first candidate to transition its financial system through the League's MAS program.

Wendy Holland, Town Clerk and Finance Officer of Pikeville, praises NCLM staff for

their willingness and ability to help the town through their conversion process.

NCLM Accounting Specialist Tracy Chestnutt has worked closely with Holland throughout the conversion process and will remain a consultant with the Town of Pikeville until the end of 2026.

"Tracy has been very helpful in not only the software but the financials and other unanswered questions. She's just so knowledgeable," Holland said.

Holland has worked for the Town of Pikeville for two years and has over 28 years of accounting experience but admits that joining the world of municipal governing is a learning journey.

It's not just about us, it's about small towns in North Carolina having a more efficient program and being able to run things with better accountability.

» Garrett Johnston, Mayor, Pikeville

“There’s only three of us in the office,” Holland explained. “With the new software, it’s a learning curve... Everyone with the League, you call and ask a question and they give you an answer... it’s just helped tremendously with everything, not just the software, with everything. It’s a blessing really.”

The Town of Pikeville is one of two pilot towns to successfully convert to Black Mountain Software, along with the Town of Jonesville.

To celebrate the long, financial journey the Town of Pikeville has undergone over the past few years, NCLM Executive Director Rose Williams, MAS Senior Consultant Perry James, and Tracy Chestnutt joined Pikeville’s town hall meeting on October 9.

Mayor Johnston received the MAS Program completion plaque on behalf of Pikeville. Holland and Tim Biggerstaff, Town Manager, received certificates of completion as well.

“It’s not just about us, it’s about small towns in North Carolina having a more efficient program and being able to run things with better accountability,” said Mayor Johnston.

Mayor Johnston witnessed firsthand the struggles his town was having in managing its finances. He realized that oftentimes it’s not about someone intentionally trying to mismanage accounts, there’s just a lack of experience in the municipal accounting field. With the Black Mountain Software “it takes the guesswork out of what we’re doing,” he said.

The Town of Pikeville recently received its budget ask of \$1 million from Rep. John Bell to renovate its parks, revitalize downtown with a new town hall, and develop community initiatives for the town’s people to spearhead.

Now that the town is operating in the Black Mountain Software, it makes that money much easier to manage, monitor, and plan.

“The town was drowning, and the state and the League came in like a life raft and we were able to get out of our mess,” said Mayor Johnston. “We want to inspire people with what we’re doing... and whatever we do, we need to do with excellence.”



ARP Case Study

Wilkesboro Invests in Community Through Creative Use of ARP-enabled Funds

STEPHANIE HUGHES

Communications & Multimedia Strategist (ARP)

WILKESBORO, KNOWN FOR ITS OUTDOOR MUSIC FESTIVALS AND RECREATION, CONTINUES TO INVEST IN ITS GROWING COMMUNITY THROUGH THE OPENING OF A NEW UNIVERSAL PLAYGROUND, MADE POSSIBLE BY ARP FUNDS.

Nestled along the Yadkin River, the Town of Wilkesboro in Western North Carolina has undergone a significant revitalization over the past decade. The town of approximately 3,700 residents is known for its outdoor music festivals, such as MerleFest and Carolina in the Fall, and has recently embraced becoming a destination for outdoor recreation. In addition to miles of walking and mountain bike trails, the town is also home to a world-class disc golf course and campground site at their wastewater treatment plant.

Through the funds distributed as part of the American Rescue Plan, the town encountered an opportunity to invest even more into its ongoing growth and development. Wilkesboro received approximately \$1.1 million in ARP funds, which they opted to put towards the replacement of lost revenue due to the pandemic. This allocation freed up other funds which the town has now invested in a number of projects.

The largest of these projects is the creation of an inclusive playground at Cub Creek Park. The playground was already part of the town's plans, but the ARP-enabled funds they received allowed them to increase the scope of the project and build Cub Creek into a

destination park. The playground opened this fall and is already becoming a place where residents of Wilkesboro are coming together and inviting in new visitors from outside of the town.

"By doing this park you're investing in your community, you're investing in children of all ability levels, [...] you're investing in visitors that are going to be able to come and use your park and your playground," Regina Mathis, NCLM ARP Field Representative, said.

Additionally, Wilkesboro creatively combined its ARP-enabled funds, state grants, and private donations to build the playground, meaning that no tax-payer dollars were used for the more than \$1 million project.

"None of this would be possible without our ARP funds," Halee Ratcliff, Wilkesboro's Finance Director, shared. "Sure, we would still have the park, but it wouldn't be nearly the magnitude it is now without those ARPA-enabled funds. That got us over the finish line to make this the crown jewel of Cub Creek Park. It was a great project and we're really thankful."

In addition to the playground, Wilkesboro desired to invest the funds in tangible outcomes for the community. They were patient in determining other projects, waiting for the right opportunity, and ultimately purchased two pieces of property—a historic home with plans to preserve this piece of Wilkesboro history and a tract of land along US-421 that they plan to use for economic development in

None of this would be possible without our ARP funds. That got us over the finish line to make this the crown jewel of Cub Creek Park. It was a great project and we're really thankful.

» Halee Ratcliff, Finance Director, Wilkesboro



the future. Neither of these purchases were planned in the initial yearly budget, but because of the ARP-enabled funds, the town was able to make a move when the opportunities arose. The town plans to use the properties for continued investment in the growth and revitalization of Wilkesboro for years to come, allowing their ARP-enabled funds to continue to make an impact.

“The hope is that this is going to trickle into our downtown and our other merchants and give them a boost in business,” Ratcliff said. “The economic development is more of a long game, but I hope that we do something that makes our residents proud to call Wilkesboro home and I hope we can preserve that character that I think a lot of people really cherish around here.”

The League is working alongside Wilkesboro in ensuring the town has the support needed to help them navigate a number of new processes that have come along with the ARP funding.

“I can tell that [Halee Ratcliff] is really invested in Wilkesboro and really wants to move them forward,” Mathis said.

And the town is taking advantage of a number of the League’s ARP services, including transitioning over to software provided by the League’s Municipal Accounting Services (MAS). The system will upgrade the town’s financial system and the League will provide them with personalized assistance throughout the transition.

“[The League] has made sure I have all the resources I need as a new finance director to keep us going in the right direction,” Ratcliff said. “It’s nice to know we can call on them and have someone in our corner as an advocate for a small town.” ▣



TAKING THE FIELD

With ARP, an Opportunity, a Responsibility, and a Role Well Played



ROSE VAUGHN WILLIAMS
NCLM Executive Director

Through the many changes in local governments—budget cycles and news cycles, projects and programs—one topic has remained front and center for the better part of two years: the American Rescue Plan.

Communications from the League reflect that sentiment. ARP has been a key piece of just about everything we've put out since early 2021, from events to emails. This magazine issue is no different. It is yet more outreach dedicated to a subject that plays such a central role in our municipalities, in ways both obvious and discreet.

Let's begin with the obvious. The American Rescue Plan is a rarity—a program unprecedented and unlikely to happen again. Every city and town in North Carolina received money directly to serve their community, to invest in transformational infrastructure improvements, and to recover wholesale from the COVID-19 pandemic. The scale of the program cannot be overestimated. And as a post-pandemic lifeline and a forward-looking leg up, the opportunities it has presented our communities are staggering.

From those opportunities, however, there is a tremendous amount of responsibility. This is the more hidden role of the American Rescue Plan. How cities spend this money will have far-reaching implications. Even with the immense investment already made by federal and state lawmakers, there remains a significant need in North Carolina, especially as it relates to water and wastewater infrastructure. More assistance will be needed down the road. If we utilize these American Rescue Plan funds prudently, we will be loudly broadcasting a fact that we at the League know well: when cities get the resources they need, they get the job done.

In other words, you, as local leaders, are on center stage. And thus far, you are playing the role beautifully.

This issue is dedicated to the work taking place through American Rescue Plan funds, both in your communities and at the League itself. Along with the direct funds received by our towns, the League also received funds from state leaders to help assist local governments in best using their allocations. Throughout these pages, you will read about the robust staff and services we have built. You will learn about our in-field representatives, who touch every corner of the state—who are ever-ready to take on any question or concern that may arise in any of our 540-plus municipalities. And you will learn about our Municipal Accounting Services program, which has already begun to implement modern budgeting systems in our smaller towns.

I could not be prouder of our local governments. You understand your communities, engage your citizens, and know intimately where and how best to spend these funds, not just to get the best bang for your buck, but to also address the most pressing needs of the people you serve. Throughout the state, this has been the case. Whether it is infrastructure, downtown improvements, community development, or any other number of spending categories, North Carolina is far better off for the work done by our dedicated local leaders.

The League is here to keep this momentum going. As you read about the many offerings of the ARP Service Line in this issue, and you think a particular service could help your community, please reach out. From planning assistance to legal guidance to accounting help, we are prepared to support you.

Our cities and towns are the toast of the state, and our state is the toast of the nation. You—our local leaders—are the reason why. This past year has been yet another display of the greatness of our towns, and I look forward to our continued achievement in 2024. ▣

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